

The Furnace of Gold eBook

The Furnace of Gold

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THE FURNACE OF GOLD

CHAPTER I

PRINCE OR BANDIT

Now Nevada, though robed in gray and white—the gray of sagebrush and the white of snowy summits—had never yet been accounted a nun when once again the early summer aroused the passions of her being and the wild peach burst into bloom.

It was out in Nauwish valley, at the desert-edge, where gold has been stored in the hungry-looking rock to lure man away from fairer pastures. There were mountains everywhere—huge, rugged mountains, erected in the igneous fury of world-making, long since calmed. Above them all the sky was almost incredibly blue—an intense ultramarine of extraordinary clearness and profundity.

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At the southwest limit of the valley was the one human habitation established thereabout in many miles, a roadside station where a spring of water issued from the earth. Towards this, on the narrow, side-hill road, limped a dusty red automobile.

It contained three passengers, two women and a man. Of the women, one was a little German maid, rather pretty and demure, whose duty it was to enact the chaperone. The other, Beth Kent, straight from New York City, well—the wild peach was in bloom!

She was amazingly beautiful and winning. It seemed as if she and not the pink mountain blossoms must be responsible for all that haunting redolence in this landscape of passionless gray. Her brown eyes burned with glorious luminosity. Her color pulsed with health and the joyance of existence. Her red lips quivered with unuttered ecstasies that surged in the depths of her nature. Even the bright brown strands of her hair, escaping the prison of her cap, were catching the sunlight and flinging it off in the most engaging animation. She loved this new, unpeopled land—the mountains, the sky, the vastness of it all!

For a two-fold reason she had come from New York to Nevada. In the first place her young half-brother, Glenville Kent—all the kin she had remaining in the world—had been for a month at Goldite camp, where she was heading, and all that he wrote had inflamed her unusual love of adventure till she knew she must see it for herself. Moreover, he was none too well. She had come to visit and surprise him.

In the second place, her fiance, Searle Bostwick, he who was now at the wheel, had also been marooned, as it were, in this sagebrush land, by the golden allurements of fortune. Beth had simply made up her mind to come, and for two days past had been waiting, with her maid, at the pretty little town of Freemont, on the railroad, for Searle to appear in his modern ship of the desert and treat her to the one day's drive into Goldite, whither he also was bound.

The man now intent on the big machine and the sandy road was a noticeable figure, despite the dust upon his raiment. He was a tall, well-modeled man of thirty-five, with an air of distinction upon him, materially heightened by his deep-set, piercing gray eyes, his firm, bluish jaw, and the sprinkling of frost in his hair.

He wore no moustache. His upper lip, somewhat over long, bore that same bluish tint that a thick growth of beard, even when diligently shaved, imparted to his face. He was, indeed, a handsome being, in a somewhat stern, determined style.

He was irritated now by the prospect of labor at the station. Even should he find some willing male being whose assistance with the tire might be invoked, the task would still involve himself rather strenuously; and above all things he loathed rough usage of his hands. For three more miles he cursed the mechanism, then he halted the car at the station.

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A shack that served as lodging-house, saloon, and dining-room, a shack for a stable, and a shack for a shed, together with a rough corral, comprised the entire group of buildings at the place. Six or eight fine cottonwoods and a number of twisted apple trees made the little place decidedly inviting. Behind these, rising almost sheer from the level yard, the mountains heaved upward grayly, their vast bulk broken, some hundred yards away, by a yawning rock canyon, steep and forbidding.

The station proprietor, who emerged from the door at sound of the halting machine, was a small, lank individual, as brown as an Indian and as wrinkled as a crocodile. The driver in the car addressed him shortly.

"I wonder if you can help me put on a tire?"

The lank little host regarded him quietly, then looked at the women and drew his hand across his mouth.

"Wal, I dunno," he answered. "I've set a tire and I've set a hen, but I wouldn't like to tell ye what was hatched."

The girl in the tonneau laughed in frank delight—a musical outburst that flattered the station host tremendously. The man at the wheel was already alighting.

"You'll do," he said. "My name is Bostwick. I'm on my way to Goldite, in a hurry. It won't take us long, but it wants two men on the job."

He had a way of thrusting his disagreeable tasks upon his fellow beings before they were prepared either to accept or refuse a proposition. He succeeded here so promptly that the girl in the car made no effort to restrain her amusement. She was radiantly smiling as she leaned above the wheel where the two men were presently at work.

In the midst of the toil a sound of whistling came upon the air. The girl in the auto looked up, alertly. It was the Toreador's song from Carmen that she heard, riotously rendered. A moment later the whistler appeared—and an exclamation all but escaped the girl's red, parted lips.

Mounted on a calico pony of strikingly irregular design, a horseman had halted at the bend of a trail that led to the rear of the station. He saw the girl and his whistling ceased.

From his looks he might have been a bandit or a prince. He was a roughly dressed, fearless-looking man of the hills, youthful, tall, and as carelessly graceful in the saddle as a fish in its natural element.

The girl's brown eyes and his blue eyes met. She did not analyze the perfect symmetry or balance of his features; she only knew his hair and long moustache were tawny, that

his face was bronzed, that his eyes were bold, frank depths of good humor and fire. He was splendid to look at—that she instantly conceded. And she looked at him steadily till a warm flush rose to the pink of her ears, when her glance fell, abashed, to the pistol that hung on his saddle, and so, by way of the hoofs of his pinto steed, to the wheel, straight down where she was leaning.

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The station-keeper glanced up briefly.

"Hullo, Van," was all he said.

The horseman made no reply. He was still engaged in looking at the girl when Bostwick half rose, with a tool in hand, and scowled at him silently.

It was only a short exchange of glances that passed between the pair, nevertheless something akin to a challenge played in the momentary conflict, as if these men, hurled across the width of a continent to meet, had been molded by Fate for some antagonistic clash, the essence of which they felt thus soon with an utter strangeness between them.

Bostwick bent promptly to his labors with the tire. The girl in the tonneau stepped past her maid and opened the door on the further side of the car. Bostwick stood up at once.

"I wouldn't get out, Beth—I wouldn't get out," he said, a little impatiently. "We'll be ready to go in five minutes."

Nevertheless she alighted.

"Don't hurry on my account," she answered. "The day is getting warm."

The eyes of both Bostwick and the horseman followed her graceful figure as she passed the front of the car and proceeded towards the orchard. Above the medium height and superbly modeled, she appeared more beautiful now than before. She had not descended for a change of position, or even to inspect the place. As a matter of fact she was hoping to secure a profile view of the bold-looking horseman on the pony. Her opportunity soon arrived. He spoke to the station proprietor.

"Want to see you for a moment, Dave," and he rode a little off to a tree.

Dave ceased helping on the tire with marked alacrity and went to the horseman at once. The two engaged in an earnest conversation, somewhat of which obviously concerned the auto and its passengers, since the lank little host made several ill-concealed gestures in the car's direction and once turned to look at the girl.

She had halted by the orchard fence from which, as a post of vantage, she was apparently looking over all the place. Her brown eyes, however, swung repeatedly around to the calico pony and its rider.

Yes, she agreed, the horseman was equal to the scene. He fitted it all, mountains, sky, the sense of wildness and freedom in the air. What was he, then? Undoubtedly a native—perhaps part Indian—perhaps——

There was something sinister, she was certain, in the glance he cast towards the car. He was armed. Could it be that he and the station man were road-agents, plotting some act of violence? They were certainly talking about the machine, or its owner, with exceptional earnestness of purpose.

Bostwick had finished with the tire.

“Come along, Beth, come along!” he called abruptly.

No sooner had she turned to walk to the car than the horseman rode up in her path. Her heart sank suddenly with misgivings. She halted as the unknown visitor addressed himself to Bostwick.

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"May I speak to you a moment privately?"

Bostwick bristled with suspicions at once.

"I have nothing of a private nature to discuss with you," he answered. "If you have anything to say to me, please say it and be prompt."

The horseman changed color, but lost no whit of the native courtesy that seemed a part of his being.

"It isn't particularly private," he answered quietly. "I only wished to say I wouldn't rush off to Goldite this morning. I'd advise you to stay here and rest."

Bostwick, already irritated by delay, and impervious to any thought of a possible service in the horseman's attitude, grew more impatient and far more irritating.

"I haven't desired your advice," he answered sharply. "Be good enough to keep it to yourself." He advanced to the station owner, held out a bill, and added: "Here you are, my man, for your trouble."

"Heck!" said the lank little host. "I don't want your money."

Across the horseman's handsome visage passed a look that, to the girl, boded anything but peace. Bostwick's manner was an almost intolerable affront, in a land where affronts are resented. However, the stranger answered quietly, despite the fact that Bostwick nettled him to an extraordinary degree.

"I agree that the sooner *you* vamoose, the prompter the improvement in the landscape. But you're not going off to Goldite with these ladies in the car."

Matters might still have culminated differently had Bostwick even asked a civil "Why?" for Van was a generous and easy-going being.

Beth, in the road, felt her heart beat violently, with vague excitement and alarm. Bostwick glared, in sudden apprehension as to what the horseman had in mind.

"Is this a hold-up?" he demanded. "What do you mean?"

The rider dismounted, in a quick, active manner, and opened the door of the tonneau.

"You wouldn't have thanked me for advice," he replied; "you would hardly thank me more for information." He added to the maid in the car:

"Please alight, your friend is impatient to be starting." He nodded towards the owner of the auto.

The maid came down, demurely, casting but a glance at the tall, commanding figure by the wheel. He promptly lifted out a suitcase and three decidedly feminine-looking bags.

Bostwick by now was furious.

"It's an outrage!" he cried, "a dastardly outrage! You can see I am wholly unarmed! Do you mean to restrain these ladies here by force?"

The horseman slipped his arm through the reins of his pony's bridle, surveying Bostwick calmly.

"Do you mean to desert them if I do? I have not yet ordered you to leave."

"Ordered me to leave!" echoed the car owner fiercely. "I can neither be ordered to leave nor to stay! But I shall go—do you hear?—I shall go—and the ladies with me! If you mean to rob us, do so at once and have it over! My time is precious, if yours is not!"

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Van smiled. "I might be tempted to rob a gentleman," he said, "but to deprive your passengers of your company would be a charity. Pray waste no more of your precious time if that is your only concern."

Beth had regained a shadow of her former composure. Her courage had never been absent. She was less alarmed than before and decidedly curious as to what this encounter might signify. She dared address the horseman.

"But—but surely—you seem—— You must have some excellent reason for—for acting so peculiarly."

He could not repress the brightness in his eyes as he met her half-appealing gaze.

"Reason, advice, and information would apparently be alike unwelcome to your chauffeur," he answered, doffing his hat. "He is eager to hasten on his way, therefore by all means let us bid him begone."

Bostwick grew rapidly wilder at each intimation of his social standing—a friend of the maid, and Beth's chauffeur! His impatience to proceed with all possible haste to Goldite was consuming. He had not intended that anything under the sun should delay him another single hour—not even Beth, should occasion arise to detain her. Even now he was far more concerned about himself and the business of his mission than he was for the women in his charge. He was much afraid, however, of the horseman's visible gun. He was not at all a person of courage, and the man before him presented such an unknown quantity that he found himself more or less helpless. At most he could merely attempt a bluff.

"You'll pay for this!" he cried somewhat shrilly, his face a black mask of anger. "I'll give you just half a minute to release these ladies and permit them to go with me in peace! If you refuse——"

The horseman interrupted.

"I said before you had not been ordered on your way, but now I've changed my mind. Don't talk any more—get into your car and hike!"

The gleam in his eye achieved two results: It cowed the last vestige of bravado in Bostwick's composition and ignited all the hatred of his nature. He hesitated for a moment, his lips parting sidewise as if for a speech of defiance which his moral courage refused to indorse. Then, not daring to refuse the horseman's command, he climbed aboard the car, the motor of which had never ceased its purring.

"You'll pay for this!" he repeated.

The girl, now pale again and tremendously disturbed, was regarding Bostwick with a new, cold light in her eyes—a light that verged upon contempt. She had never seen this lack of courageous spirit in the man before.

“But, Searle! You’re not going—you’re not really going, like this?”

It was the horseman who replied.

“You see, his time is precious. Also in his present state of mind he is certainly unfit company for—well, for Dave, here, a man who loves the pure white dove of peace.” The station owner grinned. Van turned once more to the car owner, adding, placidly: “There, there, driver——”

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Bostwick broke in vehemently.

"I refuse to abandon these ladies! Your conduct is not only that of a coward, it is——"

Van looked him over in mock astonishment.

"Say, Searle," he said, "don't you savvy you've lost your vote in this convention? I told you to do these ladies the kindness to sweeten the atmosphere with your absence. Now you hit the trail—and hit it quick!"

Bostwick looked helplessly at the girl.

"I am entirely unarmed," he said as before, though she knew there was a pistol in the car. "This ruffian——"

The horseman cut him short.

"So long, Searle. I trust you'll meet congenial company on the road, but I advise you even now to return the way you came."

Bostwick glared at him vindictively, but impotently. His jaw was set and hard. A cold fire glittered in his eyes. How selfishly eager he was to be started on his way not even the girl could have known. Moreover, some sort of plan for the horseman's speedy punishment had taken possession of his mind.

"Have courage, Beth," he said to the girl. "Have courage."

He speeded up his motor, dropped in his clutch, and the car slowly started on its way.

CHAPTER II

INTO THE MOUNTAINS

Beth stood perfectly still beside the road, watching the auto round the hill where it presently disappeared from view. The station owner picked up a sliver of wood and began to whittle industriously. The horseman remained with his bridle reins in hand, amusedly looking at his captive. The maid sat down upon the suitcase, dropped her skirt in a modest little manner, and cast her gaze upon the ground.

Beth was the first to speak.

"Well, Elsa, I hope you are comfortable."

"Yes, Miss, thank you," said the maid.

Thereupon Miss Kent turned to the horseman and laughed. Someway she could not feel alarmed, in the presence of this man of the hills, in whose eyes merry devils were dancing.

"Isn't this absurd?" she said.

"Searle must have been born absurd," replied the horseman, once more removing his hat. He waved it towards the station host imperiously. "Dave, present me to the lady." And as Dave floundered, hopelessly puzzled, he added: "Give me a knock-down, man, don't you savvy?"

Dave dropped his sliver, snatched off his hat, and rid himself of a quid of something strong—all in one convulsion of activity.

"Scuse me," he apologized, approaching nearer. "Miss—Miss—Miss Laffin' Water, this is Van. His whole name's——"

"That's enough," Van interrupted. "I'm gratified to meet you, Senorita, I'm sure."

He extended his hand. Beth knew not what to do, wherefore she gave him her own.

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"How do you do, Mr. Van?" she answered tremulously, and she drew her fingers back again at once. "If you don't mind," she added, "we really must continue on to Goldite as soon as possible." A fleeting look of doubt and alarm had swept all the mirth from her eyes. After all, even with this "introduction" what were these men's intentions? It was a grave affair to be halted thus—to be practically abducted—to be left with no protection, in the hands of roadside strangers, one, at least, of whom was certainly inclined to be lawless and outrageously bold.

The horseman regarded her seriously, as if with a certain divination of her worry. Someway, from the look in his eyes her confidence returned, she knew not why.

"Do you ride?" he asked her, "—you and your maid?"

"Why, yes—that is——" she addressed the maid on the suitcase. "Elsa, can you ride—on a horse?"

Elsa said: "Yes, Miss, if it is part of my duty."

Beth's composure increased. After all, it was a glorious day, the horseman was handsome, and she had wished for a little adventure—but not too much!

"What does it mean?" she asked of Van more boldly. "We were perfectly comfortable, riding in the car. If you really intend to permit us to go, why couldn't we have gone on as we were?"

Dave started to answer.

"You see, Miss——"

Van cut in abruptly.

"Never mind, Dave; this isn't your pie." To Beth he added: "If you've brought any particularly appropriate garments for riding, suppose you retire for preparations. Dave will tote the bags inside the house."

"You bet I will!" said Dave, who, as Elsa rose, took suitcase and all in one load.

Beth hesitated. The horseman had started already for the stable at the rear. How superbly straight was his figure! What a confident, impudent grace beset him as he moved! How could it be possible for such a man to be other than a gentleman—no matter where he was found? Some strange little thrill of excitement and love of adventure stirred in the girl's full veins. Resistance was useless. Come what might, she was helpless in the hands of this man—and he seemed a person to be trusted.

“Come, Elsa,” she said, bravely deciding to face whatsoever might arise. “You may wear the second of my skirts.”

Fifteen minutes later, therefore, she and her maid emerged from the shack attired in brown cloth, and kahki, respectively, her own skirt long and graceful, while Elsa’s was shorter and divided. Aside or cross-saddle Beth was equally at home upon a horse—or always had been, in the parks.

Van and Dave now returned, leading two extra ponies from the stable. One was a bay, accoutered with a man’s deep Mexican saddle, whereon was secured a coiled lasso; the other was a wiry little roan mare, with a somewhat decrepit but otherwise sound side-saddle tightly cinched upon her back.

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"Our stable chamberlain has slipped a cog on the outfits for ladies recently," said Van apologetically, "but I reckon these will have to do."

Beth looked the two mounts over uncritically. They seemed to be equally matched, as to general characteristics, since neither appeared either strong or plump. She said:

"Shall we ride very far?"

"No, just a pleasant little jog," replied the horseman. "They call it forty miles to Goldite by the ridge, but it isn't an inch over thirty."

Thirty miles!—over the mountains!—with an unknown man and her maid! Beth suppressed a gasp of despair and astonishment, not to mention trepidation, by making an effort that verged upon the heroic.

"But we—we can never arrive in Goldite tonight!" she said. "We can't expect to, can we?"

"It takes more than that to kill these bronchos," Van cheerfully assured her. "I can only guarantee that the horses will make it—by sunset."

Beth flushed. He evidently entertained a very poor notion of her horsemanship. Her pride was aroused. She would show him something—at least that no horse could make this journey without her!

"Thank you," she said, and advancing to the roan she addressed herself to Dave. "Will you please help me up. Mr. Van may assist my maid."

Dave grinned and performed his offices as best he could, which was strongly, if not with grace. Van shook a threatening fist, behind his captive's back. He had meant to take this honor to himself.

Fairly tossing the greatly delighted little Elsa to the seat on the bay, he mounted his own sturdy animal and immediately started for the canyon below, leaving Beth and her maid to trail behind.

The girl's heart all but failed her. Whither were they going?—and towards what Fate? What could be the outcome of a journey like this, undertaken so blindly, with no chance for resistance? The horseman had stubbornly refused a reply to her question; he was calmly riding off before them now with the utmost indifference to her comfort. There was nothing to do but to follow, and resign herself to—the Lord alone knew what. The little roan mare, indeed, required no urging; she was tugging at the bit to be off. With one last look of helplessness at the station and Dave—who somehow bore the hint of a fatherly air upon him—she charged her nerves with all possible resolution and rode on after her leader.

Elsa permitted her broncho to trudge at the tail of the column. She dared to cast one shy, disconcerting little glance at Dave—and he suddenly felt he would burst into flame and consume himself utterly to ashes.

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The great canyon yawned prodigiously where its rock gates stood open to grant the party admission to the sanctum of the hills. Sheer granite walls, austere and frowning, rose in sculptured immensity on either side, but the trail under foot was scored between some scattered wild-peach shrubs, interspersed with occasional bright-green clumps of manzanita. The air was redolent of warmth and fragrance that might with fitness have advertised the presence in the hills of some glorified goddess of love—some lofty, invisible goddess, guarded by her mountain snows, yet still too languorous and voluptuous to pass without at least trailing on the summery air the breath that exhaled from her being. It was all a delight, despite vague alarms, and the promise ahead was inviting.

Van continued straight onward, with never so much as a turn of his head, to the horses in the rear. He seemed to have quite forgotten the two half-frightened women in his wake. Beth had ample opportunity for observing again the look of strength and grace upon him. However, she found her attention very much divided between tumultuous joyance in the mountain grandeur, bathed in the marvelously life-exciting air, and concern for the outcome of the day. If a faint suggestion of pique at the manner in which the horseman ignored her presence crept subconsciously into all her meditations, she did not confess it to herself.

Elsa's horrid little habit of accepting anything and everything with the most irresponsible complacency rendered the situation aggravating. It was so utterly impossible to discuss with such a being even such of the morning's developments as the relationship of mistress and maid might otherwise have permitted.

A mile beyond the mouth of the canyon the slight ascent was ended, the chasm widened, rough slopes succeeded the granite walls, and a charming little valley, emerald green and dotted with groups of quaking aspen trees, stretched far towards the wooded mountain barriers, looming hugely ahead. It was like a dainty lake of grass, abundantly supplied with little islands.

The sheer enchantment of it, bathed as it was in sun-gold, and sheltered by prodigious, snow-capped summits, so intensely white against the intensity of azure, aroused some mad new ecstasy in all Beth's being. She could almost have done something wild—she knew not what; and all the alarm subsided from her thoughts. As if in answer to her tumult of joy, Van spurred his pinto to a gallop. Instantly responding to her lift of the reins, Beth's roan went romping easily forward. The bay at the rear, with Elsa, followed rhythmically, pounding out a measure on the turf.

A comparatively short session of this more rapid locomotion sufficed for the transit of the cove—that is, of the wide-open portion. The trail then dived out of sight in a copse where pine trees were neighbors of the aspens. Van disappeared, though hardly more than fifty feet ahead. Through low-hanging boughs, that she needs must push aside,

Beth followed blindly, now decidedly piqued by the wholly ungallant indifference to her fate of the horseman leading the way.

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She caught but a glimpse of him, now and again, in the density of the growth. How strange it was to be following thus, meekly, helplessly, perforce with some sort of confidence, in the charge of this unknown mountain man, to—whatsoever he might elect! The utterly absurd part of it all was that it was pleasant!

At length they emerged from the shady halls of trees, to find themselves confronted by the wall of mountains. Already Van was riding up the slope, where larger pines, tall thickets of green chincopin, and ledges of rock compelled the trail to many devious windings. Once more the horseman was whistling his Toreador refrain. He did not look back at his charges. That he was watching them both, from the tail of his eye, was a fact that Beth felt—and resented.

The steepness of the trail increased. At times the meager pathway disappeared entirely. It lay upon rocks that gave no sign of the hoofs that had previously rung metallic clinks upon the granite. How the man in the lead discerned it here was a matter Beth could not comprehend. Some half-confessed meed of admiration, already astir in her nature for the horseman and his way, increased as he breasted the ascent. How thoroughly at home—how much a part of it all he appeared, as he rode upon his pony!

Two hours of steady climbing, with her mare oblique beneath her weight, and Beth felt an awe in her being. It was wonderful; it was almost terrible, the fathomless silence, the altitudes, this heretofore unexperienced intimacy with the mountains' very nakedness! It was strange altogether, and impressive, the vast unfolding of the world below, the frequency with which the pathway skirted some dark precipice—and the apparent unconcern of the man ahead, now so absolutely master. And still that soul-inviting exhilaration of the air aroused those ecstasies within her spirit that she had not known were there.

They were nearing the summit of the pass. It was still a thousand feet below the snow. To the left a mighty chasm trenched the adamant, its bottom lowered away to depths of mysterious blue. Its side, above which the three stout ponies picked their way, was a jagged set of terraces, over the brink of which the descents were perpendicular.

Rising as if to bar the way, the crowning terrace apparently ended the trail against all further advance. Here Van finally halted, dismounted, and waited for the advent of his charges.

Beth rode up uncertainly, her brown eyes closely scrutinizing his face. It appeared as if they had come to the end of everything—the place for leaping off into downward space.

“Let me see if the cinches are tight,” said the horseman quietly, and he looked to the girth of her saddle.



It was found to be in a satisfactory condition. The girth on the bay he tightened, carelessly pushing Elsa's foot and the stirrup aside for the purpose.

His own horse now showed unmistakable signs of weariness. He had traveled some twenty odd miles to arrive at Dave's before undertaking this present bit of hardship. Since then Van had pushed him to the limit of his strength and speed, in the effort to reach Goldite with the smallest possible delay.

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If a sober expression of sympathy came for a second in the horseman's steady eyes, as he glanced where his pony was standing, it quickly gave way to something more inscrutable as he looked up at Beth, in advancing once more to the fore.

"Both of you give them the reins," he instructed quietly. "Just drop them down. Let the bronchos pick the trail." He paused, then added, as if on second thought, "Shut your eyes if you find you're getting dizzy—don't look down."

Beth turned slightly pale, in anticipation of some ordeal, undoubtedly imminent, but the light in her eyes was one of splendid courage. She might feel they were all at the gate of something awful, but her nature rose to meet it. She said nothing; she simply obeyed directions and looked with new emotions on the somewhat drooping mare to whom her own safety was entrusted.

Van was once more in his saddle. He started, and the ponies behind resumed their faithful plodding at his heels.

A few rods ahead they encountered a change, and Beth could scarcely repress a gasp of surprise and apprehension. The trail was laid upon the merest granite shelf, above that terrible chasm. She was terrified, frankly. The man and pony in the lead were cut with startling sharpness against the gray of the rock—the calico coloring, the muscular intensity, the bending of the man to every motion—as they balanced with terrifying slenderness above the pit of death.

For a moment the girl thought nothing of herself and of how she too must pass that awful brink, for all her concern was focused on the man. Then she realized what she must do—was doing—as her roan mare followed on. She was almost upon it herself!

Her hand flew down to the reins to halt the pony, involuntarily. A wild thought of turning and fleeing away from this shelf of destruction launched itself upon her mind. It was folly—a thing impossible. There was nothing to do but go on. Shutting her eyes and holding her breath she felt the mare beneath her tremulously moving forward, smelling out the places of security whereon to rest her weight.

Elsa, sublimely unresponsive, alike to the grandeur or the danger of the place, rode as placidly here as in the valley.

They passed the first of the shelf-like brinks, traversed a safer contour of the wall, and were presently isolated upon the second bridge of granite, which was also the last, much longer than the first, but perhaps not so narrow or winding.

Van had perspired in nervous tension, as the two women rode above the chasm. Men had gone down here to oblivion. He was easier now, more careless of himself and

horse, less alert for a looseness in the granite mass, as he turned in his saddle to look backward.

Suddenly, with a horrible sensation in his vitals, he felt his pony crumpling beneath him, even as he heard Beth sound a cry.

A second later he was going, helplessly, with the air-rush in his ears and the pony's quiver shivering up his spine. All bottomless space seemed to open where they dropped. He kicked loose the stirrups, even as the pony struck upon the first narrow terrace, ten feet down, and felt the helpless animal turned hoofs and belly upward by the blow.

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He had thrust himself free—apart from the horse—but could not cling to the rotten ledge for more than half a second. Then down once more he was falling, as before, only a heart-beat later than the pinto.

Out of the lip of the next shelf below the pony's weight tore a jagged fragment. The animal's neck was broken, and he and the stone-mass plunged on downward together.

Van half way fell through a stubborn bush—that clung with the mysterious persistency of life to a handful of soil in a crevice—and his strong hands closed upon its branches.

He was halted with a jolt. The pony hurtled loosely, grotesquely down the abyss, bounding from impacts with the terraces, and was presently lost to mortal sight in the dust and debris he carried below for a shroud. Sounds of his striking—dull, leaden sounds, tremendous in the all-pervading silence—came clearly up to the top. Then Van found his feet could be rested on the shelf, and he let himself relax to ease his arms.

CHAPTER III

A RESCUE

Beth had uttered that one cry only, as man and horse careened above the pit. She now sat dumbly staring where the two had disappeared. Nothing could she see of Van or his pony. A chill of horror attacked her, there in the blaze of the sun. It was not, even then, so much of herself and Elsa she was thinking—two helpless women, lost in this place of terrible silence; she was smitten by the fate of their guide.

Van, for his part, looked about as best he might, observing his situation comprehensively. He was safe for the moment. The ledge whereon he was bearing a portion of his weight was narrow and crumbling with old disintegration. The shrub to which he clung was as tough as wire cable, and had once been stoutly rooted in the crevice. Now, however, its hold had been weakened by the heavy strain upon it, and yet he must continue to trust a part of his weight to its branches. There was nothing, positively nothing, by which he could hope to climb to the trail up above.

He deliberately rested and fostered his breath, not a trifle of which had been jolted in violence from his body. Presently he raised his voice and called out, as cheerfully as possible:

“Ship ahoy! Hullo—Miss Laughing Water!”

For a moment there was no response. Beth was to utterly overcome to speak. She hardly dared believe it was his call she heard, issuing up from the tomb. She feared that her hope, her frantic imagination, her wish to have it so, had conjured up a voice

that had no genuine existence. Her lips moved, but made no audible sound. She trembled violently. Van called again, with more of his natural power.

“Hullo! Hullo! Miss Beth—are you up there on the trail?”

“Oh, yes! Oh! what shall I do?” cried Beth in a sudden outburst of relief and pent-up emotions. “Tell me what to do!”

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Van knew she was rather near at hand. The bridge and trail were certainly no more than twenty-five feet above his head. He could make her hear with little effort.

"Brace up and keep your nerve," he instructed. "We're O.K. up to date. Just ride ahead till you come to the flat. Let Elsa hold your mare. Can you hear me plainly?"

"Oh! yes—yes—then what next?" replied the worried girl.

Van resumed calmly: "You'll find a rawhide rope on Elsa's saddle. Come back with that, on foot. Then I'll tell you what to do. Don't try to hurry; take your time, and don't worry." After a moment, as he got no reply, he added: "Have you started?"

Beth had not budged her mare, for terror of what she must do. She was fortifying all her resolution. She answered with genuine bravery:

"Yes—I—I'll do what you say."

She took up the reins. Her pale face was set, but she did not close her eyes to cross the dizzying brink. The mare went forward—and Elsa's bay resumed his patient tagging, up to and past the fateful place where a part of the shelf-edge, having been dislodged, had let Van's pony fall.

For ten age-long minutes Van waited on his ledge, feeling the treacherous, rotted stuff break silently away beneath his feet. The shrub, too, was showing an earthy bit of root as it slowly but certainly relinquished its hold on the substance which the crevice had divided. The man could almost have calculated how many seconds the shelf and the shrub could sustain their living burden.

Then Beth returned. She had left her maid with the horses; she held the lasso in her hand. To creep on foot along the granite bridge was taxing the utmost of her courage. She could not ascertain precisely where it was that the horseman was waiting below. She was guided only by the broken ledge, where pony and all had disappeared. Therefore, she called to him weakly.

"Mr. Van—Mr. Van—where are you?"

Van's heart turned over in his breast.

"Just below that split boulder in the trail," he answered cheerily. "Go to that."

A silence succeeded, then he heard, in tremulous accents:

"I'm here—but how am I going to tie the rope?"

Van answered distinctly, for much depended on precision.



“Uncoil it first. On one end there’s an eye that runs the loop. Open the loop to a pretty good size and slip it over the smaller portion of the boulder. Then push it well down in the crevice, and pull it tight.”

He knew that the rope was far too short to loop the larger rock and reach his hands. He waited while he thought she might be working—as indeed she was—and presently added: “Got that done?”

“Yes,” she called. “Yes—but are you sure——”

His hold was giving way. He answered crisply:

“Now drop me the end. Don’t wait!”

[Illustration: His hold was giving way.]

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Beth had forgotten all danger to herself. She had ceased to tremble. She paid out the rope with commendable promptness.

"Does it reach?" she cried. "Can you get it?"

He could not. Though sufficiently long it was ten feet away, on his right. His seconds were growing fearfully precious.

"Just shift it over, more towards Elsa," he called, still calmly. "Move it about ten feet."

It began to approach him jerkily. It halted, then once more it moved. The shrub in his grasp gave out an inch, and was coming from its anchorage. Then his fist was closed on the rope.

"All right!" he called. "Let go—and stand aside!"

"But—oh, if the rock shouldn't hold!" cried the girl. "Are you sure it won't pull over?"

He was not at all certain of the boulder. This explained his directions, "stand aside!" If it came—it must not involve the girl. There was nothing for him but to trust to its weight against his own. He was strong. He began to come up, bracing a foot against the crumbling wall, winding the rope around one of his legs—or his leg around the rope, and resting whensoever he could.

Beth stood there, nearly as tense as the rope. Her brown eyes were fixed on the bedded boulder; her face was more gray than its bulk.

At the edge, where the lasso impinged upon the granite, small particles were breaking and falling ominously. Scarcely daring to breathe, as she felt how the man was toiling up from the maw of the chasm, Beth could not bear to look where he must come—if come he ever should.

It seemed an eternity of waiting. At last, when new misgivings had seized upon her heart, she heard his labored breathing. Even then she did not turn. She feared to watch his efforts; she feared to break the spell. A minute later she heard his even voice.

"It's a wonderful view—from down below."

The glad, eager light in her eyes, which his eyes met from the brink, put strength in both his arms. He came up to safety in an outburst of vigor that was nothing short of magnificent.

"Oh!" said the girl, and she leaned against the wall in a sudden need for support.

"I really had no intention of—deserting like that," panted Van, with a smile that was just a trifle forced. "But it's so much easier to—drop into a habit than it—ever is to get out."

She made no reply, but remained where she was, weakly leaning against the wall and slowly regaining the strength she had lost at the moment of beholding him safe. She was not the fainting kind, but she was human—womanly human.

Van began immediately to release and re-coil the rope.

"Too bad to throw away a pony like that," he resumed regretfully. "I always intended, if he died a Christian death, to have his hide tanned for a rug."

He was saying anything, no matter what, to dissipate the reactionary collapse into which he feared the girl was falling.

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"Now then," he added, when the rope was well in hand, "we've wasted all the time we can spare on a second-rate vaudeville performance. Come along."

CHAPTER IV

CONGENIAL COMPANY

He started ahead as he had before, with that show of utter unconcern towards the girl that was absolutely new to her experience. Her eyes were wide with appeal as she watched him striding up the trail. For herself she wanted nothing; but her womanly nature craved some trifling sign, some word of assurance that the man was uninjured—really safe again and whole—after that terrible plunge. But this from the horseman was impossible. He had not even thanked her for the rescue.

"You horrid, handsome wretch!" she murmured vexedly, stimulated to renewed activity by her resentment; then she followed along the narrow way.

They came to the flat, beyond the wall, where Elsa sat keeping the horses. The maid looked the horseman over quite calmly, inquiring:

"What for dit you did it—go down there?"

"Just for ducks," said Van. He halted for Beth's approach, put her up on the roan, and once more strode off in the trail ahead with a promptness that was certainly amazing.

There was no understanding such a person. Beth gave it up. The whole affair was inexplicable—his attitude towards Searle at the station, his abduction of herself and the maid, and this trailing of the pair of them across these terrible places, for no apparent reason in the world.

Her mare followed on in the tracks of the muscular figure, over whom, for a moment, she had almost wished to yearn. His escape from death had been so slender—and he would not even rest!

The flat was, in reality, the hog's back or ridge of a lofty spur of the mountains. Except for the vast bluish canyons and gorges far below, the view was somewhat restricted here, since towering summits, in a conclave of peaks, arose to right and left.

After a time, as they swung around on the trend of the ridge, they came abreast a mighty gap in the mountains to the left, and there, far down, lay a valley as flattened by perspective as the unruffled surface of a lake.

Here Van presently halted, peering down and searching the vast gray floor with the keenest attention. He went on further, and halted again, Beth meanwhile watching his face with increasing curiosity.

At the third of his stops she gazed no more on the panorama of immensity, but rather gazed at him.

“What is it you expect to see?” she inquired at last. “Goldite isn’t down there, is it?”

“I’m rather expecting—if I haven’t miscalculated on the time—— There he is now,” he answered, still staring afar off down upon the valley. He raised his arm and extended a finger to point towards the north-most limit of the level stretch of land. “Do you see that small, dark object in the road? That’s a road, that slender yellow streak that you can follow.”

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Beth obeyed directions and thereby discerned, with remarkable clearness, the moving object, far away below. She did not in the least suspect its nature.

"Why, yes—what is it?" she asked with languid interest, having expected something more significant. "Is it some small animal?"

"Yes," responded Van. "It's Searle."

Beth was instantly all attention.

"Not Mr. Bostwick, in his car?"

Van continued to study the gray of the world-wide map.

"I rather wonder——" he mused, and there he halted, presently adding, "He's climbing a hill. You might not think so, looking down from here, but it's steep and sandy, for a car."

She was watching eagerly.

"And he's no further along towards Goldite than this?"

"He's had some tough old going," answered Van. "He's in luck to——" then to himself, as he continued to scan the scene for something he did not apparently find. "By Jupe! I'd have sworn Matt Barger——" He broke off abruptly, adding in a spirit of fairness, "Searle is getting right up to the ridge all right. Good boy! He must have a powerful motor under the—There! By George! I knew it! I knew it! Got him! right there in the gravel!"

The girl looked suddenly upon him, wholly unable to comprehend the sharp exclamations he was making.

"What has got him? What do you mean?" she demanded in vague alarm. "I don't see what you——"

"That's Matt every time—I thought so," he resumed, as he stepped a little closer to the girl. "Don't you see them?—those lively little specks, swarming all around the machine?"

Beth bent her gaze on the drama, far below—a play in which she knew but one of the characters, and nothing of the meaning of the scene.

"I see—yes—something like a lot of tiny ants—or something. What are they?—not robbers?—not men?"



“Part men, part hyenas,” he told her quietly. “It’s a lot of State convicts, escaped from their prison, two days free—and desperate.”

She was suddenly very pale. Her eyes were blazing.

“Convicts! Out of prison?”

“A good long way out,” he told her watching, “and clever enough to hike for the mines, with the camps all full of strangers. They learn to be good mixers, when they’re trying to escape.”

Beth gazed at him searchingly.

“You—knew they were out—and waiting on the road?”

“Everyone knew they were out—and I certainly thought big Matt would do precisely what you see he has done.”

“Matt?” she echoed.

“The leader,” he explained, “a clever brute as ever worried a sheriff.”

She was not in the least interested in the personality of the convict thus described. Her mind had flown to another aspect of the case—the case involving herself.

“And this was why you wouldn’t let us go in the auto?” she said. “You expected this?”

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He looked at her quickly.

“Searle wouldn’t take my advice, you know.” His eyes were once more merry. “What could I do?”

“But Mr. Bostwick wouldn’t have gone if you had told him!” she said. “Oh, I’m surprised you’d do it—let him go and be captured like that!” She was looking down upon the silent drama intently as she added: “I don’t see why you ever did it!”

He was still amused.

“Oh, I thought perhaps Searle deserved it.”

She blazed a little.

“You told him you hoped he’d meet congenial company on the road. You didn’t mean _____”

“Guilty as charged in the indictment. I guess I did.”

“Oh! I wouldn’t have thought——” she started, then she shivered in horror, reflecting swiftly on the fate that might have befallen herself and Elsa had they too been captured with Searle. It was all explained at last—the horseman’s earnest talk with Dave, his quiet but grim refusal to permit herself and Elsa to remain with the car, and the hazardous ride he had since dared compel them to take at such peril to his life! And now, his persistent advance on foot, when perhaps he was painfully injured! He had done then such a service as she could never in her life forget. His treatment of Searle had perhaps, even as he said, been deserved. Nevertheless, Searle was much to her, very much, indeed—or had been—up to this morning—and she was worried.

“What do you think they will do?” she added in a spirit of contrition that came at once upon her. “They must be terrible men!”

“They won’t do much but take his money and clothes, and maybe beg for a ride,” said Van reassuringly. “They’ll see he isn’t fit to kill.”

Beth glanced at him briefly, inquiringly. What a baffling light it was that played in the depths of his eyes! What manner of being was he, after all? She could not tell. And yet she felt she could trust him—she certainly knew not why. Despite his ways of raillery she felt he was serious, true as steel, and big in heart and nature.

“I mustn’t forget to thank you,” she murmured. “I mean for sparing us—all that. I do thank you, most sincerely, for——”

“Never mind that,” he interrupted. “We’re going to be late to lunch.”

He turned once more to the trail and started off, in his active manner, together with a thorough indifference as to what became of Bostwick.

Beth, with a feeling that something ought yet to be done for Searle, down in the valley with the convicts, cast one helpless glance at the scene of the hold-up, then perforce urged her pony forward.

Van halted no more. He led the way doggedly onward, over the rises, through great silent forests, past crystal springs, and down dark, somber ravines. At a quarter of one he emerged from a gorge upon the level acre of a tiny cove, still high in the mountains fastnesses. Here he let out a whoop like an Indian, its echo filling all the place.

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An answering call came clearly from somewhere near at hand. Beth felt a sudden alarm to know there were human beings near. What sort they were was a matter entirely of conjecture. Then presently she discovered a number of small, rude buildings, and a fair-sized cabin, planted next the hill. The door of the latter was open. A tall man appeared in the frame.

"This," said Van, who had waited for the girl to ride once more to his side, "is the Monte Cristo mine—the worst false alarm that ever disfigured the map."

CHAPTER V

VAN'S PARTNERS

The Monte Cristo mining property comprised a tunnel in the hill, a glory hole, a little toy quartz-mill—five stamps strong—the bunk-house, kitchen, blacksmith-shop, stable, corral, and four human beings. These latter were a Chinese cook named Algy, a Piute Indian half-breed called Cayuse, and two rare souls—Napoleon G. Blink and "Gettysburg"—miners, and boastful old worthies, long partnered and beloved by Van.

Just at present the tunnel was empty, the glory-hole was deserted, and the quartz-mill was silent. The mine had proved a failure. Van had expended many thousands of dollars and ten months of time to demonstrate the facts; and now, in possession of much new experience, an indomitable spirit, two tired partners, and a brand-new claim, he was facing his fate, as heretofore, with a wonderful boyish cheer.

Not all this knowledge was vouchsafed to Beth when she and her maid were presently put in possession of the place. With the utmost gravity Van introduced her by old Dave's appellation, Miss Laughing Water. The maid he merely called Elsa. His explanation as to whence they hailed, whither they were bound, why he had taken them in charge, and how he had lost the pinto pony, was notable chiefly for its brevity. He and his charges were hungry and somewhat pressed for time, he announced, and he therefore urged Algy to haste.

Dinner had been promptly served at twelve. Algy was therefore in despair—for Algy was proud of his art. He still had good red beans, most excellent coffee, corn-fed bacon, the best of bread and butter, a hunger-inspiring stew of lamb, white potatoes, fine apple sauce, and superlative gingerbread on hand in great abundance, however, but in spite of it all he spluttered.

"What's mallah you, Van?" he demanded several times. "Wha' for no tell me blingee ladies? How you s'plose I gettee dinner? Sominagot, you come like this, that velly superstich."



He would readily have laid down his very life for Van, but he laid a good dinner instead. During its preparation Beth and her maid sat down on a bench beside the bunk-house, in the presence of Cayuse, Napoleon, and Gettysburg, while Van led the horses to the stable for refreshment, and Algy talked to himself in pigeon English.

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It was an odd situation for the girl from New York, but she found herself amused. Both Napoleon and Gettysburg had been cast for amusing roles, which they did not always fill. Neither, as might be supposed from his name, had ever even smelled the faintest suggestion of things military. Napoleon had once been a sailor, or, to be more accurate, a river boatman. He was fat, short, red-headed, red-necked, red-nosed, and red-eyed. His hands were freckled, his arms were hairy. He turned his head to one side like a bird—and promptly fell in love with demure little Elsa.

Gettysburg was as thin as Napoleon was fat. He had a straggling gray beard, a very bald pate, high cheek bones, and a glass eye. This eye he turned towards the maid, perhaps because it was steady. He also had a nervous way of drawing one hand down his face till he lowered his jaw prodigiously, after which, like the handle of a knocker, it would fall back to place with quite a thump. He did this twice as he stared at Beth, and then he remarked:

“Quite a hike yit, down to Goldite.”

“I suppose it is,” said Beth in her interesting way. “How far is it, really, from here?”

“‘Bout twenty miles of straight ahead, and two miles of straight up, and three of straight down—if a feller could go straight,” said Gettysburg gravely, “but he can’t.”

Beth looked very much concerned. She had hoped they were almost there, and no more hills to climb or descend. She felt convinced they had ridden over twenty miles already, and the horseman had assured her it was thirty at the most, from the station so far behind the mountains.

“But—Mr. Van can’t walk so far as that,” she said. “I’m sure I don’t see what——”

She was interrupted by the reappearance of Van himself.

“Isn’t there a horse on the place?” he asked his partners collectively. “What have you done with the sorrel?”

Gettysburg arose. “Loaned him to A. C., yistiddy,” said he. “But the outlaw’s on the job.”

“Not Vesuvius?” Van replied incredulously. “You don’t mean to say he’s turned up again unslaughtered?”

“Cayuse here roped him, up to Cedar flat,” imparted Gettysburg. “Cornered him there in natural corral and fetched him home fer fun.”

Napoleon added: "But Cayuse ain't been on board, you bet. He likes something more old-fashioned than Suvy. Split my bowsprit, I wouldn't tow no horse into port which I was afraid to board. When I was bustin' bronchos I liked 'em to be bad."

"Yes," agreed Gettysburg, "so bad they couldn't stand up."

A bright glitter came for a moment in Van's blue eyes.

"If Suvy's the only equine paradox on the place, he and I have got to argue things out this afternoon," he said, "but I'll have my dinner first."

Beth was listening intently, puzzled to know precisely what the talk implied. She was vaguely suspicious that Van, for the purpose of escorting her on, would find himself obliged to wage some manner of war with a horse of which the Indian was afraid.

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Further discussion of the topic was interrupted now by the cook, who appeared to announce his dinner served. Beth and her maid were, therefore, directed by Van to a table set for two, while he, with Napoleon and Gettysburg for company, repaired to a place in the kitchen.

Beth was hungry. She ate with all the relish of a mountaineer. Algy, moreover, was a kitchen magician in the art of transforming culinary commonplaces into viands of toothsome delight. Elsa became speechlessly busy. Despite her wishes in the matter, Beth could hear the men talking beyond.

"So them convicts has hiked over this way already," said the voice of Gettysburg distinctly. "We heard from A. C. about the prison break, but he wasn't on to which ones they was."

"One is Matt Barger," Van informed them. "He's the only one I know."

"Matt Barger! Not *your* Matt Barger?" demanded Gettysburg sharply.

Van nodded. "Mine when I had him."

Gettysburg arose excitedly.

"He ain't come hunting fer you as quick as this?" he inquired uneasily. "That ain't what's fetched him over to the desert?"

"Haven't asked him," answered Van. "He promised to look me up if ever he got out alive."

"Look you up!" Gettysburg was obviously over-wrought by the mere intelligence that Barger was at liberty. "You know what he'll do! You know him, boy! You know he'll keep his word. You can't go foolin' around alone. You've got to be——"

"Pass the beans," Van interrupted. He added more quietly: "Sit down, Gett, and shut the front door of your face."

Napoleon was eating, to "keep Van company." He pushed away his plate.

"Just our luck if these here derelicts was to foul us, skipper and crew," he observed ruefully. "Just our luck."

Gettysburg sat down, adding: "Why can't you wait, Van, wait till the whole kit and boodle of us can move to the bran'-new claim?"

Van finished half a cup of coffee.

"I told you I should continue on without delay. The horses will probably come to-night for all of you to follow me to-morrow."

"Then why don't you wait and go with us?" repeated Gettysburg. "We'll git there by noon, and you ain't got nuthin' to ride."

The horseman answered: "Suvy's the prettiest gaited thing you ever saw—when he gaits."

"Holy toads!" said the older man apprehensively, "you ain't sure-a-goin' to tackle the outlaw today?"

"I've always felt we'd come to it soon or late," was Van's reply. "And I've got to have a horse this afternoon. We can't kill each other but once."

"Supposen he stoves in your pilot-house," said Napoleon. "What shall we do about the claim, and all this cargo, and everything?"

"The claim? Work it, man, work it," Van responded. "What's a mining claim for but to furnish good hard work for a couple of old ring-tailed galoots who've shirked it all their lives?"

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"Work it, yep, but what on?" asked Gettysburg. "We're as broke as a hatched-out egg."

"Haven't you worked on shinbones and heavenly hopes before?" inquired the busy leader of the partnership. "And that reminds me, Algy, what about you?" he added to the Chinese cook. "We can't afford a tippe-bob-royal chef of your dimensions after this. I guess you'll have to poison somebody else."

"What's mallah you, Van?" Algy demanded aggressively. "You makee me velly sick. You get velly lich I cook your glub. You go bloke, I cook alle same. Sominagot, I b'long go with you all time. You no got good luck I never want the money, you savvy? You go hell—go anywhere—I go same place—that's all. You talkee big fool, that velly superstich." He looked at Van fiercely to disguise a great alarm, a fear that he might, after all, be dismissed in the break-up impending.

Van shrugged his shoulders.

"Sentenced for life. All right, Algy, if your cooking kills us off, at least, as the brave young husband remarked, it will all be in the family."

Algy still looked as fierce as one of his heathen idols.

"You t'ink velly smart," he said, still concealing his feelings. "Lats!" and with that he went out to chop some wood.

"Batten me into the pantry!" said Napoleon. "I'll bet old Algy'd board the outlaw himself, fer you, Van, squall and all."

"That horse ain't human," Gettysburg exploded anew. "Van, you can't ride no such Fourth-of-July procession!"

"Shut up!" murmured Van, with a gesture towards the room where Beth and her maid were dining. He added aloud: "The chances are we'll find he's a cheap Sunday-school picnic. Napoleon, you and Cayuse go out and prepare his mind for work."

"Aye, aye," said Napoleon rising to go, "but I wish we had some soothin' syrup, skipper."

He and the Indian were heard to depart, by Beth, sitting back in her chair. She was greatly alarmed by all she had heard of vengeful convicts and the vicious horse, and could eat no more for nervous dread.

"That horse has killed his man, and you know it," said Gettysburg in a whisper that the girl distinctly overhead. "Boy, boy, let the Injun ride him first."

"There, there, ease off," Van answered quietly. "You keep the women entertained about the mill while Suvy and I are debating."

He gulped down a last drink of coffee, silenced the miner's further remonstrances, and departed by way of the kitchen door.

Beth arose hurriedly and hastened forth, intent upon immediate prevention, if possible, of any further ordeals undertaken in behalf of herself. She was thoroughly frightened. A prescience of something ominous impending seemed to grip her very heart. She glanced about, helplessly, unfamiliar with the place. Van was nowhere in sight. She started to run around the cabin when Gettysburg appeared in her path.

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"Well, well," said he nervously, "now who'd a-thought you'd finished eatin'?"

"Oh please," she said, "please go tell Mr. Van I'd rather he wouldn't attempt to ride *any* horse again to-day. Will you please go tell him that?"

"You bet your patent leathers!" said Gettysburg. "You just go over and globe-trot the quartz-mill while I'm gone, and we'll fix things right in a shake."

He strode off in haste. Beth watched him go. She made no move towards the quartz-mill, which Gettysburg had indicated, over on the slope.

She soon grew restive, awaiting his return. Elsa came out and sat down. The old miner failed to reappear.

At length, unable to endure any longer her feeling of alarm and suspense, Beth resolutely followed where Gettysburg had gone, and soon came in sight of the stable and high corral. Then her heart struck a blow of excitement in her breast, and her knees began to weaken beneath her.

CHAPTER VI

THE BATTLE

Too late to interfere in the struggle about to be enacted, the girl stood rigidly beside a great red pine tree, fixing her gaze upon Van, on whose heels, as he walked, jingled a glinting pair of spurs.

From the small corral he was leading forth as handsome an animal as Beth had ever seen, already saddled, bridled—and blindfolded. The horse was a chestnut, magnificently sculptured and muscled. He was of medium size, and as trim and hard as a nail. His coat fairly glistened in the sun.

Despite his beauty there was something about him that betokened menace. It was not altogether that the men all stood away—all save Van—nor yet that the need for a blindfold argued danger in his composition. There was something acutely disquieting in the backward folding of his ears, the quiver of his sinews, the reluctant manner of his stepping.

Beth did not and could not know that an "outlaw" is a horse so utterly abandoned to ways of broncho crime and equine deviltry that no man is able to break him—that having conquered man after man, perhaps even with fatal results to his riders, he has become absolutely depraved and impossible of submission. She only knew that her heart was beating rapidly, painfully, that her breath came in gasps, that her whole nervous system was involved in some manner of anguish. She saw the Chinese cook

run past to witness the game, but all her faculties were focused on the man and horse—both sinister, tense, and grim.

Van had not turned in Beth's direction. He was wholly unaware of her presence. He halted when the horse was well out towards the center of the open, and the outlaw braced awkwardly, as if to receive an attack.

With the bridle reins held in his hand at the pommel of the saddle, Van stood for a moment by the chestnut's side, then, with incredible celerity of movement, suddenly placed his foot in the stirrup and was up and well seated before the blinded pony could have moved.

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Nothing happened. No one made a sound. No one, apparently, save Beth, had expected anything to happen. She felt a rush of relief—that came prematurely.

Van now leaned forward, as the horse remained stiffly braced, and slipping the blindfold from the pony's eyes, sat back in the saddle alertly.

Even then the chestnut did not move. He had gone through this ordeal many times before. He had often been mounted—but not for long at a time. He had even been exhausted by a stubborn “broncho buster”—some hardy human burr who could ride a crazy comet—but always he had won in the end. In a word he had earned his sobriquet, which in broncho-land is never lightly bestowed.

Van was not in the least deceived. However, he was eager for the conflict to begin. He had no time to waste. He snatched off his hat, let out a wild, shrill yell, dug with his spurs and struck the animal a resounding slap on the flank, that, like a fulminate, suddenly detonated the pent-up explosives in the beast.

He “lit into” bucking of astounding violence with the quickness of dynamite.

It was terrific. For a moment Beth saw nothing but a mad grotesquerie of horse and man, almost ludicrously unnatural, and crazed with eccentric motion.

The horse shot up in the air like a loose, distorted piece of statuary, blown from its pedestal by some gigantic disturbance. He appeared to buckle in his mid-air leap like a bended thing of metal, then dropped to the earth, stiff-legged as an iron image, to bound up again with mad and furious gyrations that seemed to the girl to twist both horse and rider into one live mass of incongruity,

He struck like a ruin, falling from the sky, went up again with demon-like activity, once more descended—once more hurtled wildly aloft—and repeated this maneuver with a swiftness utterly bewildering.

Had some diabolical wind, together with a huge, volcanic force, taken insane possession of the animal, to fire him skyward, whirl him about, thrash him down viciously and fling him up again, time after time, he could not have churned with greater violence.

He never came down in the same place twice, but he always came down stiff-legged. The jolt was sickening. All about, in a narrow, earth-cut circle he bucked, beginning to grunt and warm to his work and hence to increase the deviltry and malice of his actions.

Van had yelled but that once. He saw nothing, knew nothing, save a dizzy world, abruptly gone crazy about him.

To Beth it seemed as if the horror would never have an end. One glimpse she had of Van's white face, but nothing could it tell of his strength or the lack thereof. She felt she must look and look till he was killed. There could be no other issue, she was sure. And for herself there could be no escape from the awful fascination of the merciless brute, inflicting this torture on the man.

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It did end, however, rather unexpectedly—that particular phase of the conflict. The horse grew weary of the effort, made in vain, to dislodge the stubborn torment on his back. He changed the program with the deadliest of all a broncho's tricks.

Pausing for the briefest part of a second, while Van must certainly have been reeling with hideous motion and jolt, the chestnut quickly reared on high, to drop himself clean over backwards. It was thus that once he had crushed the life from a rider.

"Oh!" screamed Both, and she sank beside the tree.

The men all yelled. They were furious and afraid.

With hoofs wildly flaying the air, while he loomed tall and unreal in such an attitude, the broncho hung for a moment in mid-poise, then dropped over sheer—as if to be shattered into fragments.

But a mass of the bronze-like group was detached, and fell to one side, on its thigh. It was Van. He had seen what was coming in time.

Instantly up, as the brute rolled quickly to arise, he leaped in the saddle, the horn of which had snapped, and he and the chestnut came erect together, as if miraculously the equestrian group had been restored.

"Yi! Yi!" he yelled, like the madman he was—mad with the heat of the fight—and he dug in his spurs with vicious might.

Back to it wildly, with fury increased, the broncho leaped responsively.

Here, there, all the field over, the demon thrashed, catapulting incredibly. He tried new tricks, invented new volcanics of motion, developed new whirlwinds of violence.

Once more, then, as he had on the first occasion, the beast reared up and fell backward to the earth. Once more Van dropped away from his bulk and caught him before he could rise. This time, however, he did not immediately mount—and the men went running to his side.

"Fer God's sake, boy, let me kill the brute!" cried Gettysburg taking up a club.

"I'll shoot him! I'll shoot him! I'll shoot him!" said Napoleon wildly, but without any weapon in his hands.

Beth beheld and heard it all. She was once more standing rigidly by her tree, unable to move or speak. She wished to run to Van as the men had run, but not to slay the broncho—only to beg the horseman not to mount again.

She saw him push the men away and stand like the broncho's guard. His face was streaked with blood—his blood—jolted alike from his mouth and nose by the shocks to which he had been subjected.

"Let the horse alone!" he commanded roughly. "Good stuff in this broncho—somewhere. Get me a bottle of water, right away—a big one—get it full."

His partners started at once to raise objections. The Indian stood by stolidly looking on.

"You can't go no further. Van, you can't——" started Gettysburg.

"Sominagot! Una ma, hong oy! Una ca see fut!" said the Chinese-cook, swearing vehemently in the language likeliest to count, and he ran at once towards the kitchen.

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Van was replacing the blindfold on the broncho's eyes. The animal was panting, sweating, quivering in every muscle. His ears went backward and forward rapidly. The blindfold shut out a wild, unreasoning challenge and defiance that burned like a torch in his eyes.

Algy came running with a big bottle, filled and corked.

"Fer God's sake, leave me kill him!" Gettysburg was repeating automatically. "Van, if you ain't got no respect fer yourself, ain't you got none left fer us old doggone cusses?"

"Give me the bottle, Algy," Van replied. "You're the only game sport on the ranch."

Still he did not discover Beth. His attentions were engrossed by the horse. He was dizzy, dazed, but a dogged master still of his forces. Up he mounted to the saddle again, the bottle held firmly in his grasp.

"Slip off the blinder," he said to his friends, and Algy it was who obeyed.

"Damn you, now you buck!" cried Van wildly, and his heels ignited the volcano.

For five solid minutes the broncho redoubled his scheme of demoniac fury. Then he poised, let out a shrill scream of challenge, and abruptly raised to repeat the backward fall.

Up, up he went, an ungainly sight, and then—the heavens split in twain.

He was only well lifted from the earth when, with a thunderous, terrible blow, Van crashed the bottle downward, fairly between his ears, and burst it on his skull.

The weapon was shattered with a frightening thud. Red pieces of glass and streaming water poured in a cataract down across the broncho's eyes as if very doom itself had suddenly cracked. A cataclysm could not have been more horrible. An indescribable fright and awe overwhelmed the brutish mind as with a cloud of lead.

Down swiftly he dropped to his proper position, perhaps with a fear that his crown was gaping open from impact with the sky. He was stunned by the blow upon his brain, and weakened in every fiber. He started to run, in terror of the thing, and the being still solid in the saddle. Wildly he went around the cove, in the panic of utter defeat.

The men began to cheer, their voices choked and hoarse. Van rode now as fate might ride the very devil. He spurred the horse to furious, exhausting speed, guiding him wildly around the mountain theater. Again and again they circled the grassy arena, till foam and lather whitened the broncho's flank, chest, and mouth, and his nostril burned red as living flame.

When at last the animal, weary and undone, would have sobered down to a trot or walk, Van forced him anew to crazy speed. At least five miles he drove him thus, till the broncho's sides, like the rider's face, were red with blood mingled with sweat.

Beth, at the climax, had gone down suddenly, leaning against the tree. She had not fainted, but was far too weak to stand. Her eyes only moved. She watched the two, that seemed welded into one, go racing madly against fatigue.

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At last she beheld the look of the conquered—the utter surrender of the broken and subdued—gleam dully from the wilted pony's eyes. She pitied the animal she had feared and hated but a few brief moments before. She began to think that the man was perhaps the brute, after all, to ride the exhausted creature thus without a sign of mercy.

She rose to her feet as the two came at last to a halt, master and servant, conquered and conqueror, man and quivering beast.

Then Van got down, and her heart, that had pitied the horse, welled with deeper feeling for the rider. She had never in her life seen a face so drawn, so utterly haggard beneath a mask of red as that presented by the horseman.

Van nearly fell, but would not fall, and instead stood trembling, his arm by natural inclination now circling the neck of the pony.

"Well, Suvy," he said not ungently, "we gave each other hell. Hereafter we're going to be friends."

Beth heard him. She also saw the chestnut turn and regard the man with a look of appeal and dumb questioning in his eyes that choked her—with joy and compassion together. She somehow knew that this man and horse would be comrades while they lived.

Half an hour afterward as she, Van, and Elsa rode forward as before, she saw the man in affection pat the broncho on the neck. And the horse pricked his ears in a newfound gladness in service and friendship that his nature could not yet comprehend.

CHAPTER VII

AN EXCHANGE OF QUESTIONS

Youth is elastic, and Van was young. An hour of quiet riding restored him astoundingly. He bore no signs of fatigue that Beth could detect upon his face. Once more, as he had in the morning, he was riding ahead in the trail, apparently all but oblivious of the two anxious women in his charge.

They had wound far downward through a canyon, and now at length were emerging on a sagebrush slope that lowered to the valley. Van halted for Beth to ride to his side, and onward they continued together.

"I suppose you have friends to whom you are going in Goldite," he said, "—or at least there's someone you know."

"Yes," she answered, "my brother."

Van looked at her in his quizzical way, observing:

"I don't believe I know him."

Her glance was almost one of laughter.

"Why, how can you tell? You don't even know his name." She paused, then added quietly: "It's Glenmore Kent." She felt he had a right to know not only her brother's name, but also her own, if only for what he had done. "You might, of course, know him after all," she concluded. "He has quite a number of acquaintances."

"Kent," said Van. To himself it was "Beth Kent" he was saying. "No, guess not. No such luck, but I hope you'll find him in the camp."

"Do you think I may not?" She was just a trifle startled by the possibility.

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He was grave for once.

“Men come and go in a mining town, where everyone’s unduly excited. If he isn’t on deck, then have you no one else? Have you any alternative plan?”

“Why, no,” she confessed, her alarm increasing, “not unless Mr. Bostwick has arrived and arranged our accommodations.”

“I wouldn’t count on Searle,” drawled Van significantly. “He may have to walk.”

“Not across the awful desert?”

“If he goes around he’ll be longer.”

“Why—but——” she gasped, “there is nothing to eat—no water—there isn’t anything on the desert, is there?—anywhere?”

He was looking intently into the deep brown depths of her eyes as he answered:

“There’s so little to eat that the chipmunks have to fetch in their lunches.”

Beth continued to gaze upon him. If she noted the lights of laughter lying soberly subdued in his eyes, she also discerned something more, that affected her oddly. Despite the horseman’s treatment of her escort—a treatment she confessed he had partially deserved—and despite the lightness of his speeches, she felt certain of the depth of his nature, convinced of the genuine earnestness of his purposes—the honesty and worth of his friendship.

She knew she was tremendously indebted for all he had done and was doing, but aside from all that, in her heart of hearts she admired bravery, courage, and a dash of boldness more than anything else in the world. She was not yet certain, however, whether the man at her side was brave or merely reckless, courageous, or indifferent to danger, bold or merely audacious. She knew nothing about him whatsoever, nothing except he must be tired, lame, and bruised from exertions undertaken in her behalf. It had been a long, long day. She felt as if they had known each other always—and had always been friends.

Her mind went back to the morning as if to an era of the past. The thought of the convicts who had captured Bostwick aroused new apprehensions in her breast, though not for the man with the car. Someway Searle seemed strangely far away and dimmed in her regard. She was thinking of what she had overheard, back there at the Monte Cristo mine.

“This has been a trying day,” she said, apparently ignoring Van’s last observation. “You have taken a great deal of trouble for—for us—and we appreciate it fully.”



Van said gravely: "Taking trouble is the only fun I have."

"You laugh at everything," she answered, "but isn't it really a serious thing—a menace to everyone—having those convicts out of prison?"

"It isn't going to be a knitting-bee, rounding them up," Van admitted. "And meantime they're going to be exacting of everyone they meet."

She looked at him half seriously, but altogether brightly.

"And what if they chance to meet you?"

"Oh, we'd exchange courtesies, I reckon."

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She had no intention of confessing how much she had overheard, but she was tremendously interested—almost fearful for the man’s safety, she hardly dared ask herself why. She approached her subject artfully.

“Do you know them, then?”

“Well, yes, the leader—slightly,” he answered. “I sent him up for murder, stealing cattle, and robbing sluices. He was too annoying to have around.”

“Oh! Then won’t he feel ugly, resentful?” she inquired earnestly. “Won’t he try to hunt you up—and pay you back?”

Van regarded her calmly.

“He told me to expect my pay—if ever he escaped—and he’s doubtless got his check-book along.”

“His check-book?”

“Colt—forty-four,” Van drawled by way of explanation.

She turned a trifle pale.

“He’d shoot you on sight?”

“If he sighted me first.”

Her breath came hard. She realized that the quiet-seeming horseman at her side would kill a fellow-being—this convict, at least—as readily as he might destroy a snake.

“How long ago did you put him in jail?” she inquired.

“Four years ago this summer.”

“Have you always lived here—out West?”

“I’ve lived every day I’ve been here,” he answered evasively. “Do I look like a native?”

She laughed. “Oh, I don’t know. We came here straight from New York, a week ago, Elsa and I. Mr. Bostwick joined us two days later. I really know nothing of the country at all.”

“New York,” he said, and relapsed into silent meditation. How far away seemed old New Amsterdam! How long seemed the brief six years since he had started forth with his youthful health, his strength, determination, boyish dreams, and small inheritance to build up a fortune in the West! What a mixture of sunshine and failure it had been!

What glittering hopes had lured him hither and yon in the mountains, where each great gateway of adventure had charged its heavy toll!

He had lost practically all of his money; he had gained his all of manhood. He had suffered privation and hardship; he had known the vast comfort of friends—true friends, as certain as the very heart in his breast to serve him to the end.

Like a panoramic dream he beheld a swift procession of mine-and-cattle scenes troop past for swift review. He lived again whole months of nights spent out alone beneath the sky, with the snow and the wind hurled down upon him from a merciless firmament of bleakness. Once more he stumbled blindly forward in the desert—he and Gettysburg—perishing for water, giving up their liquid souls to the horribly naked and insatiate sun. Again he toiled in the shaft of a mine till his back felt like a crackly thing of glass with each aching fissure going deeper.

Once more the gold goddess beckoned with her smile, and fortune was there, almost in reach—the fortune that he and his partners had sought so doggedly, so patiently—the fortune for which they had starved and delved and suffered—only to see it vanish in the air as the sunshine will vanish from a peak.

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Old hopes, like ghosts, went skulking by, vain charlatans, ashamed. But friendships stood about in every scene—bright presences that cast a roseate glow on all the tribulations of his life. And it seemed as if a failure here was half a failure only, after all. It had not robbed him either of his youth, his strength, or a certain boyish credulity and trust in all his kind. He still believed he should win his golden goal, and he loved the land that had tried him.

His last, his biggest venture, the Monte Cristo mine was, however, gone—everything sold to meet the company debts. Nevertheless, he had once more purchased a claim, with all but his very last dollar in the world, and he and his partners would soon be on the ground, assaulting the stubborn adamant with powder, pick, and drill, in the fever of the miner's ceaseless dream.

To-day, as he rode beside the girl, he wondered at it all—why he had labored so persistently. The faint, far-off shadow of a sweetheart, long since left behind, failed to supply him a motive. She had grown impatient, listened to a suitor more tangible than Van's absent self, and so, blamelessly, had faded from his scheme of hopes, leaving no more than a fragrance in his thoughts, with certainly no bitterness or anger.

"Old New York," he repeated, at the end of his reverie, and meeting once more the steady brown eyes of the girl with whom the fates had thrown him, he fetched up promptly with the present.

"How long has your brother been out here in Goldite?"

"About a month," she answered. "He's been in the West for nearly a year, and wrote Mr. Bostwick to come."

"Mr. Bostwick is doubtless a very particular friend of your family."

"Why, yes, he's my—— That is, he was—he always has been a very particular friend—for several years," she faltered suddenly turning red. "We haven't any family, Glen and I—and he's my half brother only—but we're just like chums—and that was why I wanted to come. I expect to surprise him. He doesn't know I'm here."

Van was silent and she presently added:

"I hope you and Glen will be friends. I know how much he'll wish to thank you."

He looked at her gravely.

"I hope he won't. It's up to me to thank him."

They had come to a road at the level of the valley—a desert valley, treeless, grassless, gray, and desolate. The sun was rapidly nearing the rim of the mountains, as if to escape pursuit of a monstrous bank of clouds.

Van spurred his chestnut to a gallop, and the horses bearing the women responded with no further need of urging.

CHAPTER VIII

A NIGHT'S EXPENSES

From Karrish to Goldite by the road was twenty-seven miles. There were fifteen mile of bottles by the way—all of them empty. A blind man with a nose for glass could have smelled out the trail unerringly across that desert stretch. Karrish was the nearest town for a very great distance around.

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Over the road innumerable caravans were passing. Everything was rushing to Goldite. There were horsemen, hurried persons on foot, men in carriages and autos, twenty-horse freight teams, and men on tiny burros. Nearly all were shedding bottles as they went. A waterless land is not necessarily devoid of all manner of moisture.

A dozen of the slowly laboring freight outfits were passed by Van and his two companions. What engines of toil they represented! The ten pairs of sweating, straining animals seemed almost like some giant caterpillar, harnessed to a burden on wheels. They always dragged three wagons, two of which were huge gray hulks, incredibly heavy with giant-powder, canned goods, bottled goods, picks, shovels, bedding, hay, great mining machinery, and house-hold articles. These wagons were hitched entrain. The third wagon, termed a "trailer," was small and loaded merely with provisions for the teamster and the team. The whole thing, from end to end, beat up a stifling cloud of dust.

The sun went down while Beth, Van, and Elsa were still five miles from their goal. They rode as rapidly as possible. The horses, however, were jaded, and the way was slightly up grade. The twilight was brief. It descended abruptly from the western bank of clouds, by now as thick and dark as mud. Afar off shone the first faint light of the gold-camp to which the three were riding. This glimmering ray was two miles out from the center of town. Goldite was spread in a circle four miles wide, and the most of it was isolated tents.

The darkness shut down like a pall. A vivid, vicious bolt of lightning—a fiery serpent, overcharged with might—struck down upon the mountain tops, pouring liquid flame upon the rocks. A sweeping gust of wind came raging down upon the town, hurling dust and gravel on the travelers.

Van rode ahead like a spirit of the storm. He knew the need for haste. Beth simply let her pony go. She was cramped and far too wearied for effort.

They were galloping now past the outskirts of the camp, the many scattered tents of the men who were living on their claims. All the world was a land of claims, staked off with tall white posts, like ghosts in the vanishing light. Ahead, a multitude of lights had suddenly broken on the travelers' vision, like a nearby constellation of stars.

They rode into all of it, blazing lights, eager crowds upon the streets, noise of atrocious music from the brilliant saloons, and rush of wind and dust, not a minute too soon. They had barely alighted and surrendered their horses to a friend of Van's when the rain from the hilltops swooped upon the camp in a fury that seemed like an elemental threat to sweep all the place, with its follies, hopes, and woes, its excitements, lawlessness, and struggles, from the face of the barren desert world.



Beth and her maid were lame and numb. Van could only hustle them inside a grocery-and-hardware store to save them from a drenching. The store was separated from a gambling-hall saloon by the flimsiest board partition. Odors of alcohol, confusion of voices, and calls of a gamester came unimpeded to the women's senses, together with some mighty bad singing, accompanied lustily by strains and groans pounded from a ghastly piano.

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"Sit down," said Van, inverting a tub at the feet of the wondering women. "I'll see if I can rustle up your brother."

He went out in the rain, dived impartially into the first of the crowded saloons, was somewhat hilariously greeted by a score of convivial fellows, found no one who knew of young Glen Kent, and proceeded on to the next.

The horseman was well and favorably known in all directions. He was eagerly cornered wheresoever he appeared by a lot of fellows who were friends to little purpose, in an actual test. However, he clung to his mission with commendable tenacity of purpose, and kept upon his way. Thus he discovered at length, when he visited the bank—an institution that rarely closed before ten o'clock in the evening—that Kent had been gone for the past two weeks, no one knew where, but somewhere out south, with a party.

There was nothing to do after that but to look for fit apartments for the gently reared girl and her maid. Hunting a needle in the ocean would have been a somewhat similar task. Van went at once at the business, with his customary spirit. He was presently informed there was nothing resembling a room or a bed to be had in all the place. A hundred men would walk the streets or sleep in chairs that night. The one apartment suitable for two lone women to occupy had been secured the previous day by "Plunger" Trask, an Eastern young man who would bet that grass was not green.

Van searched for Trask and found him "cashing in" a lot of assorted chips, representing his winnings at a faro game at which he had been "bucking."

"Hello, there, Van," he said familiarly as the horseman touched him on the shoulder. "Come and have a drink."

"My teeth are floating now from drink," said Van, "but I'll take something else if you say so. I want your apartments for the night."

"Say, wire me!" answered the plunger. "That's the cutest little bunch of nerve I ever saw off the Bowery! How much money have you got in your clothes?"

"About forty-five dollars," said Van. "Is it good?"

"Not as a price, but O.K. in a flip," said Trask, with an itch for schemes of chance. "I'll throw you the dice, my room against your forty-five—and the devil take your luck if you win!"

Van agreed. They borrowed a box of dice, threw three times apiece—and the horseman paid over his money.

"There you are, old man," said the plunger cheerfully. "Satisfied, I hope."

"Not quite," said Van. "I'll owe you forty-five more and throw you again."

"Right ho!" responded Trask. "Go as far as you like."

They shook again. Van lost as before. He borrowed again, undiscouraged. For the third time they cast the little cubes of uncertainty and this time Van actually won. The room was his to dispose of as he pleased. It had cost him ninety dollars for the night.

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In his pocket he had cautiously retained a little money—seven and one-half dollars, to be accurate. He returned to Beth, informed her of all he had discovered concerning her brother, took herself and Elsa to dine in the camp's one presentable restaurant, paid nearly seven dollars for the meal, and gave what remained to the waiter.

Then Beth, who had never in her life been so utterly exhausted, resigned herself to Elsa's care, bade Van good-night, and left him standing in the rain before the door, gallant, and smiling to the end.

CHAPTER IX

PROGRESS AND SALT

Goldite, by the light of day, presented a wonderful spectacle. It was a mining camp positively crystallizing into being before the very eyes of all beholders. It was nearly all tents and canvas structures—a heterogeneous mixture of incompleteness and modernity to which the telegraph wires had already been strung from the outside world. It had no fair supply of water, but it did have a newspaper, issued once a week.

A dozen new buildings, flimsy, cheap affairs, were growing like toadstools, day and night. Several brick buildings, and shacks of mud, were rising side by side. Everywhere the scene was one of crowds, activity, and hurry. Thousands of men were in the one straight street, a roughly dressed, excited throng, gold-bitten, eager, and open-handed. Hundreds of mules and horses, a few bewildered cows, herds of great wagons, buggies, heaps of household goods, and trunks, with fortifications of baled hay and grain, were crowded into two great corrals, where dusty teamsters hastened hotly about, amidst heaps of dusty harness, sacks of precious ore and the feed troughs for the beasts.

Beth had slept profoundly, despite the all-night plague of noises, penetrating vividly through the shell-like walls of the house. She was out with Elsa at an early hour, amazingly refreshed and absorbingly interested in all she heard and saw. The sky was clear, but a chill wind blew down from the mountains, flapping canvas walls in all directions.

The building wherein the women had rested was a wooden lodging house, set barely back from the one business street of the camp. Next door was a small, squat domicile constructed of bottles and mud. The bottles were laid in the "mortar" with their ends protruding. Near by, at the rear of a prosperous saloon, was a pyramid of empty bottles, fully ten feet high—enough to build a little church.

Drawn onward by the novelty of all the scene, Beth crossed the main street—already teeming with horses, wagons, and men—and proceeded over towards a barren hill,



followed demurely by her maid. The hill was like a torn-up battlefield, trenched, and piled with earthworks of defense, for man the impetuous had already flung up great gray dumps of rock, broken and wrenched from the bulk of the slope, where he quested for gleaming yellow metal. He had ripped out the adamant—the matrix of the gold—for as far as Beth could see. Like ant-heaps of tremendous dimensions stood these monuments of toil—rock-writings, telling of the heat and desire, the madness of man to be rich.

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The world about was one of rocks and treeless ridges, spewed from some vast volcanic forge of ages past. It was all a hard, gray, adamant world, unlovely and severe—a huge old gold furnace, minus heat or fire, lying neglected in a universe of mountains that might have been a workshop in the ancient days when Titans wrought their arts upon the earth.

Beth gazed upon it all in wonder not unmingled with awe. What a place it was for man to live and wage his puny battles! Yet the fever of all of it, rising in her veins, made her eager already to partake of the dream, the excitement that made mere gold-slaves of the men who had come here compelling this forbidding place to yield up some measure of comfort and become in a manner their home.

Van, in the meanwhile, having spent the time till midnight on his feet, and the small hours asleep on a bale of hay, was early abroad, engaged in various directions. He first proceeded to the largest general store in the camp and ordered a generous bill of supplies to be sent to his newest claim. Next he arranged with a friendly teamster for the prompt return of the two borrowed horses on which Beth and her maid had come to camp. Then, on his way to an assayer's office, where samples of rock from the claim in question had been left for the test of fire, he encountered a homely, little, dried-up woman who was scooting about from store to store with astonishing celerity of motion.

"Tottering angels!" said he. "Mrs. Dick!"

"Hello—just a minute," said the lively little woman, and she dived inside the newest building and was out almost immediately with a great sack of plunder that she jerked about with most diverting energy.

"Here, fetch this down to the house," she demanded imperiously. "What's the good of my finding you here in Goldite if you don't do nothing for your country?"

Van shouldered the sack.

"What are you doing here anyhow?" said he, "—up before breakfast and busy as a hen scratching for one chicken."

"Come on," she answered, starting briskly towards a new white building, off the main thoroughfare, eastward. "I live here—start my boarding-house today. I'm going to get rich. Every room's furnished and every bed wanted as fast as I can make 'em up. Have you had your breakfast?"

"Say, you're my Indian," answered Van. "I've got you two customers already. You've got to take them in and give them your best if you turn someone else inside out to do it."

Mrs. Dick paused suddenly.

“Bronson Van Buren! You’re stuck on some woman at last!”

“At last?” said Van. “Haven’t I always been stuck after you?”

Mrs. Dick resumed her brisk locomotion.

“Snakes alive!” she concluded explosively. “She’s respectable, of course? But you said two. Now see here, Van, no Mormon games with me!”

“Her *maid*—it’s her maid that’s with her,” Van explained. “Don’t jump down my throat till I grease it.”

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"Her maid!" Mrs. Dick said no more as to that. The way she said it was enough. They had come to the door of her newly finished house, a clean, home-like place from which a fragrance of preparing breakfast flowed like a ravishing nectar. "Where are they now?" she demanded impatiently. "Wherever they are it ain't fit for a horse! Why don't you go and fetch 'em?"

Van put the bag inside the door, then his hands on Mrs. Dick's shoulders.

"I'll bet your mother was a little red firecracker and your father a bottle of seltzer," he said. Then off he went for Beth.

She was not, of course, at "home" when he arrived at the place he had found the previous evening. Disturbed for a moment by her absence, he presently discerned her, off there westward on the hill from which she was making a survey of the camp.

Three minutes after he was climbing up the slope and she turned and looked downward upon him.

"By heavens!" he said beneath his breath, "—what beauty!"

The breeze was molding her dress upon her rounded form till she seemed like the statue of a goddess—a goddess of freedom, loveliness, and joy, sculptured in the living flesh—a figure vibrant with glowing health and youth, startlingly set in the desert's gray austerity. With the sunlight flinging its gold and riches upon her, what a marvel of color she presented!—such creamy white and changing rose-tints in her cheeks—such a wonderful brown in her hair and eyes—such crimson of lips that parted in a smile over even little jewels of teeth! And she smiled on the horseman, tall, and active, coming to find her on the hill.

"Good morning!" she cried. "Oh, isn't it wonderful—so big, and bare, and *clean*!"

Van smiled.

"It's a hungry-looking country to me—looks as if it has eaten all the trees. If it makes you think of breakfast, or just plain coffee and rolls, I've found a place I hope you'll like, with a friend I didn't know was here."

"You are very kind, I'm sure," she said. "I'm afraid we're a great deal of trouble."

"That's what women were made for," he answered her frankly, a bright, dancing light in his eyes. "They couldn't help it if they would, and I guess they wouldn't if they could."

"Oh, indeed?" She shot him a quick glance, half a challenge. "I *guess* if you don't mind we won't go to the place you've found, for breakfast, this morning."

“You’d better guess again,” he answered, and taking her arm, in a masterful way that bereft her of the power of speech or resistance, he marched her briskly down the slope and straight towards Mrs. Dick’s.

“Thank your stars you’ve struck a place like this,” he said. “If you don’t I’ll have to thank them for you.”

“Perhaps I ought to thank you first,” she ventured smilingly. It would have seemed absurd to resent his boyish ways.

“You may,” he said, “when I get to be one of your stars.”

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"Oh, really? Why defer mere thanks *indefinitely*?"

"It won't be indefinitely, and besides, thanks will keep—and breakfast won't."

He entered the house, with Beth and her maid humbly trailing at his heels. Mrs. Dick came bustling from the kitchen like a busy little ant. Van introduced his charges briefly. Mrs. Dick shook hands with them both.

"Well!" she said, "I like you after all! And it's lucky I do, for if I didn't I don't know's I should take you or not, even if Van did say I had to."

Van took her by the shoulders and shook her boyishly.

"You'd take a stick of dynamite and a house afire, both in one hand, if I said so," he announced. "Now don't get hostile."

"Well—I s'pose I would," agreed Mrs. Dick. She added to Beth: "Ain't he the dickens and all? Just regular brute strength. Come right upstairs till I show you where you're put. I've turned off two men to let you have the best room in the house."

Beth had to smile. She had never felt so helpless in her life—or so amused. She followed Mrs. Dick obediently, finding the two-bed room above to be a bright, new-smelling apartment of acceptable size and situation. In answer to a score of rapid-fire questions on the part of Mrs. Dick, she imparted as much as Van already knew concerning herself and her quest.

Mrs. Dick became her friend forthwith, then hastened downstairs to the kitchen. Van and Beth presently took breakfast together, while Elsa, with a borrowed needle and thread, was busied with some minor repairing of garments roughly used the day before. Other boarders and lodgers of the house had already eaten and gone, to resume their swirl in the maelstrom of the camp.

For a time the two thus left alone in the dining-room appeased their appetites in silence. Van watched the face of the girl for a time and finally spoke.

"I'll let you know whatever I hear about your brother, if there is any more to hear. Meantime you'll have to remain here and wait."

She was silent for a moment, reflecting on, the situation.

"You took my suitcase away from Mr. Bostwick, you'll remember," she said, "and left it where we got the horses."

"It will be here to-day," he answered. "I arranged for that with Dave."

“Oh. But of course you cannot tell when Mr. Bostwick may appear.”

“His movements couldn’t be arranged so conveniently, otherwise he wouldn’t appear at all.”

She glanced at him, startled.

“Not come at all? But I need him! Besides, he’s my—— I expect him to go and find my brother. And the trunk checks are all in his pocket—wait!—no they’re not, they’re in my suitcase after all.”

“You’re in luck,” he assured her blandly, “for Searle has doubtless lost all his pockets.”

“Lost his pockets?” she echoed. “Perhaps you mean the convicts took them—took his clothing—everything he had.”

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"Everything except his pleasant manner," Van agreed. "They have plenty of that of their own."

She was lost for a moment in reflection.

"Poor Searle! Poor Mr. Bostwick!"

Van drank the last of his coffee.

"Was Searle the only man you knew in all New York?"

She colored. "Certainly not. Of course not. Why do you ask such a question?"

"I was trying to understand the situation, but I give it up." He looked in her eyes with mock gravity, and she colored.

She understood precisely what he meant—the situation between herself and Bostwick, to whom, she feared, she had half confessed herself engaged. She started three times to make a reply, but halted each answer for a better.

"You don't like Mr. Bostwick," she finally observed.

Van told her gravely: "I like him like the old woman kept tavern."

She could not entirely repress a smile.

"And how did she keep it—the tavern?"

"Like hell," said Van. He rose to go, adding; "You like him about that way yourself—since yesterday."

Her eyes had been sparkling, but now they snapped.

"Why—how can you speak so rudely? You know that isn't true! You know I like—admire Mr. Bost— You haven't any right to say a thing like that—no matter what you may have done for me!"

She too had risen. She faced him glowingly.

He suddenly took both her hands and held them in a firm, warm clasp from which there could be no escape.

"Beth," he said audaciously, "you are never going to marry that man."

She was struggling vainly to be free. Her face was crimson.

“Let me go!” she demanded. “Mr. Van—you let me go! I don’t see how you dare to say a thing like that. I don’t know why——”

“You can’t marry Searle,” he interrupted, “because you are going to marry me.”

He raised her hands to his lips and kissed them both.

“Be back by and by,” he added, and off he went, through the kitchen, leaving Beth by the table speechless, burning and confused, with a hundred wild emotions in her heart.

He continued out at the rear of the place, where little Mrs. Dick was valiantly tugging at two large buckets of water. He relieved her of the burden.

“Say, Priscilla,” he drawled, “if a smoke-faced Easterner comes around here while I’m gone, looking for—you know—Miss Kent, remember he can’t have a room in your house if he offers a million and walks on his hands and prays in thirteen languages.”

Little Mrs. Dick glanced up at him shrewdly.

“Have you got it as bad as that? Snakes alive! All right, I guess I’ll remember.”

“Be good,” said Van, and off he went to the assayer’s shop for which he had started before.

The assayer glanced up briefly. He was busy at a bucking-board, where, with energetic application of a very heavy weight, on the end of a handle, he was grinding up a lot of dusty ore.

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"Greeting, Van," said he. "Come in."

Van shook his outstretched hand.

"I thought I'd like to see those results," he said, "—that rock I fetched you last, remember? You thought you could finish the batch last week. Gold rock from the 'See Saw' claim that I bought three weeks ago."

"Yes, oh yes. Now what did I do with—— Finished 'em up and put 'em away somewhere," said the assayer, dusting his hands and moving towards his desk. "Such a lot of stuff's been coming in—here they are, I reckon." He drew a half dozen small printed forms from a cavity in the desk, glanced them over briefly and handed the lot to Van. "Nothing doing. Pretty good rock for building purposes."

"Nothing doing?" echoed Van incredulously, staring at the assay records which showed in merciless bluntness that six different samples of reputed ore had proved to be absolutely worthless. "The samples you assayed first showed from ten to one hundred and fifty dollars to the ton, in gold."

"What's that got to do with this?" inquired the master of acids and fire. "You don't mean to say——"

"Do with it, man? It all came out of the same identical prospect," Van interrupted. "These were later samples than the others, that's all."

The assayer glanced over his shoulder at the hope-destroying slips.

"The 'See Saw' claim," he said perfunctorily. "You bought it, Van, who from?"

"From Selwyn Briggs."

"Sorry," said the assayer briefly. "H'm! That Briggs!"

"You don't mean—— It couldn't have been salted on me!" Van declared. "I took my own samples, broke down a new face purposely, sacked it all myself—and sealed the sacks. No one touched those sacks till you broke the seals in this office. He couldn't have salted me, Frank. What possible chance——"

The assayer went to a shelf, took down a small canvas bag, glanced at a mark that identified it as one in which samples of "See Saw" rock had arrived for the former assay, and turned it inside out.

"Once in a while I've heard of a cute one squirting a sharp syringe full of chloride of gold on worthless rock, through the meshes of the canvas, even after the samples were

sealed,” he imparted quietly. “This sack looks to me like some I’ve encountered before that were pretty rich in gold. I’ll assay the cloth if you like.”

Van took the sack in his hand, examined it silently, then glanced as before at his papers.

“Salted—by that lump of a Briggs!” His lip was curved in a mirthless smile. “I guess I’ve got it in the neck all right. These last samples tell the real story.” He slapped the papers across his hand, then tore them up in tiny bits and threw them on the floor.”

“Sorry, old man,” said the assayer, as before. “Hope you didn’t pay him much for the claim.”

“Not much,” said Van. “All I had—and some of it borrowed money.”

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The assayer puckered up his mouth.

“Briggs has skipped—gone East.”

“I know. Well—all in a lifetime, I suppose. Pay you, Frank, when I can.”

“That’s all right,” his friend assured him. “Forget it if you like.”

Van started off, but returned.

“Say, Frank,” he said, “don’t hawk this around. It’s bad enough for me to laugh at myself. I don’t want the chorus joining in.”

“I’m your clam,” said Frank. “So long, and better luck!”

CHAPTER X

THE LAUGHING WATER CLAIM

A man who lives by uncertainties has a singular habit of mind. He is ever lured forward by hopes and dreams that overlap each other as he goes. While the scheme in hand is proving hopeless, day by day, he grasps at another, just ahead, and draws himself onward towards the gilded goal, forgetful of the trickery of all those other schemes behind, that were equally bright in their day.

Van had relinquished all hold on the golden dream once dangled before him by the Monte Cristo mine, to lay strong hands on the promise vouchsafed by the “See Saw” claim which he had purchased. As he walked away from the assayer’s shop he felt his hands absolutely empty. For the very first time in at least four years he had no blinding glitter before his vision to entice him to feverish endeavor. He was a dreamer with no dreams, a miner without a mine.

He felt chagrined, humiliated. After all his time spent here in the world’s most prodigious laboratory of minerals, he had purchased a salted mine! A sharper man, that sad-faced, half-sick Selwyn Briggs, had actually trimmed him like this!

Salted! And he was broke. Well, what was the next thing to do? He thought of the fine large bill of goods, engaged for himself and partners to take to the “See Saw” claim. It made him smile. But he would not rescind the order—for a while. His partners, with his worldly goods, the Chinese cook and all the household, save Cayuse, would doubtless arrive by noon. He and they had to eat; they had to live. Also they had to mine, for they knew nothing else by way of occupation. They must somehow get hold of some sort of claim, and go on with their round of hopes and toil. They had never been so utterly bereft—so outcast by the goddess of fortune—since they had thrown their lots together.



He dreaded the thought of meeting various acquaintances here in camp—the friends to whom he had said he was going that day to the “See Saw” property, far over the Mahogany range, near the Indian reservation. He determined to go. Perhaps the shack and the shaft-house on the claim, with the windlass and tools included by Briggs in the bill of sale, might fetch a few odd dollars.

Slowly down the street he went to the hay-yard where his pony was stabled. He met a water man, halting on his rounds at the front of a neat canvas dwelling. The man had three large barrels on a wagon, each full of muddy, brackish water. A long piece of hose was thrust into one, its other end dangled out behind.

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From the tent emerged a woman with her buckets. The water man placed the hose-end to his mouth, applied a lusty suction, and the water came gushing forth. He filled both receptacles, collected the price, and then drove on to the next.

Sardonically Van reflected that even the fine little stream of water on his claim, in a land where water was so terribly scarce, was absolutely worthless as an asset. It was over a mountain ridge of such tremendous height that it might as well have been in the forests of Maine.

Despite the utter hopelessness of his present situation, his spirits were not depressed. Gettysburg, he reflected, was a genius for bumping into queer old prospectors—relics of the days of forty-nine, still eagerly pursuing their *ignis fatuous* of gold—and from some such desert wanderer he would doubtless soon pick up a claim. There was nothing like putting Gettysburg upon the scent.

Van wrote a note to his partners.

“Dear Fellow Mourners:

“Have just discovered a joke. I was salted on the ‘See Saw’ property. Our pipe dream is defunct. Have gone over to lay out remains. If you find any oldtimers who have just discovered some lost bonanza, take them into camp. Don’t get drunk, get busy. Be back a little after noon.”

This he left with the hay-yard man where his partners would stop when they arrived. Mounted on Suvy, his outlaw of the day before, he rode from Goldite joyously. After all, what was the odds? He had been no better off than now at least a hundred times. At the worst he still had his partners and his horse, a breakfast aboard, and a mountain ahead to climb.

Indeed, at the light of friendship in his broncho’s eyes, as well as at the pony’s neigh of welcome, back there at the yard, he had felt a boundless pleasure in his veins. He patted the chestnut’s neck, in his rough, brusque way of companionship, and the horse fairly quivered with pleasure.

For nearly two hours the willing animal went zig-zagging up the rocky slopes. The day was warming; the sun was a naked disk of fire. It was hard climbing. Van had chosen the shorter, steeper way across the range. From time to time, where the barren ascent was exceptionally severe, he swung from the saddle and led the broncho on, to mount further up as before.

Thus they came in time to a zone of change, over one of the ridges, a region where rocks and ugliness gave way to a growth of brush and stunted trees. These were the outposts, ragged, dwarfed, and warped, of a finer growth beyond.



Fifteen miles away, down between the hills, flowed a tortuous stream, by courtesy called a river. It sometimes rose in a turgid flood, but more often it sank and delivered up its ghost to such an extent that a man could have held it in his hat. Nevertheless some greenery flourished on its banks.

When Van at last could oversee the vast, unpeopled lands of the Piute Indian reservation, near the boundary of which his salted claim had been staked, he had only a mile or so to ride, and all the way down hill.

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He came to the property by eleven o'clock of the morning. He looked about reflectively. The rough board cabin and the rougher shaft-house were scarcely worth knocking down for lumber. There, on the big, barren dike, were several tunnels and prospects, in addition to the shaft, all "workings" that Briggs had opened up in his labors on the ledge. They were mere yawning mockeries of mining, but at least had served a charlatan's requirements. A few tools lay about, abominably neglected.

The location was rather attractive, on the whole. The clear stream of water had coaxed a few quaking aspens and alders into being, among the stunted evergreens. Grass lay greenly along the bank, a charming relief to the eye. The sandy soil was almost level in the narrow cove, which was snugly surrounded by hills, except at the lower extremity, where the brook tumbled down a wide ravine.

Van, on his horse, gazed over towards the Indian reservation idly. How vain, in all likelihood, were the wonderful tales of gold ledges lying within its prohibited borders. What a madness was brewing in the camps all around as the day for the reservation opening rapidly approached! How they would swarm across its hills and valleys—those gold-seeking men! What a scramble it would be, and all for—what?

There were tales in plenty of men who had secretly prospected here on this forbidden land, and marked down wonderful treasures. Van looked at his salted possessions. What a chance for an orgie of salting the reservation claims would afford!

With his pony finally secured to a tree near at hand, the horseman walked slowly about. A gold pan lay rusting, half filled with rock and dirt, by a bench before the cabin. It was well worth cleaning and taking away, together with some of the picks, drills, and hammers.

He carried it over to the brook. There he knelt and washed it out, only to find it far more rusted than it had at first appeared. He scooped it full of the nearest gravel and scoured it roughly with his hands. Three times he repeated this process, washing it out in the creek.

Ready to rise with it, cleaned at last, he caught up a shallow film of water, flirted it about with a rotary motion, to sluice out the last bit of stubborn dross, then paused to stare in unbelief at a few bright particles down at the edge, washed free of all the gravel.

Incredulous and not in the least excited, he drew a small glass from his pocket and held it on the specks. There could be no doubt of their nature. They were gold.

Interested, but doubting the importance of his find, Van pawed up half a pan full of gravel and dipped the receptacle full of water. Then stirring the sand and stuff with his hand, he panned it carefully.

The result at the end was such a string of colors as he had never washed in all his wide experience. To make a superficial prospect of the claim he proceeded to pan from a dozen different places in the cove, and in every instance got an exceptional showing of coarse, yellow gold, with which the gravel abounded.

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He knelt motionless at last, beside the stream, singularly unperturbed, despite the importance of his find. Briggs had slipped up, absolutely, on the biggest thing in many miles around, by salting and selling a quartz claim here to a man with a modest sum of money.

The cove was a placer claim, rich as mud in gold, and with everything needed at hand.

Then and there the name of the property was changed from the "See Saw" to the "Laughing Water" claim.

CHAPTER XI

ALGY STIRS UP TROUBLE

Bostwick arrived in Goldite at three in the afternoon, dressed in prison clothes. He came on a freight wagon, the deliberate locomotion of which had provided ample time for his wrath to accumulate and simmer. His car was forty miles away, empty of gasoline, stripped of all useful accessories, and abandoned where the convicts had compelled him to drive them in their flight.

A blacker face than his appeared, with anger and a stubble of beard upon it, could not have been readily discovered. His story had easily outstripped him, and duly amused the camp, so that now, as he rode along the busy street, in a stream of lesser vehicles, autos, and dusty horsemen, arriving by two confluent roads, he was angered more and more by the grins and ribald pleasantries bestowed by the throngs in the road.

To complicate matters already sufficiently aggravating, Gettysburg, Napoleon C. Blink, and Algy, the Chinese cook, from the Monte Cristo mine, now swung into line from the northwest road, riding on horses and burros. They were leading three small pack animals, loaded with all their earthly plunder.

The freight team halted and a crowd began to congregate. Bostwick was descending just as the pack-train was passing through the narrow way left by the crowd. His foot struck one of the loaded burros in the eye. The animal staggered over against the wall of men, trampling on somebody's feet. Somebody yelled and cursed vehemently, stepping on somebody else. A small-sized panic and melee ensued forthwith. More of the animals took alarm, and Algy was frightened half to death. His pony, a wall-eyed, half-witted brute, stampeded in the crowd. Then Algy was presently in trouble.

There had been no Chinese in Goldite camp, largely on account of race prejudice engendered and fostered by the working men, who still maintained the old Californian hatred against the industrious Celestials. In the mob, unfortunately near the center of confusion, was a half-drunken miner, rancorous as poison. He was somewhat roughly jostled by the press escaping Algy's pony.



“Ye blank, blank chink—I’ll fix ye fer that!” he bawled at the top of his voice, and heaving his fellow white men right and left he laid vicious hands on the helpless cook and, dragging him down, went at him in savage brutality.

“Belay there, you son of a shellfish!” yelled Napoleon, dismounting and madly attempting to push real men away. “I’ll smash in your pilot-house! I’ll—— Leave me git in there to Algy!”

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Gettysburg, too, was on the ground. He, Bostwick, and a hundred men were madly crowded in together, where two or three were pushing back the throng and yelling to Algy to fight.

Algy was fighting. He was also spouting most awful Chinese oaths, sufficient to warp an ordinary spine and wither a common person's limbs. He kicked and scratched like a badger. But the miner was an engine of destruction. He was aggravated to a mood of gory slaughter. He broke the Chinaman's arm, almost at once, with some viciously diabolical maneuver and leaped upon him in fury.

In upon this scene of yelling, cursing, and fighting Van rode unannounced. He saw the crowd increasing rapidly, as saloons, stores, hay-yard, bank, and places of lodging poured out a curious army, mostly men, with a few scattered women among them—all surging eagerly forward.

Algy, meantime, in a spasm of pain and activity, struggled to his feet from the dust and attempted to make his escape. Van no more than beheld him that he leaped from his horse and broke his way into the ring.

When he laid his hand on the miner's collar it appeared as if that individual would be suddenly jerked apart. Algy went down in collapse.

"Why don't you pick on a man of your color?"

Van demanded, and he flung the miner headlong to the ground.

A hundred lusty citizens shouted their applause.

Little Napoleon broke his way to the center. Gettysburg was just behind him. Van was about to kneel on the ground and lift his prostrate cook when someone bawled out a warning.

He wheeled instantly. The angered miner, up, with a gun in hand, was lurching in closer to shoot. He got no chance, even to level the weapon. Van was upon him like a panther. The gun went up and was fired in the air, and then was hurled down under foot.

Two things happened then together. The sheriff arrived to arrest the drunken miner, and a woman pushed her way through the press.

"Van!" she cried. "Van—oh, Van!"

He was busy assisting his partners to escort poor Algy away. He noted the woman as she parted the crowd. He was barely in time to fend her off from flinging herself in his arms.

"Oh, Van!" she repeated wildly. "I thought you was goin' to git it sure!"

"Don't bother me, Queenie," he answered, annoyed, and adding to Gettysburg, "Take him to Charlie's," he turned at once to his broncho, mounted actively, and began to round up the scattered animals brought into camp by his partners.

He had barely ridden clear of the crowd when his glance was caught by a figure off to the left.

It was Beth. She was standing on a packing case, where the surging disorder had sent her. She had seen it all, the fight, his arrival, and the woman who would have clasped him in her arms.

Her face was flushed. She avoided his gaze and turned to descend to the walk. Then Bostwick, in his convict suit, stepped actively forward to meet her.

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Van saw the look of surprise in her face, at beholding the man in this attire. She recoiled, despite herself, then held forth her hand for his aid. Bostwick took it, assisted her down, and they hastily made their escape.

CHAPTER XII

BOSTWICK LOSES GROUND

The one retreat for Beth was the house where she was lodging. She went there at once, briefly explaining to Bostwick on the way how it chanced she had come the day before. What had happened to himself she already knew.

Bostwick was a thoroughly angered man. He had seen the horseman in the fight and had hoped to see him slain. To find Beth safe and even cheerful here annoyed him exceedingly.

"Have you lodged a complaint—done anything to have this fellow arrested?" he demanded, alluding to Van. "Have you reported what was done to me?"

"Why, no," said Beth. "What's the use? He did it all in kindness, after all."

"Kindness!"

"Of a sort—a rough sort, perhaps, but genuine—a kindness to me—and Elsa," she answered, flushing rosily. "He saved me from——" she looked at the convict garb upon him, "—from a disagreeable experience, I'm sure, and secured me the very best accommodations in the town."

They had almost come to her lodgings. Bostwick halted in the road, his gun-metal jaw protruding formidably.

"You haven't already begun to admire this ruffian—glorify this outlaw?" he growled, "—after what he did to me?"

"Don't stop to discuss it here," she answered, beholding Mrs. Dick at the front of the house. "I haven't had time to do anything. You must manage to change your clothes."

"I'll have my reckoning with your friend," he assured her angrily. "Have you engaged a suite for me?"

They had come to the door of the house. Beth beheld the look of amazement, suspicion, and repugnance on the face of Mrs. Dick, and her face burned red once more.

“Oh, Mrs. Dick,” she said, “this is Mr. Bostwick, of whom I spoke.” She had told of Bostwick’s capture by the convicts. “Do you think you could find him a room?”

“A room? I want a suite—two rooms at least,” said Bostwick aggressively. “Is this a first-class place?”

“It ain’t no regular heaven, and I ain’t no regular Mrs. Saint Peter,” answered Mrs. Dick with considerable heat, irritated by Bostwick’s personality and recognizing in him Van’s “smoke-faced Easterner.” She added crisply: “So you might as well vamoose the ranch, fer I couldn’t even put you in the shed.”

“But I’ve got to have accommodations!” insisted Bostwick. “I prefer them where my fiancée—where Miss Kent is stopping. I’m sure you can manage it someway—let someone go. The price is no object to me.”

“I don’t want you that bad,” said Mrs. Dick frankly. “I said no and I’m too busy to say it again.”

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She bustled off with her ant-like celerity, followed by Bostwick's scowls.

"You'll have to give up your apartments here," he said to Beth. "I'll find something better at once."

"Thank you, I'm very well satisfied," said Beth. "You'll find this town quite overcrowded."

"You mean you propose to stay here in spite of my wishes?"

"Please don't wish anything absurd," she answered. "This is really no place for fastidious choosing—and I am very comfortable."

A lanky youth, with a suitcase and three leather bags, came shuffling around the corner and dropped down his load.

"Van told me to bring 'em here with his—something I don't remember," imparted the youth. "That's all," and he grinned and departed.

Bostwick glowered, less pleased than before.

"That fellow, I presume. He evidently knows where you are stopping."

Beth was beginning to feel annoyed and somewhat defiant. She had never dreamed this man could appear so repellant as now, with his stubble of beard and this convict garb upon him. She met his glance coldly.

"He found me the place. I am considerably in his obligation."

Bostwick's face grew blacker.

"Obligation? Why don't you admit at once you admire the fellow?—or something more. By God! I've endured about as much——"

"Mr. Bostwick!" she interrupted. She added more quietly: "You've been very much aggravated. I'm sorry. Now please go somewhere and change your clothing."

"Aggravated?" he echoed. "You ought to know what he is, by instinct. You must have seen him in a common street brawl! You must have seen that woman—that red-light night-hawk throwing herself in his arms. And to think that you—with Glenmore in town—— Why isn't your brother here with you?"

Beth was smarting. The sense of mortification she had felt at the sight of that woman in the street with Van, coupled with the sheer audacity of his conduct towards herself that morning, had already sufficiently shamed her. She refused, however, to discuss such a question with Bostwick.



"Glen isn't here," she answered coldly. "I trust you will soon be enabled to find him—then—we can go."

"Not here?" repeated Bostwick. "Where is he, then?"

"Somewhere out in another camp—or mining place—or something. Now please go and dress. We can talk it over later."

"This is abominable of Glen," said Bostwick. "Is McCoppet in town?"

She looked her surprise. "McCoppet?"

"You don't know him, of course," he hastened to say. "I shall try to find him at once." He turned to go, beheld her luggage, and added: "Is there anyone to take up your things?"

She could not bear to have him enter her apartment in this awful prison costume.

"Oh, yes," she answered. "You needn't be bothered with the bags."

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"Very well. I shall soon return." He departed at once, his impatience suddenly increased by the thought of seeking out McCoppet.

Beth watched him going. A sickening sense of revulsion invaded all her nature. And when her thoughts, like lawless rebels, stole guiltily to Van, she might almost have boxed her own tingling ears in sheer vexation.

She entered the house, summoned Elsa from her room, and had the luggage carried to their quarters. Then she opened her case, removed some dainty finery, and vaguely wondered if the horseman would like her in old lavender.

Van, in the meantime, had been busy at the hay-yard known as Charlie's. Not only had Algy's arm been broken, by the bully in the fight, but he had likewise been seriously mauled and beaten. His head had been cut, he was hurt internally. A doctor, immediately summoned by the horseman, had set the fractured member. Algy had then been put to bed in a tent that was pitched in the yard where the horses, mules, cows, pyramids of merchandise, and teamsters were thicker than flies on molasses.

Gettysburg and Napoleon, quietly informed by Van of the latest turn of their fortune, were wholly unexcited by the news. The attack on Algy, however, had acted potently upon them. They started to get drunk and achieved half a load before Van could herd them back to camp.

Napoleon was not only partially submerged when Van effected his capture; he was also shaved. Van looked him over critically.

"Nap," he said, "what does this mean?—you wasting money on your face?"

Napoleon drunk became a stutterer, who whistled between his discharges of seltzer.

"Wheresh that little g-g-g-(whistle) girl?" he answered, "—lit-tle D-d-d-d-(whistle) Dutch one that looksh like—looksh like—quoth the r-r-r-r-(whistle) raven—*never more!*"

Van divined that this description was intended to indicate Elsa.

"Gone back to China," said he. "That shave of yours is wasted on the desert air."

Gettysburg, whose intellect was top heavy, had the singular habit, at a time like this, of removing his crockery eye and holding it firmly in his fist, to guard it from possible destruction. He stared uncertainly at both his companions.

"China!" said he tragically. "China?"

“Hold on, now, Gett,” admonished Van, steering his tall companion as a man might steer a ladder, “you don’t break out in the woman line again or there’s going to be some concentrated anarchy in camp.”

“No, Van, no—now honest, no woman,” said Gettysburg in a confidential murmur. “I had my woman eye took out the last time I went down to ‘Frisco.”

“You’re a l-l-l-(whistle) liar!” ejaculated Napoleon.

“What!” Gettysburg fairly shrieked.

“Metaphorical speakin’—meta phor-f-f-f-f-(whistle) phorical speakin’,” Napoleon hastened to explain. “Metaphor-f-f-f-(whistle)-phorical means you don’t really m-m-m-m-(whistle) mean what you say—means—quoth the r-r-r-r-(whistle) raven—*never more!*”

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Van said: "If you two old idiots don't do the lion and the lamb act pretty pronto I'll send you both to the poor house."

They had entered the hay-yard, among the mules and horses. Gettysburg promptly reached down, laid hold of Napoleon, and kissed him violently upon the nose.

Napoleon wept. "What did I s-s-s-s-(whistle) say?" he sobbed lugubriously. "Oh, death, where is thy s-s-s-s-(whistle) sting?"

Evening had come. The two fell asleep in Algy's tent, locked in each other's arms.

CHAPTER XIII

A COMBINATION OF FORCES

Bostwick effected a change of dress in the rear of the nearest store. A rough blue shirt, stout kahki garments and yellow "hiking" boots converted him into one of the common units of which the camp throng was comprised. He was then duly barbered, after which he made a strenuous but futile endeavor to procure accommodations for the night.

There was no one with leisure to listen to his tirade on the shameful inadequacy of the attributes of civilization in the camp, and after one brief attempt to arouse civic indignation against Van for his acts of deliberate lawlessness, he perceived the ease with which he might commit an error and render himself ridiculous. He dropped all hope of publicly humiliating the horseman and deferred his private vengeance for a time more opportune.

Wholly at a loss to cope with a situation wherein he found himself so utterly neglected and unknown, despite the influential position he occupied both in New York and Washington, he resolved to throw himself entirely upon the mercies of McCoppet.

He knew his man only through their correspondence, induced by Beth's brother, Glenmore Kent. Inquiring at the bank, he was briefly directed to the largest saloon of the place. When he entered the bar he found it swarming full of men, miners, promoters, teamsters, capitalists, gamblers, lawyers, and—the Lord alone knew what. The air was a reek of smoke and fumes of liquor. A blare of alleged music shocked the atmosphere. Men drunk and men sober, all were talking mines and gold, the greatness of the camp, the richness of the latest finds, and the marvel of their private properties. Everyone had money, everyone had chunks of ore to show to everyone else.

At the rear were six tables with layouts for games of chance. Faro, "klondike," roulette, stud-poker, almost anything possibly to be desired was there. All were in full blast. Three deep the men were gathered about the wheel and the "tiger." Gold money in

stacks stood at every dealer's hand. Bostwick had never seen so much metal currency in all his life.

He asked for McCoppet at the bar.

"Opal? Somewhere back—that's him there, talkin' to the guy with the fur on his jaw," informed the barkeeper, making a gesture with his thumb. "What's your poison?"

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"Nothing, thank you," answered Bostwick, who started for his man, but halted for McCoppet to finish his business with his friend.

The man on whom Bostwick was gazing was a tall, slender, slightly stooped individual of perhaps forty-five, with a wonderful opal in his tie, from which he had derived his sobriquet. He was clean-shaved, big featured, and gifted with a pair of heavy-lidded eyes as lustreless as old buttons. He had never been seen without a cigar in his mouth, but the weed was never lighted.

Bostwick noted the carefulness of the man's attire, but gained no clue as to his calling. To avoid stupid staring he turned to watch a game of faro. Its fascinations were rapidly engrossing his attentions and luring him onward toward a reckless desire to tempt the goddess of chance, when he presently beheld McCoppet turn away from his man and saunter down the room.

A moment later Bostwick touched him on the shoulder.

"Beg pardon," he said, "Mr. McCoppet?"

McCoppet nodded. "My name."

"I'd like to introduce myself—J. Searle Bostwick," said the visitor. "I expected to arrive, as I wrote you——"

"Glad to meet you, Bostwick," interrupted the other, putting forth his hand. "Where are you putting up?"

"I haven't been able to find accommodations," answered Bostwick warmly. "It's an outrage the way this town is conducted. I thought perhaps——"

"I'll fix you all right," cut in McCoppet. "Are you ready for a talk? Nothing has waited for you to come."

"I came for an interview—in fact——"

"Private room back here," McCoppet announced, and he started to lead the way, pausing for a moment near a faro table to cast a cold glance at the dealer.

"Wonderfully interesting game," said Bostwick. "It seems as if a man might possibly beat it."

There might have been a shade of contempt in the glance McCoppet cast upon him. He merely said: "He can't."

Bostwick laughed. "You seem very positive."

McCoppet was moving on again.

"I own the game."

He owned everything here, and had his designs on two more places like it, down the street. He almost owned the souls of many men, but gold and power were the goals on which his eyes were riveted.

Bostwick glanced at him with newer interest as they passed down the room, and so to a tight little office the walls of which were specially deadened against the transmission of sound.

"Have anything to drink?" inquired the owner, before he took a chair, "—whiskey, wine?"

"Thanks, no," said Bostwick, "not just yet." He took the chair to which McCoppet waved him. "I must say I'm surprised," he admitted, "to see the numbers of men, the signs of activity, and all the rest of it in a camp so young. And by the way, it seems young Kent is away."

"Yes," said the gambler, settling deeply into his chair and sleepily observing his visitor. "I sent him away last week."

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Bostwick was eager.

“On something good for the—for our little group?”

“On a wild goose seance,” answered McCoppet. “He’s in the way around here.”

“Oh,” said Bostwick, who failed to understand. “I thought——”

“Yes. I culled your thought from your letters,” interrupted his host drawlingly. “We might as well understand each other first as last. Bostwick—are you out here to work this camp my way or the kid’s?”

Bostwick was cautious. “How does he wish to work it?”

“Like raising potatoes.”

“And your plan is——”

“Look here, do I stack up like a Sunday-school superintendent? I thought you and I understood each other. I don’t run no game the other man can maybe beat. Didn’t you come out here with that understanding?”

“Certainly, I——”

“Then never mind the kid. What have you got in your kahki?”

“Our syndicate to buy the Hen Hawk group——” started Bostwick, but the gambler cut in sharply.

“That’s sold and cold. You have to move here; things happen. What did you do about the reservation permit?”

Bostwick looked about the room furtively, and edged his chair a bit closer.

“I secured permission from Government headquarters to explore all or any portions of the reservation, and take *assistants* with me,” he imparted in a lowered tone of voice. “I had it mailed to me here by registered post. It should be at the post-office now.”

“Right,” said McCoppet with more of an accent of approval in his utterance. “Get it out to-day. I’ve got your corps of assistants hobbled here in camp. They can get on the ground to-morrow morning.”

Bostwick’s eyes were gleaming.

“There’s certainly gold on this reservation?”



“Now, how can anybody tell you that?” demanded McCoppet, who from his place here in Goldite had engineered the plan whereby his and Bostwick’s expert prospectors could explore every inch of the Government’s forbidden land in advance of all competitors. “We’re taking a flyer, that’s all. If there’s anything there—we’re on.”

Bostwick reflected for a moment. “There’s nothing at present that our syndicate could do?”

“There’ll be plenty of chances to use ready money,” McCoppet assured him, rising. “You’re here on the ground. Keep your shirt on and leave the shuffling to me.”

Bostwick, too, arose. “How long will young Kent be away?”

“As long as I can keep him busy out South.”

“What is he doing out South?”

“Locating a second Goldite,” said the gambler. “Keeps him on the move.” He threw away his chewed cigar, placed a new one in his mouth, and started for the door. “Come on,” he added, “I’ll identify you over at the postoffice and show you where you sleep.”

CHAPTER XIV

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MOVING A SHACK

Less than a week had passed since Bostwick's arrival in Goldite, but excitement was rife in the air. Despite the angered protests of half a thousand mining men, the Easterner, with four of the shrewdest prospectors in the State, had traversed the entire mineral region of the reservation in the utmost security and assurance. Five hundred men had been forced to remain at the border, at the points of official guns. A few desperate adventurers had crept through the guard, but nearly all were presently captured and ejected from the place, while Bostwick—granted special privileges—was assuming this inside track.

The day for the opening of the lands was less than two weeks off—and the news leaked out and spread like a wind that the “Laughing Water” claim had suddenly promised amazing wealth as a placer where Van and his partners were taking out the gold by the simplest, most primitive of methods.

The rush for the region came like a stampede of cattle. An army of men went swarming over the ridges and overran the country like a plague of ants. They trooped across the border of the reservation, so close to the “Laughing Water” claim, they staked out all the visible world, above, below, and all about Van's property, they tore down each others' monuments, including a number where Van had located new, protective claims, and they builded a tent town over night, not a mile from his first discovery.

At the claim in the cove the fortunate holders of a private treasury of gold had lost no time. In the absence of better lumber, for which they had no money, Van and his partners had torn down the shaft-house, made it into sluices, and turned in the water from the stream. That was all the plant required. They had then commenced to shovel the gravel into the trough-like boxes, and the gold had begun to lodge behind the riffles.

The cove became a theatre of curiosity, envy, and covetous longings. Men came there by motor, on horses, mules, and on foot to take one delirious look and rush madly about to improve what chances still remained. The fame of it swept like prairie fire, far and wide. The new-made town began at once to spread and encroach upon all who were careless of their holdings. Lawlessness was rampant.

At the cabin on the “Laughing Water” claim Algy, the Chinese cook, was still disabled. Gettysburg was chief culinary artist. Napoleon hustled for grub, the only supplies of which were over at Goldite—and expensive. All were constantly exhausted with the labors of the day.

Despite their vigilance they awoke one morning to see a brand-new cabin standing on the claim, at the top of a hill. A man was on the rough pine roof, rapidly laying weather paper. Van beheld him, watched him for a moment, then quietly walked over to the site.

“Say, friend,” he called to the man on the roof, “you’ve broken into Eden by mistake. This property is mine and I haven’t any building lots to sell.”

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The visiting builder took out a huge revolver and laid it on a block. He said nothing at all. Van felt his impatience rising.

"I'm talking to you, Mr. Carpenter," he added. "Come on, now, I don't want any trouble with neighbors, but this cabin will have to be removed."

"Go to hell!" said the builder. He continued to pound in his nails.

"If I go," said Van calmly, "I'll bring a little back. Are you going to move or be moved?"

"Don't talk to me, I'm busy," answered the intruder. "I'm an irritable man, and everything I own is irritable, understand?" And taking up his gun he thumped with it briskly on the boards.

"If you're looking for trouble," Van replied, "you won't need a double-barreled glass."

He turned away and the man continued operations. When he came to the shack Van selected a hammer and a couple of drills from among a lot of tools in the corner.

To his partner's questions as to what the visitor intended he replied that only time could tell.

"Here, Nap," he added, fetching forth the tools, "I want you to take this junk and go up there where the neighbor is working. Just sit down quietly and drill three shallow holes and don't say a word to yonder busy bee. If he asks you what's doing, play possum—and don't make the holes too deep."

Napoleon went off as directed. His blows could presently be heard as he drilled in a porphyry dike.

His advent puzzled the man intent on building.

"Say, you," said he, "what's on your programme?"

Napoleon drilled and said nothing.

The carpenter watched him in some uneasiness.

"Say, you ain't starting a shaft?"

No answer.

"Ain't this a placer? Say, you, are you deef?"

Napoleon pounded on the steel.

“Go to hell!” said the builder, as he had before, “—a man that can’t answer civil questions!”

He resumed his labors, pausing now and then to stare at Napoleon, in a steadily increasing dubiety of mind.

In something less than twenty minutes he had done very little roofing, owing to a nervousness he found it hard to banish, while Napoleon had all but completed his holes. Then Van came leisurely strolling to the place, comfortably loaded with dynamite, of which a man may carry much.

With utter indifference to the man on the roof he proceeded to charge those shallow holes. As a matter of fact he overcharged them. He used an exceptional amount of the harmless looking stuff, and laid a short fuse to the cap. When he turned to the builder, who had watched proceedings with a sickening alarm at his vitals, that industrious person had taken on a heavy, leaden hue.

“You see I went where you told me,” said Van, “and I’ve brought some back as I promised. This shot has got to go before breakfast—and breakfast is just about ready.”

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"For God's sake give a man a chance," implored the man who had trespassed in the night. "I'll move the shack to-morrow."

"You won't have to," Van informed him, "but you'd better move your meat to-day."

He took out a match, scratched it with quiet deliberation and lighted the end of the fuse.

"For God's sake—man!" cried the carpenter, and without even waiting to climb from the roof he rolled to the edge in a panic, fell off on his feet, and ran as if all the fiends of Hades were fairly at his heels.

Van and Napoleon also moved away with becoming alacrity. Three minutes later the charge went off. It sounded like the crack of doom. It seemed to split the earth and very firmament. A huge black toadstool of smoke rose up abruptly. Something like a blot of yellowish color spattered all over the landscape. It was the shack.

It had moved. The smoke cloud drifted rapidly away. On the hill was a great jagged hole, lined with rock, but there was nothing more. The cabin was hung in lumber shreds on the stunted trees for hundreds of feet in all directions. With it went hammers, saws and a barrel of nails whose usefulness was ended.

Gettysburg, aproned, and fresh from his labors at the stove, came hastening out of the cabin to where his partners stood, in great distress of mind.

"Holy toads, Van!" he said excitedly, "it must have been the shot! I've dropped an egg—and what in the world shall I do?"

"Cackle, man, cackle," Van answered him gravely. "That's a mighty rare occurrence."

"And two-bits apiece!" almost wailed poor Gettysburg, diving back into the cabin, "and only them four in the shack!"

That was also the day that Bostwick came out upon the scene. He came with his prospectors, all the party somewhat disillusionized as to all that fabled gold upon the Indian reservation.

Some word of the wealth of the "Laughing Water" claim had come to Searle early in the week. He did not visit the cabin or the owners of the cove. For fifteen minutes, however, he sat upon his horse and scanned the place in silence. Then out of his newly-acquired knowledge of the boundaries of the reservation the hounds of his mind jumped up a half-mad plan. His cold eyes glittered as he looked across to where Van and his partners were toiling. His lips were compressed in a smile.

He rode to Goldite hurriedly and sought out his friend McCoppet. When the two were presently closeted together where their privacy was assured, a conspiracy, diabolically insidious, was about to have its birth.

CHAPTER XV

HATCHING A PLOT

"You're back pretty pronto," drawled the gambler, by way of an opening remark. "Found something too big to keep hidden?"

"That reservation is a false alarm, as Billy and the others will tell you," answered Bostwick, referring to McCoppet's chosen prospectors. "The rush will prove a farce."

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"You've decided sudden, ain't you?" asked McCoppet. "There's a good big deck there to stack."

"We've wasted time and money till to-day." Bostwick rose from his chair, put one foot upon it, and leaned towards the gambler as one assuming a position of equality, if not of something more. "Look here, McCoppet, you asked me the day I arrived what sort of a game I'd come to play. I ask you now if you are prepared to play something big—and—well, let us say, a trifle risky?"

"Don't insult my calling," answered the gambler. "I call. Lay your cards on the table."

Bostwick sat down and leaned across the soiled green baize.

"You probably know as much as I do about the 'Laughing Water' claim—its richness—its owners—and where it's located."

McCoppet nodded, narrowing his eyes.

"A good dog could smell their luck from here."

"But do you know where it lies—their claim?" insisted Bostwick significantly. "That's the point I'm making at present."

"It's just this side of the reservation, from what I hear," replied the gambler, "but if there's nothing on the reservation even near the 'Laughing Water' ground——"

Bostwick interrupted impatiently: "What's the matter with *the 'Laughing Water' being on the reservation?*"

McCoppet was sharp but he failed to grasp his associate's meaning.

"But it ain't," he said, "and no one claims it is."

Bostwick lowered his voice and looked at the gambler peculiarly.

"No one claims it *yet!*"

McCoppet threw away his cigar and took out a new one.

"Well? Come on. I bite. What's the answer?"

Bostwick leaned back in his chair.

"Suppose an accredited surveyor were to run out the reservation line—the line next the 'Laughing Water' claim—and make an error of an inch at the farthest end. Suppose that

inch, projected several miles, became about a thousand feet—wouldn't the 'Laughing Water' claim be discovered to be a part of the Indian reservation?"

McCoppet eyed him narrowly, in silence, for a moment. He had suddenly conceived a new estimate of the man who had come from New York.

Bostwick again leaned forward, continuing:

"No one will be aware of the facts but ourselves—therefore no one will think of attempting to relocate the 'Laughing Water' ground, lawfully, at six o'clock on the morning of the rush. But we will be on hand, with the law at our backs, and quietly take possession of the property, on which—as it is reservation ground—the present occupants are trespassing."

McCoppet heard nothing of what his friend was saying. All the possibilities outlined had flashed through his mind at Bostwick's first intimation of the plan. He was busy now with affairs far ahead in the scheme.

"Culver, the Government agent and surveyor is a dark one," he mused aloud, half to himself. "If only Lawrence, his deputy, was in his shoes—— Your frame-up sounds pretty tight, Bostwick, but Culver may block us with his damnable squareness."

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"Every man has his price," said Bostwick, "—big and little. Culver, you say, represents the Government? Where is he now?"

McCoppet replied with a question: "Bostwick, how much have you got?"

Bostwick flushed. "Money? Oh, I can raise my share, I hope."

"You hope?" repeated the gambler. "Ain't your syndicate back of any game you open, with the money to see it started right?"

Bostwick was a trifle uneasy. The "syndicate" of which he had spoken was entirely comprised of Beth and her money, which he hoped presently to call his own. He had worked his harmless little fiction of big financial men behind him in the certainty of avoiding detection.

"Of course, I can call on the money," he said, "but I may need a day or so to get it. How much shall we require?"

McCoppet chewed his cigar reflectively.

"Culver will sure come high—if we get him at all—but—it ought to be worth fifty thousand to you and me to shift that reservation line a thousand feet—if reports on the claim are correct."

It was a large sum. Bostwick scratched the corner of his mouth.

"That would be twenty-five thousand apiece."

"No," corrected McCoppet, "twenty thousand for me and thirty for you, for equal shares. I've got to do the work underground."

"Perhaps I could handle what's his name, Culver, myself," objected Bostwick. "The fact that I'm a stranger here——"

"And what will you do if he refuses?" interrupted the gambler. "Will you still have an ace in your kahki?"

Bostwick stared.

"If he should refuse, and tell the owners——"

"Right. Can you handle it then?"

Bostwick answered: "Can you?"

"It's my business to get back what I've lost—and a little bit more. You leave it to me. Keep away from Culver, and bring me thirty thousand in the morning."

Bostwick was breathing hard. He maintained a show of calm.

"The morning's a little bit soon for me to turn around. I'll bring it when I can."

McCoppet arose. The interview was ended. He added:

"Have a drink?"

"I'll wait," said Bostwick, "till we can drink a toast to the 'Laughing Water' claim."

McCoppet opened the door, waved Bostwick into the crowded gaming room, and was about to follow when his roving gaze abruptly lighted on a figure in the place—a swarthy, half-breed Piute Indian, standing in front of the wheel and roulette layout.

Quickly stepping back inside the smaller apartment, the gambler pulled down his hat. His face was the color of ashes.

"So long. See you later," he murmured, and he closed the door without a sound.

Bostwick, wholly at a loss to understand his sudden dismissal, lingered for a moment only in the place, then made his way out to the street, and went to the postoffice, where he found a letter from Glenmore Kent. Intent upon securing the needed funds from Beth with the smallest possible delay, he dropped the letter, unread, in his pocket and headed for the house where Beth was living. He walked, however, no more than half a block before he altered his mind. Pausing for a moment on the sidewalk, he turned on his heel and went briskly to his own apartments, where he performed an unusual feat.

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First he read the letter from Kent. It was dated from the newest camp in the desert and was filled with glittering generalities concerning riches about to be discovered. It urged him, in case he had arrived in Goldite, to hasten southward forthwith—"and bring a bunch of money." Glenmore's letters always appealed for money—a fact which Bostwick had remembered.

The man sat down at his table and wrote a letter to himself. With young Kent's epistle for his model, he made an amazingly clever forgery of the enthusiastic writer's chirography, and at the bottom signed the young man's name.

This spurious document teemed with figures and assertions concerning a wonderful gold mine which Glenmore had virtually purchased. He needed sixty thousand dollars at once, however, to complete his remarkable bargain. Only two days of his option remained and therefore delay would be fatal. He expected this letter to find his friend at Goldite and he felt assured he would not be denied this opportunity of a lifetime to make a certain fortune. He would, of course, appeal to Beth—with certainty of her help from the wealth bequeathed her by her uncle—but naturally she was too far away,

Glenmore was unaware of the fact that his sister had come to the West. Bostwick overlooked no details of importance. Armed with this plausible missive, he went at once to Mrs. Dick's and found that Beth was at home.

CHAPTER XVI

INVOLVING BETH

Goldite to the Eastern girl, who had found herself practically abandoned for nearly a week, had proved to be a mixture of discomforts, excitements, and disturbing elements. Fascinated by the maelstrom of the mining-camp life, and unwilling to retreat from the scene until she should see her roving brother, and gratify at least a curiosity concerning Van, she nevertheless felt afraid to be there, not only on account of the roughness and uncertainty of the existence, but also because, despite herself, she had attracted undesirable attention. Moreover, the house was full of "gentlemen" lodgers, with three of whom Elsa was conducting most violent flirtations.

There were few respectable women in the town. It was still too early for their advent. Beth had been annoyed past all endurance. There was no possibility of even mild social diversions; there was no one to visit. While the street could be described as perfectly safe, it was nevertheless an uncomfortable place in which to walk. Bostwick's car had been recovered and brought into camp, but skilled as she was at the steering wheel, she had hardly desired or dared to take it out.

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Crime was frequent in the streets and houses. Disturbing reports of marauding expeditions on the part of the convicts, still at large, came with insistent frequency. Altogether the week had been a trial to her nerves. It had also been a vexation. No man had a right, she told herself, to do and say the things that Van had said and done, only to go off, without so much as a little good-by and give no further sign. She told herself she had a right to at least some sort of opportunity to tender her honest congratulations. She had heard of his claim—the “Laughing Water”—and perhaps she wished to know how it chanced to have this particular name. If certain disturbing reflections anent that woman who had run to him wildly, out in the street, came mistily clouding the estimate she tried to place upon his character, she confessed he certainly had the right to make an explanation. In a purely feminine manner she argued that she had the right to some such explanation—if only because of certain liberties he had taken with her hands—on which memories still warmly burned.

Wholly undecided as to what she would do if she could, and impatient with Bostwick for his sheer neglect in searching out her brother, she was thoroughly glad to see him to-day when he came so unannounced to the house.

“Well if you don’t look like a mountaineer!” she said, as she met him in the dining-room, which was likewise the parlor of the place. “Where in the world have you been, all this time? You haven’t come back without Glen?”

He had gone away ostensibly to find her brother.

“Well, the fact is he wasn’t where I went, after all,” he said. “I hastened home, after all that trip, undertaken for nothing, and found a letter from him here. I’ve come at once to have an important talk.”

“A letter?” she cried. “Let me see it—let me read it, please. He’s—where? He’s well? He’s successful?”

“Sit down,” answered Bostwick, taking a chair and placing his hat on the table. “There’s a good deal to say. But first, how have you been here, all alone?”

“Oh—very well—I suppose,” she answered, restraining the natural resentment she felt at his patent neglect. “It isn’t exactly the place I’d choose to remain in, alone all the time.”

“Poor little girl, I’ve been thinking of that,” he told her, reaching across the table to take her hands. “It’s worried me, Beth, worried me greatly—your unprotected position, and all that.”

“Oh, you needn’t worry.” She withdrew her hands. Someway it seemed a sacrilege for him to touch them—it was not to be borne—she hardly knew why, or since when. “I want to know about Glen,” she added. “Never mind me.”

“But I do mind,” he assured her. His hand was trembling. “Beth, I—I can’t talk much—I mean romantic talk, and all that, but—well—I’ve about concluded we ought to be married at once—for your sake—your protection—and my peace of mind. I have thought about it ever since I left you here alone.”

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The brightness expressive of the gayety of her nature departed from her eyes. She looked fixedly at the man's dark face, with its gray, deep-set, penetrative eyes, its bluish jaw, and knitted brows. It frightened her, somehow, as it never had before. He had magnetized her always—sometimes more than now, but his influence crept upon her subtly even here.

"But I—I think I'd rather not—just yet," she faltered, crimsoning and dropping her gaze to the table. "You promised not to—to urge me again—at least till I've spoken to Glen."

"But I could not have known—foreseen these conditions," he told her, leaning further towards her across the table. "Why shouldn't we be married now—at once? A six months' engagement is certainly long enough. Your position here is—well—almost dubious. You must see that. It isn't right of me—decent—not to make you my wife immediately. I wish to do so—I wish it very much."

She arose, as if to wrench herself free from the spell he was casting upon her.

"I'm all right—I'm quite all right," she said. "I'd rather not—just now. There's no one here who cares a penny who or what I am. If my position here is misunderstood—it can do no harm. I'd rather you wouldn't say anything further about it—just at present."

Her agitation did not escape him. If he thought of the horseman who had carried her off while sending himself to the convicts, his plan for vengeance only deepened.

"You must have some reason for refusing." He too arose.

"No—no particular reason," she answered, artlessly walking around the table, apparently to pick up a button from the floor, but actually to avoid his contact. "I just don't wish to—to be married now—here—that's all. I ask you to keep your promise—not to ask it while we remain."

He had feared to lose her a score of times before. He feared it now more potently than ever. And there was much that he must ask. The risk of giving her a fright was not to be incurred.

"Very well," he said resignedly, "but—it's very hard to wait."

"Won't you sit down?" she asked him, an impulse of gratitude upon her. "Now do be good and sensible, and tell me all about Glen."

She returned to the table and resumed her seat.

Bostwick sat opposite and drew his forged letter from his pocket. He had placed it in Glenmore's envelope after tearing the young man's letter into scraps.

"This letter," said he, "was sent from way down in the desert—from Starlight, another new camp. It looks to me as if the boy has struck something very important. I'll read you what he says—or you can read it for yourself."

"No, no—read it. I'd rather listen."

He read it haltingly, as one who puzzles over unfamiliar writing. Its effect sank in the deeper for the method. Beth was open-eyed with wonder, admiration, and delight over all that Glen had done and was about to accomplish. She rose to the bait with sisterly eagerness.

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"Why, he *must* have the chance—he's *got* to have the chance!" she cried excitedly. "What do you think of it yourself?"

Bostwick fanned the blaze with conservatism.

"It's quite a sum of money and Glen might overestimate the value of the mine. I've inquired around and learn that the property is considered tremendously promising. If we—if he actually secures that claim it will doubtless mean a fortune—I don't like to lose my sense of judgment, but I do want to help the boy along. Frankly, however, I don't see how I can let him have so much. I couldn't possibly send him but thirty thousand dollars at the most."

Beth's eyes were blazing with excitement. She had never dreamed that Searle could be so generous—so splendid. An impulse of gratitude and admiration surged throughout her being.

"You'd *do* it?" she said. "You'll do as much as that for Glen?"

"Why, how can I do less?" he answered. "That claim will doubtless be worth half a million, maybe more—if all I hear is reliable—and I get it from disinterested parties. The boy has done a good big thing. I've got to help him out. It seems too bad to offer him only half of what he needs, but I'm not a very wealthy man. I can't be utterly Quixotic. We've all got to help him all we can."

"Oh, thank you, Searle—thank you for saying 'we,'" she said in a voice that slightly trembled. "I'm glad of the chance—glad to show dear Glen that a sister can help a little, too."

He stared at her with an excellent imitation of surprise in his gaze.

"You'll—help?" he said in astonishment, masterfully simulated. "Not with the other thirty thousand?"

"Why not?" she cried. "Why not, when Glen has the chance of his life? You don't really think I'd hesitate?"

"But," said he, leading her onward, "he needs the money now—at once. You'd have to get it here by wire, and all that sort of trouble."

"Then we'd better get things started," she said. "You'll help me, Searle, I'm sure."

"If you wish it," said Bostwick, "certainly."

"Dear Glen!" she said. "Dear boy! I'll write him a letter at once."

Bostwick started, alertly, as she ran in her girlish pleasure to a stand where she had placed her materials for writing.

“Good,” he commented drily, “I’ll mail it with one of my own.”

She dashed off a bright effusion with all her spontaneous enthusiasm. Bostwick supplied her with the address, and presently took the letter in his hand. He had much to do at the bank, he informed her, by way of preparing for the deal. He promised to return when he could.

On his way down street he deliberately tore the letter to the smallest of fragments and scattered them widely on the wind.

CHAPTER XVII

UNEXPECTED COMPLICATIONS

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On the following morning news arrived in Goldite that temporarily dimmed the excitement attendant upon stories of the “Laughing Water” property and the coming stampede to the Indian reservation.

Matt Barger and three others of the convicts, still uncaptured, had pillaged a freight team, of horses, provisions, and arms, murdered a stage driver, robbed the express of a large consignment of gold, and escaped as before to the mountains.

Two separate posses were in pursuit. Rewards aggregating ten thousand dollars were offered for Barger, dead or alive, with smaller sums for each of his companions. Their latest depredations had occurred alarmingly close to the mining camp, from which travel was becoming hazardous.

The gold theft was particularly disquieting to the Goldite mining contingent. Dangers beset their enterprises in many directions at the very best. To have this menace added, together with worry over every man’s personal safety in traveling about, was fairly intolerable. The inefficient posses were roundly berated, but no man volunteered to issue forth and “get” Matt Barger—either alive or as a corpse.

The man who arrived with the news was one of Van’s cronies, Dave, the little station man whom Beth had met the morning of her coming. He was here in response to a summons from Van, who thought he saw an opportunity to assist his friend to better things. Everything Dave owned he had fetched across the desert, including both the horses that Beth and Elsa once had ridden. The station itself he had sold. He had launched forth absolutely on Van’s new promises, burning all his bridges, as it were, behind him.

Van came down to meet him. He had other concerns in Goldite, some with Culver, the Government representative, and others a trifle more personal, and intended to combine them all in one excursion.

No sooner had he appeared on the street, after duly stabling “Suvy” at the hay-yard, than a hundred acquaintances, suddenly transformed into intimate friends, by the change in his fortunes, pounced upon him in a spirit of generosity, hilarity, and comaraderie that cloyed not only his senses, but even his movements in the camp.

He was dragged and carried into four saloons like a helpless, good-natured bear cub, strong enough to resist by inflicting injuries, but somewhat amused by the game. Intelligence of his advent went the rounds. The local editor and the girl he had addressed as “Queenie,” on the day of the fight in the street, were rivals in another joyous attack as he escaped at last to proceed about his own affairs.

The editor stood no chance whatsoever. Van had nothing to say, and said so. Moreover, Queenie was a very persistent, as well as a very pretty, young person, distressingly careless of deportment. She clung to Van like a bur.

“Gee, Van!” she cried with genuine tears in her eyes, “didn’t I always say you was the candy? Didn’t I always say I’d give you my head and breathe through my feet—day or night? Didn’t I tell ’em all you was the only one? You’re the only diamonds there is for me—and I didn’t never wait for you to strike it first.”

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"No, you didn't even wait for an invitation," answered Van with a smile. "Everybody's got to hike now. I'm busy, trying to breathe."

She clung on. Unfortunately, down in an Arizona town, Van had trounced a ruffian once in Queenie's protection—simply because of her gender and entirely without reference to her character or her future attitude towards himself. In her way she personified a sort of adoration and gratitude, which could neither be slain nor escaped by anything that he or anyone else could do. Her devotion, however, had palled upon him early, perhaps more because of its habit of increasing. It had recently become a pest.

"Busy?" she echoed. "You said that before. When ain't you going to be busy?"

"When I'm dead," he answered, and wrenching loose he dived inside a hardware store, to purchase a hunting knife for Gettysburg, then went at once to a barber shop and shut out the torment of friends.

He escaped at the rear, when his face had been groomed, and made his way unseen to Mrs. Dick's.

Beth was not at home. She and Bostwick were together at the office of the telegraph company, where Searle was assisting her, as she thought to aid her brother, to such excellent purpose that her thirty thousand dollars bid fair to repose in the bank at his call before the business day should reach its end.

Mrs. Dick seemed to Van the one and only person in the camp unaffected by the news of his luck. She treated him precisely as she always had and doubtless always should. Therefore, he had no difficulty in getting away to Culver at his office.

The official surveyor was a fat-cheeked, handsome man, with a silky brown beard, an effeminate voice, and prodigious self-conceit. He was pacing up and down the inside office, at the rear of the rough board building, when Van came in and found him. The horseman's business was one of maps and land-office data made essential to his needs by the new recording of the "Laughing Water" property as a placer instead of a quartz claim. He had drawn a crude outline of his holdings and in taking it forth from his pocket found the knife bought for Gettysburg in the way. He removed the weapon and placed it on the table near at hand.

"There's so much of this desert unsurveyed," he said, "that no man can tell whether he's just inside or just outside of Purgatory."

"So you come to me to find out?" Culver demanded somewhat shortly. "Do you tin-horn miners think that's all this office is for?"

"Well, in my instance, I had to come to some wiser spirit than myself to get my bearings," answered Van drawlingly. "You can see that."

“There are the maps.” Culver waved his hand towards a drawer in the office table, and moved impatiently over to a window, the view from which commanded a section of the street, including the bank.

Van was presently engrossed in a search for quarter sections, ranges, and townships.

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"Look here," said Culver, turning upon him aggressively, "what's this racket I hear about you taking the inside track with that stunning new petticoat in town?"

Van looked up without the least suspicion of the man's real meaning.

"If you are referring to that reckless young woman called Queenie——"

"Oh, Queenie—rats!" interrupted Culver irritably. "You know who I mean. I guess you call her Beth."

Van's face took on a look of hardness as if it were chiseled in stone. He had squared around as if at a blow. For a moment he faced the surveyor in silence.

"You are making some grave mistake," he said presently in ominous calm. "Please don't make such an allusion as that again."

"So, the shot went home," Culver laughed unctuously, turning for a moment from the window. "I thought it would. You know you couldn't expect to keep anything like that all to yourself, Van Buren. You're not the only ladies' man on the beach. And as for this clod of a Bostwick——" He had turned to look out as before, and grew suddenly excited. Beth was in view at the bank. "By the gods!" he exclaimed with a sudden change of tone, "she is the handsomest bit of confectionery on earth. If I don't win her ——"

His utterance promptly ceased, together with his abominable activities and primping in the window. Van, who did not know that this creature had been Beth's particular annoyance, had crossed the room without a sound and laid his grip on Culver's collar.

"You cur!" he said quietly, and choking the man he flung him down against the floor and wall as if he had been the merest puppet.

Someone had entered the outside door. Neither Culver nor Van heard the sound. Culver rolled over, scrambled to his feet, and with his face and neck engorged with rage, came rushing at the horseman like a fury.

"You blackguard!" he screamed, "I'll tear out your heart for that! I'll kill you like——"

"Shut up!" Van commanded quietly, stopping the onrush of his angered foe by putting his hand against the surveyor's face and sending him reeling as before. "Don't tell me what you'll do to me—or to anyone else in this camp! And if ever I hear of you opening your mouth again as you did here a moment ago, I'll tie a knot so hard in your carcass you'll have to be buried in a hat box!"

He glanced towards the doorway. A stranger stood on the threshold. Bowing, Van passed him and left the place, too angered to think either of the maps or of his knife.

Culver, raging like a maniac, bowled headlong into the visitor, in his effort to overtake the horseman, but found himself baffled and took out his wrath in foul vituperation that presently drove the stranger from the place.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHEREIN MATTERS THICKEN

The stranger who had witnessed the trouble at Culver's office had come there at the instance of McCoppet. It was, therefore, to McCoppet that he carried the intelligence of what had taken place, so far as he had seen.

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The gambler was exceedingly pleased. That Culver would now be ready, as never before, to receive a proposition whereby the owners of the “Laughing Water” claim could be deprived of their ground, he was well convinced.

For reasons best known to himself and skillfully concealed from all acquaintances, McCoppet had remained practically in hiding since the moment in which he had beheld that half-breed Piute Indian in the saloon. He remained out of sight even now, dispatching a messenger to Culver, in the afternoon, requesting his presence for a conference for the total undoing of Van Buren.

Culver, who in ordinary circumstances might have refused this request with haughty insolence, responded to the summons rather sooner than McCoppet had expected. He was still red with anger, and meditating personal violence to Van at the earliest possible meeting.

McCoppet, with his smokeless cigar in his mouth, and his great opal sentient with fire, received his visitor in the little private den to which Bostwick had been taken.

“How are you, Culver?” he said off-handedly.

“I wanted to have a little talk. I sent a man up to your shop a while ago, and he told me you fired Van Buren out of the place on the run.”

“That’s nobody’s business but mine,” said Culver aggressively. “If that is all you care to talk about——”

“Don’t roil up,” interrupted the gambler. “I don’t even know what the fight was about, and I don’t care a tinker’s whoop either. I got you here to give you a chance to put Van Buren out of commission and make a lifetime winning.”

Culver looked at him sharply.

“It must be something crooked.”

“Nothing’s crooked that works out straight,” said McCoppet. “What’s life anyhow but a sure-thing game? It’s stacked for us all to lose out in the end. What’s the use of being finniky while we live—as long as even the Almighty’s dealing brace?”

Culver was impatient. “Well?”

“I won’t beat around the chapparal,” said McCoppet. “It ain’t my way.” Nevertheless, with much finesse and art he contrived to put his proposition in a manner to rob it of many of its ugly features. However, he made the business plain.

“You see,” he concluded, “the old reservation line might actually be wrong—and all you’d have to do would be to put it right. That’s what we want—we want the line put right.”

Culver was more angered than before. He understood the conspiracy thoroughly. No detail of its cleverness escaped him.

“If you thought you could trade on my personal unpleasantness with an owner of the ‘Laughing Water’ claim,” he said hotly, “you have made the mistake of your life. I wish you good-day.”

He rose to go. McCoppet rose and stopped him.

“Don’t get feverish,” said he. “It don’t pay. I ain’t requesting this service from you for just your feelings against a man. There’s plenty in this for us all.”

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"You mean bribe money, I suppose," said Culver no less aggressively than before. "Is that what you mean?"

"Don't call it hard names," begged the gambler. "It's just a retainer—say twenty thousand dollars."

Culver burned to the top of his ears. He looked at McCoppet intently with an expression the gambler could not interpret.

"Just to change that line a thousand feet," urged the man of gambling propensities. "I'll make it twenty-five."

Still Culver made no response. With all his other hateful attributes of character he was tempered steel on incorruptibility. He was not even momentarily tempted to avenge himself thus on Van Buren.

McCoppet thought he had him wavering. He attempted to push him over the brink.

"Say," said he persuasively, lowering his voice to a tone of the confidential, "I can strain a little more out of one of my partners and make it thirty thousand dollars." He had no intention of employing a cent of his own. Bostwick was to pay all these expenses. "Thirty thousand dollars, cash," he repeated, "the minute you finish your work—and make it look like a Government *correction* of the line."

Culver broke forth on him with accumulated wrath.

"You damnable puppy!" he said in a futile effort to be adequate to the situation. "You sneak! Of all the accursed intrigues—insults—robberies that ever were hatched— By God, sir, if you offered me a million of money you shouldn't alter that Government line by a hair! If you speak to me again—I'll knock you down!"

He flung the door wide open, went out like a rocket, and bowled a man half over in his blind haste to be quit the place.

McCoppet was left there staring where he had gone—staring and afraid of what the results would probably be to all the game. He had no eyes to behold a man who had suddenly discerned him from the crowds. A moment later he started violently as a huge form stood in the door.

"Trimmer!" he said, "I'm busy!"

"You're goin' to be busier in about a minute, if I don't see you right now," said the man addressed as Trimmer, a raw, bull-like lumberman from the mountains. "Been waitin' to see you some time."

"Come in," said the gambler instantly regaining his composure. "Come in and shut the door. How are you, anyway?" He held out his hand to shake.

Trimmer closed the door. "Ain't ready to shake, jest yet," he said. "I come here to see you on business."

"That's all right, Larry," answered McCoppet. "That's all right. Sit down."

"I'm goin' to," announced his visitor. He took a chair, pulled out a giant cigar, and lighting it up smoked like a pile of burning leaves. "You seem to be pretty well fixed," he added, taking a huge black pistol from his pocket and laying it before him on the table. "Looks like money was easy."

"I ain't busted," admitted the gambler. "Have a drink?"

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"Not till we finish." The lumberman settled in his chair. "That was the way you got me before—and you ain't goin' to come it again."

McCoppet waited for his visitor to open. Trimmer was not in a hurry. He eyed the man across the table calmly, his small, shifting optics dully gleaming.

Presently he said; "Cayuse is here in camp."

Cayuse was the half-breed Piute Indian whose company McCoppet had avoided. Partially educated, wholly reverted to his Indian ways and tribal brethren, Cayuse was a singular mixture of the savage, plus civilized outlooks and ethical standards that made him a dangerous man—not only a law unto himself, as many Indians are, but also a strange interpreter of the law, both civilized and aboriginal.

McCoppet had surmised what was coming.

"Yes—I noticed he was here."

"Know what he come fer?" asked the lumberman. "Onto his game?"

"You came here to tell me. Deal the cards."

Trimmer puffed great lungfuls of the reek from his weed and took his revolver in hand.

"Opal," said he, enjoying his moment of vantage, "you done me up for a clean one thousand bucks, a year ago—while I was drunk—and I've been laying to git you ever since."

McCoppet was unmoved.

"Well, here I am."

"You bet! here you are—and here you're goin' to hang out till we fix things *right!*" The lumberman banged his gun barrel on the table hard enough to make a dent. "That's why Cayuse is here, too. Mrs. Cayuse is dead."

The gambler nodded coldly, and Trimmer went on.

"She kicked the bucket havin' a kid which wasn't Cayuse's—too darn white fer even him—and Cayuse is on the war trail fer that father."

McCoppet threw away his chewed cigar and replaced it with a fresh one. He nodded as before.

"Cayuse is on that I know who the father was," resumed the visitor. "I told him to come here to Goldite and I'd give up the name."

He began to consume his cigar once more by inches and watched the effect of his words. There was no visible effect. McCoppet had never been calmer in his life—outwardly. Inwardly he had never felt Dearer to death, and his own kind of fright was upon him.

"Well," he said, "your aces look good to me. What do you want—how much?"

"I ought to hand you over to Cayuse—good riddance to the whole country," answered Trimmer, with rare perspicacity of judgment. "You bet you're goin' to pay."

"If you want your thousand back, why don't you say so?" inquired the gambler quietly. "I'll make it fifteen hundred. That's pretty good interest, I reckon."

"Your reckoner's run down," Trimmer assured him. "I want ten thousand dollars to steer Cayuse away."

McCoppet slowly shook his head. "You ain't a hog, Larry, you're a Rockefeller. Five thousand, cash on the nail, if you show me you can steer Cayuse so far off the trail he'll never get on it again."

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Five thousand dollars was a great deal of money to Trimmer. Ten thousand was far in excess of his real expectations. But he saw that his power was large. He was brutally frank.

"Nope, can't do it, Opal, not even fer a friend," and he grinned. "I've got you in the door and I'm goin' to jamb you hard. Five thousand ain't enough."

Things had been going against the gambler for nearly an hour. He had been acutely alarmed by the presence of Cayuse in the camp. His mind, like a ferret in a trap, was seeking wildly for a loophole of advantage. Light came in upon him suddenly, with a thought of Culver, by whom, subconsciously, he was worried.

"How do you mean to handle the half-breed?" he inquired by way of preparing his ground. "You've promised to cough up a name."

Trimmer scratched his head with the end of his pistol.

"I guess I could tell him I was off—don't know the father after all."

"Sounds like a kid's excuse," commented McCoppet. "Like as not he'd take it out of you."

The likelihood was so strong that Trimmer visibly paled.

"I've got to give him somebody's name," he agreed with alacrity. "Has anyone died around here recent?"

"Yes," answered McCoppet with ready mendacity.

"Culver, who used to do surveying."

"Who?" asked Trimmer. "Don't know him."

McCoppet leaned across the table.

"Yes you do. He stopped you once from stealing—from picking up a lot of timber land. Remember?"

Trimmer was interested. His vindictive attributes were aroused.

"Was that the cuss? I never seen him. Do you think Cayuse would know who he was?—and believe it—the yarn?"



"Cayuse was once his chain-man." McCoppet was tremendously excited, though apparently as cold as ice, as he swiftly thought out the niceties of his own and fate's arrangements. "Cayuse's wife once worked for Mrs. Culver, cooking and washing."

"Say, anybody'd swaller that," reflected the lumberman aloud. "But five thousand dollars ain't enough."

"I'll make it seven thousand five hundred—that's an even split," agreed the gambler. He thought he foresaw a means whereby he could save this amount from the funds that Bostwick would furnish. He rose from his seat. "A thousand down, right now—the balance when Cayuse is gone, leaving me safe forever. You to give him the name right now."

Trimmer stood up, quenched the light on the stub of his cigar, and chewed up the butt with evident enjoyment.

"All right," he answered. "Shake."

Ten minutes later he had found Cayuse, delivered up the name agreed upon, and was busy spending his money acquiring a load of fiery drink.

CHAPTER XIX

VAN AND BETH AND BOSTWICK

Van was far too occupied to retain for long the anger that Culver had aroused in all his being. Moreover, he had come to camp in a mood of joyousness, youth, and bounding emotions such as nothing could submerge. The incident with Culver was closed. As for land-office data, it was far from being indispensable, and Gettysburg's knife was forgotten.

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He had fetched down a nugget from the “Laughing Water” claim, a bright lump of virgin gold, rudely fashioned by nature like a heart. This he took at once to a jeweler’s shop, where more fine diamonds were being sold than in all the rest of the State, and while it was being soldered to a pin he returned to the hay-yard for Dave. His business was to purchase the mare on which, one beautiful morning when the wild peach was in bloom, Beth Kent had ridden by his side. Dave would have given him the animal out of hand. Van compelled him to receive a market price. Even ponies here were valuable, and Dave had been poor all his life.

“Say, Van,” he drawled, when at length the transaction was complete, “this camp has set me to thinkin’. It’s full of these rich galoots, all havin’ an easy time. If ever I git a wad of dough I’m comin’ here and buy five dollars worth of good sardines and eat ’em, every one. Never have had enough sardines in all my life.”

“I’d buy them for you now and sit you down,” said Van, “only why start a graveyard with a friend?”

Some woman who had come and gone from Goldite had disposed of a beautiful side saddle, exposed in the hay-yard to the weather. Van paid fifty dollars and became its owner. The outfit for Beth was soon complete. He ordered the best of feed and attention for her roan—bills to be rendered to himself—and hastening off to the jeweler’s, found his pin ready and reposing in a small blue box. Avoiding a number of admiring friends, he slipped around a corner, and once more appeared at Mrs. Dick’s.

Beth was in the dining-room, alone. Her papers were spread upon the table. She was flushed with the day’s excitements,

Van had entered unannounced. His active tread upon the carpet of the hall had made no sound. When he halted in the doorway, transfixed by the beauty of the face he saw reflected in the sideboard mirror opposite, Beth was unconscious of his presence.

She was busily gathering up her documents. Her pretty hands were moving lightly on the table. Her eyes were downcast, focused where she worked. Only the wondrous addition of their matchless brown, thought Van, was necessary to complete a picture of the most exquisite loveliness he had ever beheld.

He had come there prepared to be sedate—at least not over-bold again, or too presumptuous. Already, however, a riot of love was in his veins. He loved as he fought—with all his strength, with a tidal impetuosity that could scarcely understand resistance or imagine defeat. To restrain himself from a quick descent upon her position and a boyish sweeping of her up in his powerful arms was taxing the utmost of his self-control. Then Beth glanced up at the mirror.

The light of her eyes seemed to liquify his heart. He felt that mad, joyous organ spread abruptly, throughout his entire being.

She rose up suddenly and turned to greet him.

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"Why—Mr. Van!" she stammered, flushing rosily. "I *heard* you were in town."

He came towards her quietly enough, the jeweler's box in his hand.

"I called before," he answered in his off-hand way. "You must have been out with poor old Searle."

"Oh," she said, "poor old Searle? Why poor?"

"I told you why before," he said boldly, in spite of himself. He was standing before her by the table, looking fairly into her eyes, with that dancing boyishness amazingly bright in his own. "You remember, too—you can't forget."

The flush in her cheeks increased. Her glance was lowered.

"You didn't give me time to—rebuke you for that," she answered, attempting to assume a tone of severity. "You had no right—it wasn't nice or like you in the least."

"Yes it was, nice, and like me," he corrected. "I've brought you a nugget from the claim." He opened the box and shook out the pin on the table.

She had started to make a reply concerning his actions when leaving on that former occasion. The words were pushed aside.

"Oh, my!" she said in a little exclamation, instead. "A nugget!—gold!—not from the—not from your claim?"

His hand slightly trembled.

"From the 'Laughing Water' claim. Named for the girl I'm going to marry."

She gasped, almost audibly. The things he said were so wholly unexpected—so almost naked in their bluntness.

"The girl—some girl you—Isn't it beautiful?" she faltered helplessly. "Of course I don't know—how any girl could have such a singular name."

"Yes you do," he corrected in his shockingly candid way. "You know when Dave gave her the name."

"Do I?" she asked weakly, trying to smile, and feeling some wonderful, welcome sort of fear of the passion with which he fairly glowed. "You are—very positive."

He moved a trifle closer, touching the pin, with a finger, as she held it in her hand. His voice slightly shook as he asked:

“Do you like it?”

“The pin? Of course. A genuine nugget! You were very kind, I’m sure.”

“I thought when you and I ride over to the claim, some day, you ought to have a horse of your own,” he announced in his manner of finality. “So your horse and outfit are over at Charlie’s, at your order.”

She looked up at him swiftly. “My horse—over at Charlie’s?”

“Yes, Charlie’s—the hay-yard. I thought you liked a side-saddle best and I found a good one in the hay.”

“But—I haven’t any horse,” she protested, failing for a moment to grasp his meaning. “How could I have a horse in Goldite?”

“You couldn’t help having him—that’s all—any more than you can help having me.”

The light in his eyes was far too magnetic for her own brown glance to escape. She hardly knew what she was saying, or what she was thinking. She was simply aflame with happiness in his presence—and she feared he must read it in her glance. That the horse was his gift she comprehended all at once—but—what had he said—what was it he had said, that she must answer? Her heart and her mind had coalesced. There was love in both and little of reason in either. She knew he was holding her eyes to his with the sheer force of overwhelming love.

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She tried to escape.

“You--mean-----”

He broke all control like a whirlwind.

“I mean I can’t hold it any longer! I love you!—I love you to death!”

He took her in his arms suddenly, passionately, crushing her almost fiercely against his heart. He kissed her on the lips—once—twice—a dozen times in half a minute—feeling the warm, moist softness in the contact and holding her pliant figure yet more closely.

She, too, was mad with it all, for a second. Then she began to battle with his might.

“Van!—Mr. Van!” she said, pushing his face away with a hand he might have devoured. “Let me go! Let me go! How dare—— You shan’t! You shan’t! Let me go!”

Her nature, in revolt for a moment against her better judgment, refused to do the bidding of her muscles. Then she gathered strength out of the whirlwind itself and pushed him away like a tigress.

“You shan’t!” she repeated. “You ought to be ashamed! How dare you treat me——”

He had turned abruptly, looking towards the door. Her utterance was halted by his movement of listening. She had barely time to take up her papers, and make an effort at regaining her composure. Bostwick was coming down the hall. He presently appeared at the door. For a moment there was silence.

Van was the first to speak.

“How are you, Searle?” he said cheerily. “Got over your grouch?”

Bostwick looked him over with ill-concealed loathing.

“You thought you were clever, I suppose,” he said in a growl-like tone that certainly fitted his face. “What are you doing here, I’d like to know?”

“Tottering angels!” said Van, “didn’t that experience do you any good after all? No wonder the convicts wouldn’t have you!”

Beth was afraid for what Bostwick might have heard. She could not censure Van for what he had done; she saw he would make no explanations. At best she could only attempt to put some appearance of the commonplace upon the horseman’s visit.



“Mr. Van Buren came—to see Mrs. Dick,” she faltered, steadying her voice as best she might. “They’re—very old friends.”

“What’s that?” demanded Bostwick, coming into the room and pointing at the bright nugget pin, lying exposed upon the table. “Some present, I suppose, for Mrs. Dick?” He started to take it in his hand.

Van interposed. “It’s neither for Mrs. Dick nor for you. It’s a present I’ve made to Miss Kent.”

Bostwick elevated his brows.

“Indeed?”

Beth fluttered in with a word of defense.

“It’s just a little souvenir—that’s all—a souvenir of—of my escape from those terrible men.”

“And Searle’s return,” added Van, who felt the very devil in his veins at sight of Bostwick helpless and enraged.

Searle opened his lips as if to fling out something of his wrath. He held it back and turned to Beth.

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"It will soon be night. We have much to do. I suppose I may see you, privately—even here?"

Beth was helpless. And in the circumstances she wished for Van to go.

"Certainly," she answered, raising her eyes for a second to the horseman's, "—that is—if _____"

"Certainly," Van answered cordially. "Good-by." He advanced and held out his hand.

She gave him her own because there was nothing else to do—and the tingling of his being made it burn. She did not dare to meet his gaze.

"So long, Searle," he added smilingly. "Better turn that grouch out to pasture."

Then he went.

CHAPTER XX

QUEENIE

The shadows of evening met Van, as he stepped from the outside door and started up the street. Then a figure emerged from the shadows and met him by the corner.

It was Queenie. Her eyes were red from weeping. A smile that somehow affected Van most poignantly, he knew not why, came for a moment to her lips.

"You didn't expect to see me here," she said. "I had to come to see if it was so."

"What is it, Queenie? What do you mean? What do you want?" he answered. "What's the trouble?"

"Nothing," she said. "I don't want nothing I can git—I guess—unless—Oh, *is* it her, Van? Is it sure all over with me?"

"Look here," he said, not unkindly, "you've always been mistaken, Queenie. I told you at the time—that time in Arizona—I'd have done what I did for an Indian squaw—for any woman in the world. Why couldn't you let it go at that?"

"You know why I couldn't," she answered with a certain intensity of utterance that gave him a species of chill. "After what you done—like the only real friend I ever had—I belonged to you—and couldn't even take myself away."

“But I didn’t want anyone to belong to me, Queenie. You know that. I could barely support my clothes.”

Her eyes burned with a strange luminosity. Her utterance was eager.

“But you want somebody to belong to you now? Ain’t that what’s the matter with you now?”

He did not answer directly.

“I didn’t think it was in you, Queenie, to follow me around and play the spy. I’ve liked you pretty well—but—I couldn’t like this.”

She stared at him helplessly, as an animal might have looked.

“I couldn’t help it,” she murmured, repressing some terrible emotion of despair. “I won’t never trouble you no more.”

She turned around and went away, walking uncertainly, as if from physical weakness and the blindness of pain.

Van felt himself inordinately wrung—felt it a cruelty not to run and overtake her—give her some measure of comfort. There was nothing he could do that would not be misunderstood. Moreover, he had no adequate idea of what was in her mind—or in her homeless heart. He had known her always as a butterfly; he could not take her tragically now.

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"Poor girl," he said as he watched her vanishing from sight, "if only she had ever had a show!"

He looked back at Mrs. Dick's. Bostwick had ousted him after all, before he could extenuate his madness, before he could ascertain whether Beth were angry or not—before he could bid her good-by.

Now that the cool of evening was upon him, along with the chill of sober reflection, he feared for what he had done. He was as mad, as crude as Queenie. Yet his fear of Beth's opinion was a sign that he loved her as a woman should be loved, sacredly, and with a certain awe, although he made no such analysis, and took no credit to himself for the half regrets that persistently haunted his reflections.

It would be a moonlight night, he pondered. He had counted on riding by the lunar glow to the "Laughing Water" claim. Would Beth, by any possibility, attempt to see him—come out, perhaps, in the moonlight—for a word before he should go?

He could not entertain a thought of departing without again beholding her. He wanted to know what she would say, and when he might see her again. After all, what was the hurry to depart? He might as well wait a little longer.

He went to the hay-yard. Dave had disappeared. Half an hour of search failed to bring him to light. On the point of entering a restaurant to allay his sense of emptiness, Van was suddenly accosted by a wild-eyed man, bare-headed and sweating, who ran at him, calling as he came.

"Hey!" he cried. "Van Buren! Come on! Come on! She's dyin' and all she wants is you!"

"What's wrong with you, man?" inquired the horseman, halted by the fellow's words. "What are you talking about?"

"Queenie!" gasped the fellow, panting for his breath. "Took poison—O, Lord! Come on! Come on! She don't want nothing but you!"

Van turned exceedingly pale.

"Poison? What you want is the doctor!"

"He's there—long ago!" answered the informant excitedly, and swabbing perspiration from his face. "She won't touch his dope. It's all over, I guess—only she wants to see you."

"Show me the way, then—show me the way. Where is she?" Van shook the man's shoulder roughly. "Don't stand here trembling. Take me to the place."

The man was in a wretched plight, from fear and the physical suffering induced by what he had seen. He reeled drunkenly as he started down the street, then off between some rows of canvas structures, heading for a district hung with red.

At the edge of this place, at an isolated cabin, comprising two small, rough rooms, the man seemed threatened with collapse.

“May be too late,” he whispered hoarsely, as he listened and heard no sounds from the house. “I’m goin’ to stay outside—and wait.”

The door was ajar. Without waiting for anything further, Van pushed it open and entered.

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"There he is—I knew it!" cried Queenie from the room at the rear. It was a cry that smote Van like a stab.

Then he came to the room where she was lying.

"I knew you'd come—I knew it, Van!" said the girl in a sudden outburst of sobbing, and she tried to rise upon her pillow. Agony, which she had fought down wildly, seized her in a spasm. She doubled on the bed.

Van glanced about quickly. The doctor—a young, inexperienced man—was there, sweating, a look of abject helplessness upon his face. The room was a poor tawdry place, with gaudy decorations and a litter of Queenie's finery. In her effort to conquer the pains that possessed her body, the girl had distorted her face almost past recognition.

Van came to the bedside directly, placed his hand on her shoulder, and gave her one of his characteristic little shakings.

"Queenie, what have you done?" he said. "What's going on?"

She tried to smile. It was a terrible effort.

"It's nobody's fault—but what was the use, Van?—what was there in it for me?"

"She won't take anything—the antidote—anything! There isn't a stomach pump in town!" the doctor broke in desperately. "She's got to! It's getting too late! We'll have to force it down! Maybe she'd take it for you." He thrust a goblet into Van's nervous hand. It contained a misty drink.

"For God's sake take this, Queenie," Van implored. "Take it quick!"

She shrank away, attempting with amazing force of will to mask her pain.

"I'd take the stuff—for your sake—when I—wouldn't for God," she faltered, sitting up, despite her bodily anguish. "You don't ask me to—do it for you."

"I do, Queenie—take it for me!" he answered, wrung again as he had been at her smiles, an hour before, but now with heart-piercing poignancy. "Take it for me, if you won't for anyone else."

She received the glass—and deliberately threw it on the floor. The doctor cried out sharply. Queenie shook her head, all the time fighting down her agony, which was fast making inroads to her life. She fell back on her pillow.

"You didn't—ask me—Van 'cause you love me. Nobody—wants me to live. That's all right. Do you s'pose you could kiss me good-by?"

The look on her face was peculiarly childish, as she drove out the lines of anguish in a superhuman effort made for him. And the yearning there brought back again that thought he had voiced before, that night—why couldn't the child have had a chance?

The doctor was feverishly mixing another potent drink.

Van bent down and kissed her, indulgently.

"Force her to take it!" cried the doctor desperately. "Force her to take it!"

"Queenie," Van said, "you've got to take this stuff."

Her hand had found his and clutched it with galvanic strength.

"Don't—make me," she begged, closing her eyes in a species of ecstasy that no man may understand. "I'd rather—not—Van—please. Only about a minute now. Ain't it funny—that love—can burn you—up?" Her grip had tightened on his hand.

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The doctor ran to the window, which he found already opened. He ran back in a species of frenzy.

"Make her take it, make her take it! God!" he said. "Not to do anything—not to do a thing!"

Queenie smiled at Van again—terribly. Her fingers felt like iron rods, pressing into his flesh. As if to complete her renunciation she dropped his hand abruptly. She mastered some violent convulsion that left the merest flicker of her life.

"Good-by, Van—good luck," she whispered faintly.

"Queenie!" he said. "Queenie!"

Perhaps she heard. After an ordeal that seemed interminable her face was calm and still, a faint smile frozen on her marble features.

Van waited there a long time. Someway it seemed as if this thing could be undone. The place was terribly still. The doctor sat there as if in response to a duty. He was dumb.

When Van went out, the man on the doorstep staggered in.

The moon was up. It shone obliquely down into all that rock-lined basin, surrounded by the stern, forbidding hills—the ancient, burned-out furnace of gold that man was reheating with his passions. Afar in all directions the lighted tents presented a ghostly unreality, their canvas walls illumined by the candles glowing within. A jargon of dance-hall music floated on the air. Outside it all was the desert silence—the silence of a world long dead.

Van would gladly have mounted his horse and ridden away—far off, no matter where. Goldite, bizarre and tragic—a microcosm of the world that man has fashioned—was a blot of discordant life, he felt, upon an otherwise peaceful world. As a matter of fact it had only begun its evening's story.

He stood in the road, alone, for several minutes, before he felt he could begin to resume the round of his own existence. When he came at length to the main street's blaze of light, a deeply packed throng could be seen in all the thoroughfare, compactly blocked in front of a large saloon.

Culver, the Government representative in the land-office needs, had been found in his office murdered. He had been stabbed. Van's knife, bought for Gettysburg, had been employed—and found there, red with its guilt.

All this Van was presently to discover. He was walking towards the surging mob when a miner he had frequently seen came running up and halted in the light of a window. Then the man began to yell.

“Here he is!” he cried. “Van Buren!”

The mob appeared to break at the cry. Fifty men charged down the street in a species of madness and Van was instantly surrounded.

CHAPTER XXI

IN THE SHADOW OF THE ROPE

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Mob madness is beyond explanation. Cattle stampeding are no more senseless than men in such a state. Goldite, however, was not only habitually keyed to the highest of tension, but it had recently been excited to the breaking point by several contributing factors. Lawless thefts of one another's claims, ore stealing, high pressure over the coming rush to the Indian reservation, and a certain apprehension engendered by the deeds of those liberated convicts—all these elements had aroused an over-revulsion of feeling towards criminality and a desire to apply some manner of law. And the primal laws are the laws that spring into being at such a time as this—the laws that cry out for an eye for an eye and a swiftness of legal execution.

Into the vortex of Goldite's sudden revulsion Van was swept like a straw. There was no real chance for a hearing. His friends of the morning had lost all sense of loyalty. They were almost as crazed as those whom his recent success had irritated. The story of his row with Culver had spread throughout the confines of the camp. No link in the chain of circumstantial evidence seemed wanting to convict him. A bawling sea of human beings surrounded him with violence and menace.

To escape the over-wrought citizens, the sheriff, assuming charge of Van, dragged him on top of a stack of lumber, piled three feet high before a building. The cry for a rope and a lynching began with a promptness that few would have expected. In normal times it could scarcely have been broached.

Snatching new-made deputies, hit-or-miss from the mob, and summarily demanding their services, the sheriff exerted his utmost powers to stem the tide that was rising. Something akin to a trial began then and there. A big red-faced drummer from Chicago, a man that Van had never seen, became his voluntary advocate, standing between him and the mob.

He had power, that man, both of limb and presence. His voice, also, was mighty. He shoved men about like rubber puppets and shouted his demands for law and order.

Van, having flung off half a dozen citizens, who in the excitement had felt some fanatical necessity for clutching him, faced the human wolves about him in a spirit of angry resentment. The big man from Chicago mowed his way to the pile of lumber and clambered up by the sheriff. The pile raised its occupants only well above the surging pack of faces.

"Stop your howling! Stop your noise!" roared the drummer from his elevation. "Don't you want to give this man a chance?"

[Illustration: "Don't you want to give this man a chance?"]

He was heard throughout the street.

“He’s got to prove his innocence or hang!” cried someone shrilly. “A murder foul as that!”

Another one bawled: “Where was he then? Make him tell where he was at six o’clock!”

Culver’s watch had been shattered and stopped at precisely six o’clock, presumably by his fall against a table in his office, when he suddenly went down, at the hands of his assassin. This fact was in possession of the crowd.

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A general shout for Van to explain where he was at the vital moment arose from all the crowd. The drummer turned to Van.

"There you are," he said. "There's your chance. If you wasn't around the surveyor's shack, you ought to be able to prove it."

Van could have proved his alibi at once, by sending around to Queenie's residence. He was nettled into a stubbornness of mind and righteous anger by all this senseless accusation. He did not realize his danger—the blackness of the case against him. That a lynching was possible he could scarcely have been made to believe. Nevertheless, as the Queenie matter was one of no secrecy and the facts must soon be known, he was turning to the drummer to make his reply when his eye was caught by a face, far out in the mass of human forms.

It was Beth that he saw, her cheek intensely white in the light streaming forth from a store. Bostwick was there at her side. Beth had been caught in the press of the throng as they came from the telegraph office.

He realized that at best his story concerning Queenie would be sufficiently black. With Beth in this theater of accusation the story of Queenie must wait.

"It's nobody's business where I was," he said. "This whole affair is absurd!"

Half a dozen of the men who were nearest heard his reply. One of them roared it out lustily. The mob was enraged. The cries for a violent termination to the scene increased in volume. Men were shouting, swearing, and surging back and forth tumultuously, wrought to a frenzy of primal virtue.

One near Beth called repeatedly for a lynching. He had cut a long new piece of rope from a coil at a store of supplies and was trying to drag it through the crowd.

The girl had heard and seen it all. She realized its full significance. She had never in her life felt so horribly oppressed with a sense of terrible things impending. Impetuously she accosted a man who stood at her side.

"Oh, tell them he was with me!" she said.

The man looked her over, and raising himself on his tip toes, shook his hat wildly at the mob.

"Say," he shouted at the top of his might, "here's a girl he was with at six o'clock."

It seemed as if only the men near at hand either heard or paid attention. On the farther side, away from Beth, the shouts for mob law were increasing. She turned to Bostwick hotly.

“Can’t you do anything? Tell them he was there with us—down at Mrs. Dick’s at six o’clock!”

“He wasn’t!” said Searle. “He left there at five forty-five.”

The man who had shouted listened to them both.

“Five forty-five?” he repeated. “That makes a difference!”

The drummer had caught the shout from out at the edge.

“Who’s that?” he called. “Who’s got that alibi?”

“All wrong!—No good!” yelled the man who stood by Beth.

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The girl had failed to realize how her statement would sound—in such a place as Goldite. Van had turned sick when it reached him. He was emphatically denying the story. The gist of it went through the mass of maddened beings, only to be so soon impugned by the man who had started it from Beth. The fury, at what was deemed an attempted deception, burst out with accumulated force.

The sheriff had drawn a revolver and was shouting to the mob to keep away.

“This man has got to go to jail!” he yelled. “You’ve got to act accordin’ to the law!”

He ordered his deputies to clear the crowd and make ready for retreat. Three of them endeavored to obey. Their efforts served to aggravate the mob.

Confusion and chaos of judgment seemed rising like a tide. In the very air was a feeling that suddenly something would go, something too far strained to hold, and some terrible deed occur before these people could ask themselves how it had been accomplished.

The fellow with the rope was being boosted forward by half a dozen intoxicated fools. Had the rope been a burning fuse it could scarcely have ignited more dangerous material than did its strands of manilla, in those who could lay their hands upon it.

The drummer was shouting himself raw in the throat—in vain.

Van was courting disaster by the very defiance of his attitude. It seemed as if nothing could save him, when two separate things occurred.

The doctor who had been with Van at Queenie’s death arrived in the press, got wind of the crisis, and vehemently protested the truth. Simultaneously, the lumberman, Trimmer, drunk, and enjoying what he deemed a joke, hoarsely confided to some sober men the fact that Cayuse had done the murder.

Even then, when two centers of opposition to the madness of the mob had been created, the menace could not at once be halted.

The man with the rope had approached so near the lumber-pile that the sheriff could all but reach him. A furious battle ensued, and waged around the planks, between the deputies and lynchers. It lasted till fifty active men of the camp, aroused to a sense of reaction by the facts that were now becoming known, hurled the struggling fighters apart and dragged them off, all the while spreading the news they had heard concerning the half-breed Indian.

No less excited when at last they knew that Van was innocent, the great crowd still occupied the street, hailing Trimmer to the lumber-pile and demanding to know how he came by the facts, and where Cayuse had gone.

Trimmer was frightened into soberness—at least into soberness sufficient to protect himself and McCoppet. He said he had seen the Indian coming from Culver's office, with blood upon his hands. The Indian had gone straight westward from the town, to elude pursuit in the mountains.

The fact that Van had been at Queenie's side at her death became town property at once. It came in all promptness to Beth.

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With a feeling of sickness pervading all her being, she was glad to have Bostwick take her home.

It was late when at last the street was clear, and Van could finally make his escape from danger and returning friends. Dave by then had found himself; that is, he made his way, thus tardily, to the horseman's side—and the two went at length to their dinner.

At half-past eight, with the moon well up, Dave and Van were ready for departure. Their horses were saddled. One extra animal was packed with needed provisions for the crew on the "Laughing Water" claim. Van had ordered all he could for Queenie's final journey—the camp's best possible funeral, which he could not remain to attend. There was nothing to do but to mount and ride away, but—Beth was down at Mrs. Dick's.

Resistance was useless. Bidding Dave wait with the horses at the yard. Van made his way around through the shadows of the houses, and coming out upon a rocky hill, a little removed from the boarding place, was startled to see Beth abruptly rise before him.

The house had oppressed her—and the moon had called. Bostwick, in alarm concerning possible disaster to the plans he had made with McCoppet, now that Culver was dead, had gone to seek the gambler out and ascertain the status of affairs.

CHAPTER XXII

TWO MEETINGS AFTER DARK

For a moment neither Beth nor Van could speak. The girl, like a startled moon-sprite, wide-eyed and grave, had taken on a mood of beauty such as the man had never seen. She seemed to him strangely fragile, a trifle pale, but wholly exquisite, enchanting.

No signs were on her face, but she had wept—hot, angry tears, within the hour. And here was the cause of them all! She had wished he would come—and feared he would come, as conflicting emotions possessed her. Now that he stood here, with moonlight on half of his face, her thoughts were all unmarshaled.

Van presently spoke.

"I'm a kid, after all. I couldn't go away without—this."

"I wish you had! I wish you had!" she answered, at his smile. "I wish I had never seen you in the world!"

His heart was sore for jesting, but he would not change his way.

"If not in the world, where *would* you have wished to see me, then?"

"I never wished to see you at all!" she replied. "Your joke has gone too far. You have utterly mistaken my sense of gratitude."

"Guess not," he said. "I haven't looked for gratitude—nor wanted it, either."

"You had no right!" she continued. "You have said things—done things—you have taken shameful advantage—you have treated me like—I suppose like—that other—that other—— You dared!"

Van's face took on an expression of hardness, to mask the hurt of his heart.

"Who says so?" he demanded quietly. "You know better."

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"It's true!" she answered hotly. "You had no right! It was mere brute strength! You cannot deny what you have been—to that miserable woman!" Tears of anger sped from her eyes, and she dashed them hotly away.

Van stepped a little closer.

"Beth," he said, suddenly taking her hand, "none of this is true, and you know it. You're angry with that woman, not with me."

She snatched her hand away.

"You shan't!" she said. "Don't you dare to touch me again. I hate you—hate you for what you have done! You've been a brute probably to her as well as to me!"

"To you? When?" he demanded

"All the time! To-day!—Now!—when you say I'm angry at a—woman who is dead!—a woman who died for you!"

It hit him.

"Poor Queenie," he said, "poor child."

"Yes—poor Queenie!" Her eyes blazed in the moonlight. "To think that you dared to treat me like——"

"Beth!" he interrupted, "I won't permit it. I told you to-day I loved you. That makes things right. You love me, and that makes them sacred. I'd do all I've done over again—*all* of it—Queenie and the rest! I'm not ashamed, nor sorry for anything I've done. I love you—I say—I love you. That's what I've never done before—and never said I did—and that's what makes things right!"

Beth was confused by what he said—confused in her judgment, her emotions. Weakly she clung to her argument.

"You haven't any right—it isn't true when you say I love you. I don't! I won't! You can't deny that woman died of a broken heart for you!"

"I don't deny anything about her," he said. "I tried to be her friend. God knows she needed friends. She was only a child, a pretty child. I'm sorry. I've always been sorry. She knew I was only a friend."

She felt he was honest. She knew he was wrung—suffering, but not in his conscience. Yet what was she to think? She had heard it all—all of Queenie's story.

“You kissed her,” she said, and red flamed up in her cheeks.

“It was all she asked,” he answered simply. “She was dying.”

“And you’re paying for her funeral.”

“I said I was her friend.”

“Oh, the shamelessness of it!” she exclaimed as before, “—the way it looks! And to think of what you dared to do to me!”

“Yes, I kissed you without your asking,” he confessed. “I expect to kiss you a hundred thousand times. I expect to make you my wife—for a love like ours is rare. Whatever else you think you want to say, Beth—now—don’t say it—unless it’s just good-night.”

With a sudden move forward he took her two shoulders in his powerful hands and gave her a rough little shake. Then his palms went swiftly to her face, he kissed her on the lips, and let her go.

“You!—Oh!” she cried, and turning she ran down the slope of the hill as hard as she could travel.

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He watched her going in the moonlight. Even her shadow was beautiful, he thought, but all his joy was grave.

She disappeared within the house, without once turning to see what he had done. He could not know that from one of the darkened windows she presently peered forth and watched him depart from the hill. He was not so assured as he had tried to make her think, and soberness dwelt within his breast.

Half an hour later he and old Dave were riding up the mountain in the moonlight. The night from the eminence was glorious, now that the town was left behind. Goldite lay far below in the old dead theatre of past activities, dotting the barren immensity with its softened lights like the little thing it was. How remote it seemed already, with its vices, woes, and joys, its comedy and tragedy, its fevers, strifes, and toil, disturbing nothing of the vast serenity of the planet, ever rolling on its way. How coldly the moon seemed looking on the scene. And yet it had cast a shadow of a girl to set a man aflame.

Meantime Bostwick had been delayed in securing McCoppet's attention. The town was still excited over all that had happened; the saloons were full of men. Culver had been an important person, needful to many of the miners and promoters of mining. His loss was an aggravation, especially as his deputy, Lawrence, was away.

The more completely to allay suspicions that might by any possibility creep around the circle to himself, McCoppet had been the camp's most active figure in organizing a posse, with the sheriff, to go out and capture Cayuse. His reasons for desiring the half-breed's end were naturally strong, nevertheless his active partisanship of law and justice excited no undesirable talk. He was simply an influential citizen engaged in a laudable work.

It was late when at length he and Bostwick could snatch a few minutes to themselves. The gambler's first question then was something of a puzzle to Bostwick.

"Well, have you got that thirty thousand?"

"Got it? Yes, I've got it," Bostwick answered nervously, "but what is the good of it now?"

It was McCoppet's turn to be puzzled.

"Anything gone wrong with Van Buren, or his claim?"

"Good heavens! Isn't it sufficient to have things all gone wrong with Culver? What could be worse than that?"

The gambler flung his cigar away and hung a fresh one on his lip.

"Say, don't you worry on Culver. Don't his deputy take his place?"

“His deputy?”

“Sure, his deputy—Lawrence—a man we can get hands down.”

Bostwick stared at him hopefully.

“You don’t mean to say this accident—this crime—is fortunate, after all?”

“It’s a godsend.” McCoppet would have dared any blasphemy.

Bostwick’s relief was inordinate.

“Then what is the next thing to do?”

“Wait for Lawrence,” said the gambler. Then he suddenly arose. “No, we can’t afford the time. He might be a week in coming. You’ll have to go get him, to-morrow.”

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"Where is he, then?"

"Way out South, on a survey. You'd better take that car of yours, with a couple of men I'll send along, and fetch him back mighty pronto. We can't let a deal like this look raw. The sooner he runs that reservation line the better things will appear."

Bostwick, too, had risen.

"Will your men know where to find him?"

"If he's still on the map," said the gambler. "You leave that to me. Better go see about your car to-night. I'll hustle your men and your outfit. See you again if anything turns up important. Meantime, is your money in the bank?"

"It's in the bank."

"Right," said McCoppet. "Good-night."

CHAPTER XXIII

BETH'S DESPERATION

The following day in Goldite was one of occurrences, all more or less intimately connected with the affairs of Van and Beth.

Bostwick succeeded in making an early start to the southward in his car. McCoppet had provided not only a couple of men as guides to the field where Lawrence was working, but also a tent, provisions, and blankets, should occasion arise for their use.

Beth was informed by her fiance that word had arrived from her brother, to whom Searle said he meant to go. The business of buying Glenmore's mine, he said, required unexpected dispatch. Perhaps both he and Glen might return by the end of the week.

By that morning's train the body of Culver was shipped away—and the camp began to forget him. The sheriff was after Cayuse.

Early in the afternoon the body of the girl who had never been known in Goldite by any name save that of Queenie, was buried on a hillside, already called into requisition as a final resting place for such as succumbed in the mining-camp, too far from friends, or too far lost, to be carried to the world outside the mountains. Half a dozen women attended the somewhat meager rites. There was one mourner only—the man who had run to summon Van, and who later had waited by the door.

At four o'clock the *Goldite News* appeared upon the streets. It contained much original matter—or so at least it claimed. The account of the murder of Culver, the death of Queenie, and the threatened lynching of Van Buren made a highly sensational story. It was given the prominent place, for the editor was proud to have made it so full in a time that he deemed rather short. On a second page was a tale less tragic.

It was, according to one of its many sub-headings, "A Humorous Outcrop concerning two Maids and a Man." It related, with many gay sallies of "wit," how Van had piloted Mr. J. Searle Bostwick into the hands of the convicts, recently escaped, packed off his charges, Miss Beth Kent and her maid, and brought them to Goldite by way of the Monte Cristo mine, in time to behold the discomfited entrance of the said J. Searle Bostwick in prisoner's attire. Mr. Bostwick was described as having been "on his ear" towards Van Buren ever since.

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In the main the account was fairly accurate. Gettysburg, Napoleon, and old Dave had over-talked, during certain liquifying processes. The matter was out beyond repair.

Mrs. Dick was prompt in pouncing on the story, hence Beth was soon presented with a copy. In the natural annoyance she felt when it was read, there was one consolation, at least: Searle was away, to be gone perhaps two or three days. He might not see the article, which would soon be forgotten in the camp.

To culminate the day's events, that evening Elsa ran away. She went with a "gentleman" lodger, taking the slight precaution to be married by the Justice of the Peace.

Beth discovered her loss too late to interfere. She felt herself alone, indeed, with Bostwick away, her brother off in the desert, and Van—she refused to think of Van. Fortunately, Mrs. Dick was more than merely a friend. She was a staunch little warrior, protecting the champion, to anger whom was unhealthy. Despite the landlady's attitude of friendliness, however, Beth felt wretchedly alone. It was a terrible place. She was cooped up all day within the lodging house, since the street full of men was more than she cared to encounter; and with life all about her, and wonderful days spreading one after another across the wide-open land, her liberties were fairly in a cage.

From time to time she thought of the horse, awaiting her order at the hay-yard. She tried to convince herself she would never accept or ride the animal. She was certain she resented everything Van had done. She felt the warmest indignation at herself for breaking into bits of song, for glowing to the tips of her ears, for letting her heart leap wildly in her breast whenever she thought of the horseman.

Two days went by and she chafed under continued restraints. No word had come from Bostwick, none from Glen—and not a sign from the "Laughing Water" claim. From the latter she said to herself she wished no sign. But Searle had no right to leave her thus and neglect her in every respect.

The morning of the third long day Mrs. Dick brought her two thin letters. One had been mailed in Goldite, by a messenger down from the "Laughing Water" claim. It came from Van. He had written the briefest of notes:

"Just to send my love. I want you to wear my nugget."

Folded into the paper was a spray of the wild peach bloom.

Beth tried to think her blushes were those of indignation, which likewise caused the beat of her heart to rise. But her hand fluttered prettily up to her breast, where the nugget was pinned inside her waist. Also his letter must have been hard to understand—she read it seventeen times.

Then she presently turned to the other. It was addressed in typewritten characters, but the writing inside she knew—her brother Glen's.

“Dear Old Sis: Say, what in the dickens are you doing out here in the mines, by all that's holey?—and what's all this story in the *Goldite News* about one Bronson Van Buren doing the benevolent brigand stunt with you and your maid, and shunting Searle off with the Cons? Why couldn't you let a grubber know you were hiking out here to the desert? Why all this elaborate surprise—this newspaper wireless to your fond and lonesome?

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"What's the matter with your writing hand? Is this Van-brigand holding them both? What's the matter with Searle? I wrote him two or three aeons ago, when he might have been of assistance. Now I'm doing my eight hours a day in an effort to sink down to China. I'm on the blink, in a way, but not for long, for this is the land where opportunity walks night and day to thump on your door—and I'll grab her by the draperies yet.

"But *me!*—working as a common miner!—though I've got a few days off to go and look at a claim with a friend of mine, so you needn't answer till you hear again.

"If Searle is dead, why don't he say so? I only touched him for a few odd dollars—I only needed a grub-stake—fifty would have done the trick—and he doesn't come through. And nobody writes. I guess it's me for the Prodigal, but when I do get next to the fatted calf I'll get inside and eat my way out by way of his hoofs and horns. Why couldn't you and Searle and the maid come down and have a look at me—working? *It's worth it.* Come on. Maybe it's easier than writing. Yours for the rights of labor, GLEN."

Astonished by the contents of this communication, Beth read it again, in no little bewilderment, to make sure she had made no mistake. No letter from herself? No word from Searle? No answer to Glen's request for money? And he had only asked for a "few odd dollars?" There must be something wrong. He had sent the most urgent requirement for sixty thousand dollars. And she herself had written, at once. Searle had assured her he had sent him word by special messenger. Starlight was less than a long day's ride away. Glen had already had time to see that account in the paper and write.

She had no suspicions of Bostwick. She had seen Glen's letter and read it for herself. And Searle had responded immediately with an offer to lend her brother thirty thousand dollars. There must be some mistake. Glen might be keeping his news and plans from herself, as men so often will. Searle might even have overlooked the importance of keeping Glen fully posted, intending to go so soon to Starlight. Her own letter might have miscarried.

She tried to fashion explanations—but they would not entirely fit. Searle had been gone three days. He had gone before the Goldite News was issued. The paper had arrived at Glen's while the man in his car had failed.

For a moment she sickened with the reflection that Searle might once more have fallen captive to the convicts, still at large—and with all the money! Then she presently assured herself that news so sinister as this would have been very prompt to return.

It was all too much to understand—unless Glen were ill—or out of his reason. His two letters, the one to Searle and this one to herself, were so utterly conflicting. It was not to be solved from such a distance. Moreover, Glen wrote that he was off on a trip, and

asked her to wait before replying. It was irritating, all this waiting, alone here in Goldite, but there seemed to be nothing else to do.

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The long morning passed, and she fretted. In the afternoon the *Goldite News* broke its record. It printed an extra—a single sheet, in glaring type, announcing the capture of the convicts. By a bold and daring coup, it said, the entire herd of criminals, all half starved and weakened by privations, had been rounded up and transported back to prison. Unfortunately, the report was slightly inaccurate. Matt Barger, the leader in the prison delivery, and the most desperate man in the lot, had escaped the posse's vigilance. Of this important factor in the welcome story of the posse's work Goldite was ignorant, and doomed to be in ignorance a week.

The news to Beth was a source of great relief. But her troubles in other directions were fated to increase. That evening three men called formally—formally, that is to say, in so far as dressing in their best was concerned and putting on their “company manners.” But Beth and courtship were their objects, a fact that developed, somewhat crudely with the smallest possible delay.

One of these persons, Billy Stitts by name, was fairly unobjectionable as a human being, since he was a quaint, slow-witted, bird-like little creature, fully sixty years of age and clearly harmless. The others were as frankly in pursuit of a mate as any two mountain animals.

Beth was frightened, when the purport of their visit flashed upon her. She felt a certain sense of helplessness. Mrs. Dick was too busy to be constantly present; Elsa was gone; the ways of such a place were new and wholly alarming. She felt when she made her escape from the three that her safety was by no means assured. Her room was her only retreat. Except for Mrs. Dick, there was not another woman in the house. She was wholly surrounded by men—a rough, womanless lot whose excitements, passions, and emotions were subjected to changes constantly, as well as to heats, by the life all around them in the mines.

That night was her first of real terror. Every noise in the building, and some in the streets, made her start awake like a hunted doe, with imaginings of the most awful description. She scarcely slept at all.

The following day old Billy Stitts called again, very shortly after breakfast. He proved such an amiable, womanly old chap that he was almost a comfort to the girl. She sent him to the postoffice, for a possible letter from Glen. He went with all the pleasure and alacrity of a faithful dog, apologizing most exuberantly on his return for the fact that no letter had come.

She remained in the house all day. The afternoon brought the two rough suitors of the night before, and two more equally crude. Mrs. Dick, to Beth's intense uneasiness, regarded the matter as one to be expected, and quite in accord with reason and proper regulations. A good-looking girl in camp, with her men-folks all giving her the go-by—and what could you expect? Moreover, as some of these would-be courtiers were

husky and in line for fortune's smile, with chances as good as any other man's, she might do worse than let them come, and hear what they had to say. It was no girl's need to be neglected as Searle and Van were patently neglecting Beth.

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This was the stage in which Beth at length began to meditate on Spartan remedies. The situation was not to be endured. No word had come from Searle. The world might have swallowed him up. She was sick of him—sick of his ways of neglect. And as for Van——

There was no one to whom she could turn—unless it were Glen. If only she could flee to her brother! She thought about it earnestly. She tried to plan the way.

Her horse was at the hay-yard. Starlight was only one day off in the desert. The convicts were no longer about. If only she could ride there—even alone! An early start—a little urging of the pony—she could fancy the journey accomplished with the utmost ease; then scornful defiance, both of Bostwick and of Van.

But a woman—riding in this lawless land alone! She was utterly disheartened, disillusionized at the thought. It would be no less than madness. And yet, it seemed as if she must presently go. Searle's silence, coupled to conditions here, was absolutely intolerable.

With plans decidedly hazy—nothing but a wild, bright dream really clear—she questioned Billy Stitts concerning the roads. He was familiar with every route in miles, whether roadway, trail, or “course by compass,” as he termed trackless cruising in the desert. He gave her directions with the utmost minutae of detail as to every highway to Starlight. He drew her a plan. She was sure that she could almost ride to Starlight in the dark. What branches of the road to shun, which trails to choose, possibly, for gaining time, what places to water a famishing horse—all these and more she learned with feverish interest.

“Now a man would do this,” and “a man would do that,” said Billy time after time, till a new, fantastic notion came bounding full-fledged into Beth's anxious brain and almost made her laugh with delight. She could *dress as a man* and ride as a man and be absolutely safe on the journey! She knew a dozen unusual arts for dyeing the skin and concealing the hair and making the hands look rough. Make-up in private theatricals, at professional hands, she had learned with exceptional thoroughness.

She would need a suit of kahki, miners' books, a soft, big hat, and flannel shirt. They were all to be had at the store. She could order her horse to be saddled for a man. She could readily dress and escape unseen from the house. In a word, she could do the trick!

The plan possessed her utterly. It sent her blood bounding through her veins. Her face was flushed with excitement. She loved adventure—and this would be something to do!

Nevertheless, despite all her plans, she had no real intention of attempting a scheme so mad. Subconsciously she confessed to herself it was just the merest idle fancy, not a thing to be actually ventured, or even entertained.

That night, when she was more beset, more worried than before, however, desperation was increasing upon her. The plan she had made no longer seemed the mere caprice of one in pursuit of pleasure—it appeared to be the only possible respite from conditions no longer to be borne.

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When the morning came, after a night of mental torture and bodily fear, her patience had been strained to the point of breaking, and resolve was steeling her courage.

The word that should have come from Searle was still delinquent. But old Billy Stitts brought her a letter from Glen.

“Dear Sis: I can only write a line or two. Had a thump on the head, but it didn’t knock off my block. Don’t worry. All right in a few days, sure. Guess you couldn’t come, or you’d be here, in response to my last. But Searle might show up, anyhow. You can write me now. Hope you’re well and happy. Is the brigand still on the job? Can’t really write. With love, GLEN.”

Her heart stood still as she; read her brother’s lines, in a scrawled hand indicative of weakness. She resolved in that instant to go.

“Mr. Stitts,” she said in remarkable calm, for all that she felt, “my brother needs some clothing—everything complete, boots, shirts, and all. He’s just about my size. I wish you’d go and buy them.”

“Lord, I know the best and the cheapest in camp!” said Billy eagerly. “I’ll have ’em here before you can write him your letter—but the stage don’t go back till Friday.”

She had given no thought to the tri-weekly stage. She dismissed it now, with a wave of gratitude towards Van for the horse—gratitude, or something, surging warmly in her veins. She almost wished he could ride at her side, but checked that lawlessness sternly. She would ride to Glen alone!

CHAPTER XXIV

A BLIZZARD OF DUST

At daylight Beth was dressed as a man and surveying herself in the mirror. She had passed a sleepless night. She was fevered, excited, and nervous.

Her work had been admirably done. She looked no more rawly new or youthful than scores of young tenderfeet, daily in the streets of the camp. The stain on her face had furnished an astonishing disguise, supported as it was by male attire. Her hair was all up in the crown of her hat, which was set on the back of her head. It was fastened, moreover, with pins concealed beneath the leather band. Altogether the disguise was most successful. Beth had disappeared: a handsome young man had been conjured in her place.

Her mare, which Billy had ordered, came promptly to the door. She heard her arrive—and her heart stroked more madly than before. Trembling in every limb, and treading as softly as a thief, she made her way downstairs.

On the dining-room table was the package of lunch that Mrs. Dick had agreed to prepare. Beth had told her she meant to take an early morning ride and might not be back in time for breakfast. With this bundle in hand she went out at the door, her courage all but failing at thought of the man with the horse at the threshold. She shrank from being seen in such an outfit.

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It was too late now to retreat, however, she told herself bravely, and out she went.

"Say, git a move, young feller," said the hostler with her pony. "I ain't got time to play horse-post here all day."

"Thank you for being so prompt," said Beth, in a voice that was faint, despite her efforts to be masculine, and she gave him a coin.

"I'll tie that there bundle on behind," he volunteered, less gruffly, and Beth was glad of his assistance.

A moment later she took a gasp of breath and mounted to the seat. Collapse of all the project had seemed imminent, but an actual feeling of relief and security ensued when she was settled in the saddle.

"So long," said the hostler, and Beth responded manfully, "So long."

She rode out slowly, towards the one main road. A feeling of the morning's chill assailed her, making her shiver. The noise of her pony's hoof-beats seemed alarmingly resonant.

But nothing happened. The streets were deserted, save for a few half-drunken wanderers, headed for the nearest saloon. On the far-off peaks of the mountains the rosy light of sunrise faintly appeared. In the calm of the great barren spaces, even Goldite was beautiful at last.

A sense of exhilaration pervaded Beth's youthful being. She was glad of what she had done. It was joyous, it was splendid, this absolute freedom in all this stern old world!

The road wound crookedly up a hill, as it left the streets of the town behind. The scattered tents extended for a mile in this direction, the squares of silent canvas, like so many dice, cast on the slopes by a careless fate that had cast man with them in the struggle.

Beth and her pony finally topped the hill, to be met by a sea of mountains out beyond. Up and down these mighty billows of the earth the highway meandered, leading onward and southward through the desert.

The mare was urged to a gallop, down an easy slope, then once more she walked as before. All the mountains in the west were rosy now, till presently the sun was up, a golden coin, struck hot from the very mints of God, giving one more day with its glory.

Its very first rays seemed a comfort, suggesting a welcome warmth. Beth could have called out songs of gladness well nigh uncontainable. She had all the big world to

herself. Even the strangely twisted clouds in the sky seemed made for her delight. They were rare in this wonderful dome of blue and therefore things of beauty.

For an hour or more her way was plain, and to ride was a god-like privilege. Her ease of mind was thoroughly established. What had been the necessity for all those qualms of fear? The matter was simple, after all.

It was ten o'clock before she ate her breakfast. She had come to the so-called river, the only one in perhaps a hundred miles. It was quite a respectable stream at this particular season, but spread very thinly and widely at the ford.

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By noon she was half way of her distance. The sun was hot; summer baking of the desert had begun. Her mare was sweating profusely. She had urged her to the top of her strength. Nevertheless she was still in excellent condition. To the westward the sky was overcast in a manner such as Beth had never seen, with a dark, copperous storm-head that massed itself prodigiously above the range.

Already she had come to three branchings of the road and chosen her way in confidence, according to Billy Stiff's directions. When she came to a fourth, where none had been indicated, she was sure, either in Billy's instructions, or upon his drawing, she confessed herself somewhat uncertain. She halted and felt for the map.

It was not to be found. She had left it behind at Mrs. Dick's. Dimly she fancied she remembered that Billy had said on the fourth branch, keep to the right. There could be no doubt that this branch was the fourth, howsoever out of place it appeared. She rode to the right, and, having passed a little valley, found herself enfolded in a rolling barrier of hills where it seemed as if the sun and rocks were of almost equal heat.

At mid-afternoon Beth abruptly halted her pony and stared at the world of desert mountains in confusion not unmixed with alarm. She was out at the center of a vast level place, almost entirely devoid of vegetation—and the road had all but disappeared. It branched once more, and neither fork was at all well defined, despite the fact that travel to Starlight was supposed to be reasonably heavy. She had made some mistake. She suddenly remembered something that Billy had said concerning a table mountain she should have passed no later than half-past one. It had not been seen along her way. She was tired. Weariness and the heat had broken down a little of the bright, joyous spirit of the morning. A heart-sinking came upon her. She must turn and ride back to—she knew not which of the branches of the road, any one of which might have been wrongly selected.

Her mare could not be hurried now; she must last to get her to Starlight. To add to other trifles of the moment, the bank of cloud, so long hung motionless above the western summits, moved out across the path of the sun and blotted out its glory with a density that would have seemed impossible.

Scarcely had Beth fairly turned her back to the west when a wind storm swooped upon the desert. It came as a good stiff breeze, at first, flecking up but little of the dust. Then a sudden, ominous change occurred. All the blue of the sky was overwhelmed, under a sudden expansion of the copperous clouds. An eclipse-like darkness enveloped the world, till the farthest mountains disappeared and the near-by ranges seemed to magnify themselves as they blended with the sky.

With a sound as of an on-rushing cataclysm the actual storm, cyclonic in all but the rotary motion, came beating down upon the startled earth like a falling wall of air.

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In less than two minutes the world, the atmosphere, everything had ceased to be. It was a universe of dust and sand, hurtling—God knew whither.

In the suddenness of the storm's descent upon her, Beth became speechless with dismay. Her mare dropped her head and slowly continued to walk. Road, hills, desert—all had disappeared. To go onward was madness; to remain seemed certain death. Despair and horror together gripped Beth by the heart. There was nothing in the world she could do but to close her eyes and double low above the saddle, her hat bent down to shield her face.

At the end of a few minutes only the frightfulness of the thing could no longer be endured. Beth had been all but torn from her seat by the sheer weight and impact of the wind. All the world was roaring prodigiously. The sand and dust, driving with unimaginable velocity, smoked past in blinding fury.

The mare had ceased to move. Beth was aware of her inertia, dimly. She remembered at last to dismount and stand in the animal's shelter. At length on the raging and roaring of the air-sea, crashing onward in its tidal might, came a fearful additional sound. It was rushing onward towards the girl with a speed incredible—a sound of shrieking, or whistling, that changed to a swishing as if of pinions, Titanic in size, where some monstrous winged god was blown against, his will in a headlong course through the tumult.

Then the something went by—the whole roof of a house—from twenty miles away. It scraped in the earth, not ten feet off from where the pony stood—and she bolted and ran for her life.

Down went Beth, knocked over by the mare. With a hideous crash the flying roof was hurled against a nearby pinnacle of rock. The wooden wings split upon the immovable obstruction, and on they went as before.

The pony had disappeared, in panic that nothing could have allayed. The storm-pall swallowed her instantly, Beth could not have seen her had she halted a rod away. Her eyes had been opened for half a moment only before she was flung to the earth. She was rolling now, and for the moment was utterly powerless to rise or to halt her locomotion.

When she presently grasped at a little gray shrub, came to a halt, and tried to stand erect, she was buffeted bodily along by the wind with no strength in her limbs to resist.

She was blown to the big rock pinnacle on which the roof had been divided. An eddy twisted her rudely around to the shelter, and she flung herself down upon the earth.

CHAPTER XXV

A TIMELY DELIVERANCE

How long she lay there Beth could never have known. It seemed a time interminable, with the horror of the storm in all the universe. It was certainly more than an hour before the end began to come. Then clouds and the blizzard of sand and dust, together with all the mighty roaring, appeared to be hurled across the firmament by the final gust of fury and swept from the visible world into outer space.

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Only a brisk half-gale remained in the wake of the huger disturbance. The sky and atmosphere cleared together. The sun shone forth as before—but low to the mountain horizon. When even the clean wind too had gone, trailing behind its lawless brother, the desert calm became as absolute as Beth had beheld it in the morning.

She crept from her shelter and looked about the plain. Her eyes were red and smarting. She was dusted through and through. In all the broad, gray expanse there was not a sign of anything alive. Her mare had vanished. Beth was lost in the desert, and night was fast descending.

Deliverance from the storm, or perhaps the storm's very rage, had brought her a species of calm. The fear she had was a dull, persistent dread—an all-pervading horror of her situation, too large to be acute. Nevertheless, she determined to seek for the road with all possible haste and make her way on foot, as far as possible, towards the Starlight highway and its possible traffic.

She was stiff from her ride and her cramped position on the earth. She started off somewhat helplessly, where she felt the road must be.

She found no road. Her direction may have been wrong. Possibly the storm of wind had swept away the wagon tracks, for they had all been faint. It had been but half a road at best for several miles. Her heart sank utterly. She became confused as to which way she had traveled. Towards a pass in the hills whence she felt she must have come she hastened with a new accession of alarm.

She was presently convinced that she had chosen entirely wrong. A realizing sense that she was hopelessly mixed assailed her crushingly. To turn in any direction might be a grave mistake. But to stand here and wait—do nothing—with the sun going down—this was preposterous—suicidal! She must go on—somewhere! She must find the road! She must keep on moving—till the end! Till the end! How terrible that thought appeared, in such a situation!

She almost ran, straight onward towards the hills. Out of breath very soon, she walked with all possible haste and eagerness, all the time looking for the road she had left, which the storm might have wiped from the desert. She was certain now that the mountains towards which she was fleeing were away from the Goldite direction.

Once more she changed her course. She realized then that such efforts as these must soon defeat themselves. At least she must stick to one direction—go on in a line as straight as possible, till she came to something! Yet if she chose her direction wrong and went miles away from anything—

She had to go on. She had to take the chance. She plodded southwestward doggedly, for perhaps a mile, then halted at something like a distant sound, and peered towards the shadows of the sunset.

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There was nothing to be seen. A hope which had risen for a moment in her breast, at thought of possible deliverance, sank down in collapse, and left her more faint than before. The sun was at the very rim of the world. Its edge began to melt its way downward into all the solid bulk of mountains. It would soon be gone. Darkness would ensue. The moon would be very late, if indeed it came at all. Wild animals would issue from their dens of hiding, to prowl in search of food. Perhaps the sound she heard had been made by an early night-brute of the desert, already roving for his prey!

Once more she went on, desperately, almost blindly. To keep on going, that was the one essential! She had proceeded no more than a few rods, however, when she heard that sound again—this time more like a shout.

Her heart pounded heavily and rapidly. She shaded her eyes with her hand, against the last, slanted sun-rays, and fancied she discerned something, far off there westward, in the purples flung eastward by the mountains. Then the last bit of all that molten disk of gold disappeared in the summits, and with its going she beheld a horseman, riding at a gallop towards herself.

The relief she felt was almost overwhelming—till thoughts of such an encounter came to modify her joy. She was only an unprotected girl—yet—she had no appearance of a woman! This must be her safeguard, should this man now approaching prove some rough, lawless being of the mines.

She stood perfectly still and waited. A man would have hurried forward to meet this deliverance, so unexpectedly vouchsafed. But she was too excited, too uncertain—too much of a girl. Then presently, when the horseman was still a hundred yards away, her heart abruptly turned over in her bosom.

The man on the horse was Van. She knew him—knew that impudent pose, that careless grace and oneness with his broncho! She did not know he was chasing that flying roof which had frightened her horse from her side; that he had bought an old cabin, far from his claim, to move it to the “Laughing Water” ground—only to see it wrenched from his hold by the mighty gale and flung across the world. She knew nothing of this, but she suddenly knew how glad was her whole tingling being, how bounding was the blood in her veins! And she also knew, abruptly, that now if ever she must play the man. She had all but forgotten she was angry with Van. That, and a hundred reasons more, made it absolutely imperative now that he should not know her for herself!

She made a somewhat wild attempt at a toilet of her hair—in case the wind had ripped the tell-tale strands from beneath her hat. Then with utter faintness in her being, and weakness in her knees, she prepared to give him reception.

He had slowed his horse to a walk. He rode up deliberately, scrutinizing in obvious puzzlement the figure before him in the sand.

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"Hullo," he said, while still a rod away, "what in blazes are you doing here, man—are you lost?"

Beth nodded. "I'm afraid I am." Her utterance was decidedly girlish, and quavering.

"Lost your voice somewhere, too, I reckon," said Van. "Where are you going? Where are you from?"

"Starlight," answered Beth, at a loss for a better reply, and making an effort to deepen her tones as she talked. "I lost my horse in the storm."

Van looked around the valley.

"Did, hey? Didn't happen to see a stray roof, anywhere, did you? I lost one."

"I—haven't seen anything," faltered Beth, whose only wish was to have him say something about her escape from this terrible place. "But something frightened my pony."

"I was curious to see how far that roof would hike, that's all," he told her by way of explanation of his presence here on his horse, and he turned to look at her again. "Didn't you know this so-called cut-off to Starlight would take you more time than the road?"

"No, I—I didn't know it," said Beth, afraid he must presently penetrate her masquerade if he looked like that upon her. "What do you advise me to do?"

He ignored her question, demanding:

"Say, is your name Kent?—Glenmore Kent?"

Beth felt her heart begin new gymnastics. This was her cue.

"Why, yes. But—how did you know—know me?"

"I've met your sister, in Goldite. You can't get to Starlight to-night."

She had passed muster! A herd of wild emotions were upon her. But first here was her predicament—and what he said was not at all reassuring. Certain alarms that his coming had banished returned in a vague array.

She showed her dread in her eyes. "Perhaps I could get to Goldite."

"How?" He was half unconsciously patting Suvy, the horse, whose ecstasy thereat was not to be concealed.

Beth knew not how. She wished Van would cease that study of her face. Perhaps she could think more clearly.

“Why—I suppose I could walk—if I knew the way,” she said. “Is it very far? I admit I’m bewildered. I was lost.”

“It would be a long ride,” he told her. “A lost man is hopeless. I couldn’t even show you the way so you could keep it—especially at night.”

New fears came surging upon her in all their force and numbers.

“But—what shall I do?”

Van reflected.

“My claim is the nearest camp from here, since the wind took down that shack. And that was abandoned anyway. Can you hike some twenty-odd miles?”

Twenty-odd miles!—on foot! For a second she was almost tempted to disclose herself, and beg him, for something a trifle more sympathetic than what he seemed to be offering another fellow man. But that could not be done. And night was descending rapidly. The twilight was brief—and on the wane.

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"Why—perhaps so," she answered, attempting to smile. "I'll try."

Something in her smile went straight to his heart—he wondered why. To feel as he did towards this unknown man, even the brother of the girl he madly loved—this was certainly absurd. It was not to be explained; it was simply upon him, that was enough. He dismounted.

"Here, get on my horse and ride. I want to walk and stretch my legs."

Beth all but gasped. She!—ride on Suvy!—the horse she had seen so nearly kill this man!—a horse that might perhaps permit no other living thing upon his back! Yet she knew not how to refuse—and to walk very far would be impossible.

"I'm—afraid I'm a very poor horseman," she admitted guardedly. "If your pony should happen——"

Van had thought that Suvy might resent a stranger's liberties. He turned to the broncho peculiarly.

"How about it, boy?" he asked the horse gravely. "I want you to stand for it, savvy?" He looked at the animal inquiringly. How he knew that Suvy consented was only for him to comprehend. He squared about to Beth, who was watching with wonder, and something far softer, in her heart. "Get on," he said. "He was raised as a cradle for babies."

Beth was pale, but she had to be a man. She stepped to the broncho's side and mounted to the saddle. Suvy trembled in every sinew of his being.

Van gave him a pat on the neck again, turned his back and started straight northward. The pony followed at his heels like a dog with a master he loves.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE NIGHT IN THE DESERT

At ten o'clock that night the moon had not yet risen. Its glow was on the eastern sky, however, and at length it appeared, a broken orb with its waning side lopped from its bulk.

Beth was still in the saddle. She was utterly exhausted; she could scarcely remain in her seat. For more than an hour Van had plodded onward without even turning to speak. They had talked intermittently, and he had told her his name. Far off in the dimness of the desert level—the floor of a second mighty valley—a lone coyote began his dismal howling. Beth, on the horse, felt a chill go down her spine. Van seemed not

to hear. The howl was repeated from time to time intermittently, like the wail of a ghost, forever lost to hope.

When the moon at last shone fairly on the broncho and the girl, Van cast a glance at her face. He was startled. The young rider looked so much like Beth—and looked so utterly tired!

Van halted, and so did the pony. The man looked up at his companion.

“You’re in no fit condition to go on,” he said. “What’s the use of our trying to make it? To camp right here is as good as going on all night, which don’t suit my legs worth a cent.”

Beth was wearied almost to collapse. But—to camp out here—all night!—they two! Aside from the terrors that had crept to her soul at sound of the distant coyote, this present aspect of the situation was appalling. Indeed, she began to see that whether they went on or remained, she must spend the night in this man’s company.

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She was almost too tired to care how such a thing would appear. He thought her a man—it had been inescapable—there was nothing she could do to prevent the course of events. And come what might she must presently slip from that saddle, in her weakness, faintness, and hunger, if the penalty were all but life itself.

“I’m—sure I can walk—and let you ride,” she said. “I’d like to go on, but I know I can’t sit here any longer.”

She tried to dismount by herself—as any man must do. In her stiffness she practically fell from the saddle, sinking on her side upon the ground. Only for a second was she prostrate thus at his feet, but her coat fell back from her kahki vest—and a gleam of the moonlight fell upon a bright little object, pinned above her heart.

Van beheld it—and knew what it was—his nugget, washed from the “Laughing Water” claim!

The truth seemed to pour upon him like the waters of an all-engulfing wave—the overwhelming, wonderful truth that was also almost terrible, in what it might mean to them both.

There was one thing only the man could do—ignore this fact that he had discovered and treat her like a man. This he knew instantly. He turned with a man’s indifference to one of his sex and vaulted to Suvy’s back.

“Come on,” he said, “if you’re anxious to get under cover.”

He could trust himself to say no more. He rode ahead.

Beth did her best to follow, and make no complaint. The broncho, however, was a rapid walker. This she had not realized while Van was striding on in the lead. She fell behind repeatedly, and Van was obliged to halt his horse and wait. She began to be lame. It had been a torture to ride; it was agony to walk.

Van now became strangely urgent. He had never loved her more. His love had taken on a sacredness, out here in the night, with Beth so weary and helpless. More than anything he had ever desired in his life he wished to keep her sacred—spared from such a complication as their night out here alone might engender.

Yet he saw the first little limp when she began to falter. He was watching backward constantly, his whole nature eager to protect her—save her from hurt, from this merciless toil across the desert. He longed to take her in his arms and carry her thus, securely. He was torn between the wish to hasten her along, for her own greater ease of mind, and the impulse to halt this hardship. He knew not what to do.

They had gone much less than a mile when he brought up his pony at her side.

“Here, Kent,” he said, “you walk like a bride-groom going up the aisle. You’ll have to get up here and ride.” He dismounted actively.

Beth could have dropped in her tracks for weariness. She was tired to the marrow of her bones.

“I can’t,” she answered. “Perhaps—we’d better camp.” A hot flush rushed upward to her very scalp, fortunately, however, unseen.

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Van regarded her sternly.

"I've changed my mind. I haven't time to camp out here to-night. You'll have to ride."

It seemed to Beth that, had it been to save her life, she could scarcely have climbed to that saddle. To remain on the horse would, she knew, be far beyond her strength. She continued on her feet only by the utmost exertion of her will. Someway since Van had found her in this dreadful place she had lost strength rapidly—perhaps for the leaning on him. With Van's ultimatum now to confront, she could summon no nerve or resolution.

Her face paled. "You'd better go on, if you have to be at your claim," she said, aware that she could offer no argument, no alternative plan to his wish for an onward march. "I'm—not used to riding—much. I can't ride any more tonight."

He knew she told the truth, knew how gladly she would have continued riding, knew what a plight of collapse she must be approaching to submit to a thought of remaining here till morning. He could not go and leave her here. The thought of it aroused him to something like anger. He realized the necessity of assuming a rougher demeanor.

"Damn it, Kent," he said, "you're no less lost than you were before. You know I can't go off and leave you. And I want to get ahead."

She only knew she could not ride, come what might.

"You didn't say so, a little while ago," she ventured, half imploringly. "I'm sorry I'm so nearly dead. If you must go on——"

That cut him to the heart. How could he be a brute?

"I ought to go!" he broke in unguardedly. "I mean I've got to think—I've got work to do in the morning. Don't you suppose you could try?"

The moonlight was full on his face. All the laughter she knew so well had disappeared from his eyes. In its place she saw such a look of yearning and worry—such a tenderness of love as no woman ever yet saw and failed to comprehend. She divined in that second that he knew who she was—she felt it, through all her sense of intuition and the fiber of her soul. She understood his insistence on the march, the saving march, straight onward without a halt. She loved him for it. She had loved him with wild intensity, confessed at last to herself, ever since the moment he had appeared in the desert to save her.

If a certain reckless abandon to this love rocked her splendid self-control, it was only because she was so utterly exhausted. Her judgment was sound, unshaken. Nevertheless, despite judgment and all—to go on was out of the question. God had

flung them out here together, she thought, for better or for worse. That Van would be the fine chivalrous gentleman she had felt him to be at the very first moment of their accidental acquaintance, she felt absolutely assured. She accepted a certain inevitable fatality in the situation—perhaps the more readily now that she knew he knew, for she seemed so much more secure.

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His question remained unanswered while she thought of a thousand things. Could she try to go on?

She shook her head. "What's the use of my riding—perhaps another mile? You might go on and send a man to guide me in the morning."

What an effort it cost her to make such a harsh suggestion not even Van could know. A terrible fear possessed her that he might really act upon her word. To have him stay was bad enough, but to have him go would be terrible.

"Hell!" he said, keeping up his acting. "You talk like a woman. Haven't I wasted time enough already without sending someone out here to-morrow morning? What makes you think you're worth it?" He turned his back upon her, hung the stirrup of the saddle on the horn, and began to loosen the cinch.

Like the woman that she was, she enjoyed his roughness, his impudence, and candor. It meant so much, in such a time as this. After a moment she asked him:

"What do you mean to do?"

He hauled off the saddle and dropped it to the ground.

"Make up the berths," he answered. "Here's your bedding." He tossed the blanket down at her feet. It was warm and moist from Suvy's body. He then uncoiled his long lasso, secured an end around the pony's neck, and bade him walk away and roll.

The broncho obeyed willingly, as if he understood. Van took up the saddle, carried it off a bit, and dropped it as before.

Beth still remained there, with the blanket at her feet.

Van addressed her. "Got any matches?"

"No," she said. "I'm afraid——"

"Neither have I," he interrupted. "No fire in the dressing-room. Good-night. No need to set the alarm clock. I'll wake you bright and early." Once more he took up his saddle and started off in the ankle-high brush of the plain.

Beth watched him with many misgivings at her heart.

"Where—where are you going?" she called.

"To bed," he called in response. "Want room to kick around, if I get restless."

She understood—but it was hard to bear, to be left so alone as this, in such a place. He went needlessly far, she was sure.

Grateful to him, but alarmed, made weaker again by having thus to make her couch so far from any protection, she continued to stand there, watching him depart. He stooped at last, and his pony halted near him, like a faithful being who must needs keep him always in sight. Even the pony would have been some company for Beth, but when Van stretched himself down upon the earth, with the saddle for a pillow, she felt horribly alone.

There was nothing to do but to make the best of what the fates allowed. She curled herself down on the chilly sand with the blanket tucked fairly well around her. But she did not sleep. She was far too tired and alarmed.

Half an hour later three coyotes began a fearsome serenade. Beth sat up abruptly, as terrified as if she had been but a child. She endured it for nearly five minutes, hearing it come closer all the while. Then she could bear it no more. She rose to her feet, caught up her blanket, and almost ran towards the pony. More softly then she approached the place where Van lay full length upon the ground. She beheld him in the moonlight, apparently sound asleep.

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As closely as she dared she crept, and once more made her bed upon the sand. There, in a child-like sense of security, with her fearless protector near, she listened in a hazy way to the prowling beasts, now cruising away to the south, and so profoundly slept.

Van had heard her come. Into his heart snuggled such a warmth and holy joy as few men are given to feel. He, too, went to sleep, thinking of his nugget on her breast.

CHAPTER XXVII

TALL STORIES

Daylight had barely broadened into morning when Van was astir from his bed. The air was chill and wonderfully clean. Above the eastern run of hills the sun was ready to appear.

Beth still lay deep in slumber. She had curled up like a child in her meager covering. Van watched her from his distance. A little shiver passed through her form, from time to time. Her hat was still in place, but how girlish, how sweet, how helpless was her face—the little he could see! How he wished he might permit her to sleep it out as nature demanded. For her own sake, not for his, he must hasten her onward to Goldite, by way of the “Laughing Water” claim.

He walked off eastward where a natural furrow made a deep depression in the valley. His pony followed, the lasso dragging in the sand. Once over at the furrow edge, the man took out his pistol and fired it off in the air.

Beth was duly aroused. Van saw her leap to her feet, then he disappeared in the hollow, with his broncho at his heels.

The girl was, if possible, stiffer than before. But she was much refreshed. For a moment she feared Van was deserting, till she noted his saddle, near at hand. Then he presently emerged upon the level of the plain and returned to the site of their camp.

“First call for breakfast in the dining-car,” he said. “We can make it by half-past eight.”

“If only we could have a cup of good hot coffee first, before we start,” said Beth, and she smiled at the vainness of the thought.

“We won’t get good coffee at the claim,” Van assured her dryly. “But near-coffee would lure me out of this.”

He was rapidly adjusting the blanket and saddle on his horse.

"You'll have to ride or we can't make speed," he added. "As a walker you're sure the limited."

She appreciated thoroughly the delicacy with which he meant to continue the fiction of her sex. But he certainly was frank.

"Thank you," she answered amusedly. "I'd do better, perhaps, if I weren't so overburdened with flattery."

"You'll have to do better, anyhow," he observed, concluding preparations with Suvy. "There you are. Get on. Father Time with hobbles on could beat us getting a move."

He started off, leaving her to mount by herself. She managed the matter somewhat stiffly, suppressing a groan at the effort, and then for an hour she was gently pummeled into limberness as the pony followed Van.

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They came at the end of that time to one of the upper reaches of that same river she had forded the previous day. To all appearances the wide shallow bed was a counterpart of the one over which her horse had waded. But the trail turned sharply down the stream, and followed along its bank.

They had halted for the pony to drink. Van also refreshed himself and Beth dismounted to lie flat down and quench her long, trying thirst.

"Right across there, high up in the hills, is the 'Laughing Water' claim," said Van, pointing north-eastward towards the mountains. "Only three miles away, if we could fly, but six as we have to go around."

"And why do we have to go around?" Beth inquired. "Aren't we going to cross the river here?"

"Looks like a river, I admit," he said, eying the placid stream. "That's a graveyard there—quicksand all the way across."

Beth's heart felt a shock at the thought of what could occur to a traveler here, unacquainted with the treacherous waters.

"Good gracious!" she said. She added generously: "Couldn't I walk a little now, and—share the horse?"

"When you walk it gets on Suvy's nerves to try to keep step," he answered. "Fall in."

They went two miles down the river, then, across on a rock-and-gravel bottom, at a ford directly opposite a jagged rift in the mountains. This chasm, which was short and steep, they traversed perspiringly. The sun was getting warm. Beyond them then the way was all a rough, hard climb, over ridges, down through canyons, around huge dykes of rock and past innumerable foldings of the range. How Van knew the way was more than Beth could understand. She was already growing wearied anew, since the night had afforded her very little rest, and she had not eaten for nearly a day.

Van knew she was in no condition for the ride. He was watching her constantly, rejoicing in her spirit, but aching for her aches. He set a faster pace for the broncho to follow, to end the climb as soon as possible.

At length, below a rounded ridge, where stunted evergreens made a welcome bit of greenery, he came to a halt.

"We're almost there," he said. "You'll have to remain at the claim till somewhere near noon, then I'll show you the way down to Goldite."

"Till noon?" She looked at him steadily, a light of worry in her eyes as she thought of arriving so late at Mrs. Dick's, with what consequences—the Lord alone knew.

"I can't get away much earlier," he said, and to this, by way of acting his part, he added: "Do you want to wear me out?"

She knew what he meant. He would wait till noon to give her time to rest. She would need all the rest he could make possible. And then he would only "show her the way to Goldite." He would not ride with her to town. She might yet escape the compromising plight into which she had been thrust. His thoughtfulness, it seemed, could have no end.

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"Very well," she murmured. "I'm sorry to have made you all this trouble." She was not—someways; she was lawlessly, inordinately glad.

The "trouble" for Van had been the most precious experience in all his life.

"It has been one wild spasm of delight," he said in his dryest manner of sarcasm. "But between us, Kent, I'm glad it's no continuous performance."

He went over the ridge, she following. A moment later they were looking down upon the "Laughing Water" claim from that self-same eminence from which Searle Bostwick had seen it when he rode one day from the Indian reservation.

"This," said Van, "is home."

"Oh," said the girl, and tears sprang into her eyes.

And a very home, indeed, it presently seemed, when they came to the shack, where Gettysburg, Napoleon, old Dave, and even Algy, the Chinese cook, came forth to give them cordial welcome.

Beth was introduced to all as Glenmore Kent—and passed inspection.

"Brother of Miss Beth Kent," said Van, "who honored us once with a visit to the Monte Cristo fiasco. He's been lost on the desert and he's too done up to talk, so I want him to be fed and entertained. And of the two requirements, the feed's more important than the vaudeville show, unless your stunts can put a man to sleep."

Algy and Gettysburg got the impromptu breakfast together. The placer sluices outside were neglected. Nobody wished to shovel sand for gold when marvelous tales might be exchanged concerning the wind storm that had raged across the hills the day before.

Indeed, as Van and Beth sat together at the board, regaling themselves like the two famished beings they were, their three entertainers proceeded to liberate some of the tallest stories concerning storms that mortal ever heard.

Napoleon and Gettysburg became the hottest of rivals in an effort to deliver something good. Gettysburg furnished a tale of a breeze in the unpeopled wilds of Nebraska where two men's farms, fully twenty miles apart, had undergone an astounding experience whereby a complete exchange of their houses, barns, and sheds had been effected by a cyclone, without the slightest important damage to the structures.

When this was concluded, Napoleon looked pained. "I think you lie, Gett—metaphorical speakin'!" he hastened to add. "But shiver my bowsprit if I didn't see a ship, once, ten days overdue, jest snatched up and blowed into port two days ahead of time, and never

touched nothing all the way, I remember the year 'cause that was the winter ma had twins and pa had guinea pigs.”

“Wal,” drawled Dave, who had all this time maintained a dignified silence, “I’ve saw some wind, in my time, but only one that was really a leetle mite too obstreperous. Yep, that was a pretty good blow—the only wind I ever seen which blew an iron loggin’ chain off the fence, link by link.”

Napoleon paid Dave a compliment. He said:



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"You old son of a gun!"

Van thought the storms had raged sufficiently.

"Is work unpopular, or did the wind blow the water from the creek?"

"I like to work," admitted Gettysburg, "but it's fun to watch you epicures eatin'."

Beth felt embarrassed.

"Epicures?" echoed Napoleon. "You don't know what an epicure is? That's a vulgar remark when you don't know no meaning of a word."

"Epicure? Me not know what an epicure is?" replied old Gettysburg aggressively. "You bet I do. An epicure's a feller which chaws his fodder before he swallows it."

Napoleon subsided. Then he arose and sauntered out to work, Dave and Gettysburg following. Van hastily drank his cup of coffee, which, as he had predicted, was not particularly good, and started for the others. He halted in the door.

"Make yourself comfortable, if you can here, Kent," he said. "You had an exhausting experience yesterday. Perhaps you had better lie down."

Beth merely said: "Thank you." But her smile was more radiant than sunshine.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WORK AND SONG

Having presently finished her breakfast, Beth joined the group outside, curious to behold the workings of a placer mine in actual operation.

There was not much to see, but it was picturesque. In their lack of funds the partners had constructed the simplest known device for collecting the gold from the sand. They had built a line of sluices, or troughs of considerable length, propped on stilts, or supports about knee high, along the old bed of the canyon. The sluices were mere square flumes, set with a fairly rapid grade.

Across the bottom of all this flume, at every yard or less of its length, small wooden cleats had been nailed, to form the "riffles." Into the hoses the water from the creek was turned, at the top. The men then shoveled the sand in the running stream and away it went, sluicing along the water-chute, its particles rattling down the wooden stairway noisily. The gold was expected to settled behind the riffles, owing to its weight.

All the flume-way dripped from leakages. The sun beat down upon the place unshaded. Water escaped into all the pits the men were digging as they worked, so that they slopped around in mud above their ankles. Dave wore rubber boots and was apparently protected. As a matter of fact the boots promptly filled with water. Napoleon and Gettysburg made no effort to remain dry shod, but puddled all day with soused footgear.

Van rode off to the “reservation town,” a mile below the hill, to bargain for a tent reported there for sale. Sleeping quarters here on the claim were far too crowded. Until lumber for a cabin could be purchased they must make what shifts they might.

It had taken but the briefest time for the miners to go at their work. Beth stood near, watching the process with the keenest interest. It seemed to her a back-breaking, strenuous labor. These sturdy old fellows, grown gray and stooped with toil—grown also expectant of hardship, ill-luck, and privations—were pathetic figures, despite their ways of cheer.

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That Van had attached them to himself in a largeness of heart by no means warranted by their worth was a conviction at which anyone must promptly arrive. They were lovable old scamps, faithful, honest, and loyal to the man they loved—but that was all that could be stated. Perhaps it was enough. As partners with whom to share both life and fortune they might have seemed impossible to many discerning men.

Beth sat down on a rock, near Gettysburg. Someway she, too, liked the three old chaps of whom work had made three trademarks. Old Gettysburg began to sing. The words of his song, halted by grunts as he shoveled, were, to say the least, unexpected:

The frog he swore he'd have a ride,

(Shovel)

With a rinktum bolly kimo;
Sword and pistols by his side,

(Shovel)

With a rinktum bolly kimo.
For lunch he packed a beetle bug,

(Shovel)

With a rinktum bolly kimo;
Tucked inside his tummy snug,

(Shovel)

With a rinktum bolly kimo.

Kimo, karo, pito, garo,
Kimo, bolly mitty kimo.

(Shovel)

Shing-shang hammyriddle, allibony, ringtang,
Folderolli bolly mitty kimo.

(Three shovelings and some meditation)

The frog he rode a slimy eel,

(Shovel)

With a rinktum bolly kimo.
The sun made his complexion peel,

(Shovel)

With a rinktum bolly kimo.
The frog's legs went to join a fry,

(Shovel)

With a rinktum bolly kimo.
The eel became a juicy pie,

(Shovel)

With a rinktum bolly kimo.

(Chorus)

Napoleon looked up at the end of the song and spat upon his hands.

“Gett,” he said placidly, “I think that’s a lie—metaphorical speakin’. Ain’t mad, are you?”

Gettysburg made no response. He merely shoveled.

One of the sluices, weakened by a leak that had undermined its pinning, fell from place, at the farther end of the line. Old Dave went down to repair it. Napoleon took advantage of his absence to come to Beth, with an air of imparting something confidential.

“Splice my main brace,” said he, with his head on one side, quaintly, “wasn’t that a blasphemous yarn old Dave was givin’ us about the wind blowing that log chain away a link at a time? Old son of a gun!”

Beth was inquisitive.

“Why do you call him a son of a gun?”

Napoleon scratched his head.

“Well, you see, Dave’s mother held up his father with a Colt forty-five and makes him marry her. Then along comes Dave. I reckon that makes him a sure enough son of a gun.”

Beth said: “Oh.” She turned a little red.

“Yep, good old cuss, Dave is, though. No good for a seafearing man, however. He could never learn to swear—he ain’t got no ear for music.”

He returned to his shovel. He and Gettysburg worked in silence for fifteen minutes. Old Dave returned and joined them. Gettysburg tuned up for another of his songs, the burden of which was the tale of a hen-pecked man.

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Once more at its end Napoleon looked up and spat on his hands.

“There ain’t nothing that can keep some women down ’cept a gravestone—and I’ve seen some gravestones which was tilted.”

Despite the interest and amusement she felt in it all, Beth was becoming sleepy as she sat there in the sun. She shook off the spell and arose, approaching closer to the bank and flume where Gettysburg was toiling. He labored on, silently, for several minutes, then paused, straightened up by degrees, as if the folds in his back were stubborn, and looked at their visitor steadily, his glass eye particularly fixed. One of his hands pulled down his jaw, and then it closed up with a thump.

“Guess this kind of a racket is sort of new to you, Mr. Kent,” he ventured. “Ever seen gold washin’ before?”

“No,” Beth confessed, “and I don’t see where the gold is to come from now.”

Gettysburg chuckled. “Holy toads! Miners do a heap of work and never see it neither. Me and Van and Napoleon has went through purg and back, many’s the time, and was lucky to git out with our skeletons, sayin’ nuthin’ about the gold.”

“Oh.” She could think of nothing else to say.

“In fact Van was all that got me out onct—Napoleon, too. We wasn’t worth it, prob’ly. That’s the joke on Van. Since then us three cusses has starved, and froze, and clean roasted, chasin’ gold.”

“Oh.”

“We was lost in the snow, one winter, with nuthin’ to eat but a plug of tobacker, a can of vasolene, and a porous plaster. We lived on that menu fer a week—that and snow-soup. But Van got us out all right—packed Napoleon about five miles on his back. Nap was so thin there wasn’t enough of him to die.” His one good eye became dreamily focused on the past. He smiled. “But someways the desert is worse than the snow. We got ketched three times without no water. Never did know, Nap or me, how Van got our two old dried-up carcasses out the last time, down to Death Valley. He’s a funny cuss, old Van.”

Once more Beth merely answered: “Oh.”

“You bet!” resumed Gettysburg. “He never quits. It ain’t in him. He works his hands off and his soul out of its socket, every time.” He laughed heartily. “Lord! we have done an awful lot of fool work fer nuthin’! We’ve tackled tunnels and shafts, and several games like this, and pretty near died a dozen different styles—all uneasy kinds of dyin’—and we’ve lived when it was a darn sight uneasier than croakin’, and kept on tryin’ out new

diggin's, and kept on bein' busted all the time. 'Nuff to make a lemon laugh, the fun we've had. But now, by Jupe! we've struck it at last—and it ain't a-goin' to git away!"

"Oh, I'm glad—I'm glad!" said Beth, winking back a bit of suspicious moisture that came unbidden in her eyes as she looked on this weather-beaten, hardship-beaten old figure, still sturdily ready for the fates. "I'm sure you all deserve it! I'm sure of that!"

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“Wal, that’s a question fer God Almighty,” Gettysburg replied. “But there’s the gold, the good yellow gold! And I’m awful glad fer Van!”

Into the water he dipped his crooked old fingers, and scratching down behind a riffle he fetched up a small amount of gold, doubly bright with the water and the sunlight upon it.

“Gold—and we git it easy,” he added, repeating: “I’m awful glad fer Van. You ought to see him shovel!” He dropped the gold back into the water carelessly. “It ain’t a-goin’ to do us old jack-legged cusses much good, at our age, but I would like to go to San Francisco this summer once, and shoot the chutes!”

CHAPTER XXIX

SUSPICIOUS ANSWERS

Beth and Van rode away from the claim just after lunch; she on a borrowed horse. The girl had not slept, but she had rested well and was far more fit for the journey back to town than either she or Van had expected.

He went with her part way only—far enough to put her safely on a trail from which she could not wander. They talked but little as they rode—perhaps because they had so much to say that could not be approached. Never for a moment did Van relax his vigilance upon himself, or treat her otherwise than as a man for whom he had conceived a natural liking.

When they came to the place of parting he pulled up his broncho and faced about in the trail.

“Well, Kent,” he said, “so long. You’ll have no trouble now.” He held forth his hand.

Beth gave him hers—and all her heart. Nevertheless, his clasp was as brief as he would give to one of his sex.

“So long,” she answered. “Good luck. I am under many obligations.”

“They won’t make you very round shouldered,” he said. “See you again.”

That was their parting. He rode back at once—and Beth continued on her way. She turned three times in her saddle to watch him as he went, but she did not catch him glancing back.

About sundown she rode into Goldite, went at once to Mrs. Dick’s, and tied her horse to a post. Mrs. Dick she met in the hall.

“Snakes alive!” exclaimed that lively little person. “If you ain’t back as natural as life!” The garb had not deceived her for a moment. “Where in the world have you been, in such a rig?”

Beth’s answer was ready.

“I went to see my brother, and had to spend the night on the desert.”

Mrs. Dick stared at her in wonder. “Talk to me about the Eastern women being mollycuddles! You don’t mean his cabin was blown down by the storm?”

Beth was ill-prepared for this, but she met it.

“I wish you could have seen that roof go by!”

“Are you hungry?” the hostess demanded. “You look all wore out.”

“I am,” Beth admitted. “Has Mr. Bostwick been here in my absence?”

“He ain’t been here in anything—nope.”

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Beth's relief was inexpressible. She was safe, with everything behind her! No one knew, or would ever need to know, the secret in possession of herself and Van.

"If anyone comes that you can send, will you kindly have my horse taken over to the stable?" she said. "I must go upstairs and rest."

"Here's Billy Stitts a-comin' now," replied the housewife, moving towards the door. "He's been worried to death about you bein' gone!"

Beth ran at once for the stairs, and later, from the window, saw the faithful old Billy leading her pony away. She closed her door, darkened the light, and soon clambered wearily into bed, where she dropped off to sleep like a child, lost to the world through the dinner hour and till something like three in the morning. She awaked then for a moment, long enough to think of Van, then sighed in absolute comfort and turned to sleep again.

It was nine o'clock in the morning when at last she appeared on the scene.

"Land snakes!" said Mrs. Dick, who had heard her coming down. "Ain't you the sleeper! Well, I've kept your breakfast, but I couldn't keep last night's supper. Your friend, Mr. Bostwick, was here about eight, but I told him he'd have to wait if it took you a week to come to."

"You didn't tell him I'd been away, I hope," said Beth, suddenly alarmed at the thought of Searle's presence in the town. "I'd rather no one knew but you."

"Lord! I wouldn't tell him if a rat was dead in his pocket!" Mrs. Dick expostulated. "I can't abide the man, and you might as well know it, even if it does hurt your feelings."

Beth sat down to her breakfast. "You're as good as you can be."

"Well, the breakfast ain't—'taint fresh," said Mrs. Dick. "But I'll see you git a decent lunch."

She bustled off into the kitchen. Beth had barely finished eating when Bostwick again appeared.

The man was tanned from his trip in the desert. He seemed alert, excited, keen over prospects rapidly coming to a head.

"Well, well, Beth," he said as he came inside the dining-room, "I'm back, you see, but I've certainly had a time of it! The car broke down, and Glen had left Starlight when at last I arrived, and I hunted for him all through the mountains and only found him four days ago, and we've been going ever since. I couldn't write, but I did feel cut up, I assure you, about leaving you here alone for so long a time."

He advanced as if to kiss her, but Beth avoided his caress. She was calm and possessed. She meant to ascertain just how far the man was trying to deceive her.

"Won't you sit down, and tell me all about it," she said. "You saw Glen four days ago?" She resumed her place in her chair.

"Three or four days ago—I'm mixed in my dates," he said, as he also took a seat. "He's looking fine, and sent his love, of course."

That the man was lying, in every particular, she began to feel convinced.

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"You left him well? He was feeling strong and well?"

"Never better," he assured her. "You can see what this wonderful sunlight does, even to me."

"Yes, I see. And you left Starlight yesterday?"

"Yesterday afternoon. I had trouble running back. Otherwise we'd have been here in the evening."

She glanced at him quickly. "We? Glen didn't come along? He isn't here?"

"Oh, no, no, certainly not," he hastened to say. "I brought in a man who—who is interested in the purchase we have made."

That served to arouse her sense of wonderment at what he had really been doing with her money. He was attempting to deceive her concerning Glen, and perhaps his entire story was a fabrication.

"Oh," she said. "Then you have purchased the mine—you and Glen?"

"Well—a few minor details remain to be concluded," he said off-handedly. "We are not yet in actual possession of the property. There will be no further hitches, however—and the claim is certainly rich."

For the life of her she could not tell what lay at the bottom of the business. The strange conflicts and discrepancies between Glen's very own letters made the riddle utterly obscure. She felt that Searle was fashioning falsehoods in every direction. That he had not visited Glen at all was her fixed conviction. A sudden distrust, almost a loathing for this heavy-browed man, was settling down upon her, inescapably. Someway, somehow she must know about Glen for herself. Her own attempted trip to Starlight had discouraged all thought of further adventure, and no reliance whatsoever could be placed on Searle's reports. Perhaps the reputed mining property was likewise a myth—or if such a property existed, Glen might never have heard of it at all. But Glen's letter—she was always forgetting that letter—the one he had written to Searle.

She said: "Where is this mine that Glen has found?"

He colored slightly. "We have all agreed not to talk too much about it yet. It's not very far from here—I can tell you that. Precautions are necessary where a hundred men follow every prospector about, night and day, if he happens to have found a bit of valuable ore. A thousand men would be after this property if they knew the way to secure it."

Perhaps, after all, Glen, had purposely concealed this matter from herself. Bostwick sounded plausible. Her mind reverted to her brother's illness, for Glen to her was of far more importance than all the mines in Nevada.

"I am glad to hear that Glen is *well*," she said, determined on another tack. "He hasn't answered my letter."

Once more Bostwick colored, beneath his tan and the gun-metal tint of his jaw.

"I suppose he's been too busy," he answered. "Have you written again?"

"Not yet," she answered honestly. "I wasn't sure of his whereabouts. You are sure he's in Starlight now?"

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"Yes—but you needn't write," he hastened to say. "He said he might come, perhaps tomorrow." He rose from his chair. "I've got to hurry off, little girl. These negotiations cannot wait. I'll run in when I can—this afternoon at the latest. I'm glad to see you looking so well." He approached her with lover-like intent. "My heart has been empty and forlorn, away from you, Beth. Surely you have a little—a little something for me, pet? You know how starved——"

"Oh—Mrs. Dick is coming!" she interrupted desperately. "You must have a great deal to do."

Mrs. Dick was making a large and lively noise in the kitchen.

Bostwick listened for a second, his deep-set eyes keenly fixed on the girl, like very orbs of suspicion and jealousy. He lowered his voice.

"Has that ruffian, Van Buren, been here recently?"

She raised her brows in well-feigned astonishment,

"I haven't heard of any ruffian being in town."

Bostwick studied her face for a moment in silence.

"I'll be around this afternoon," he repeated. "Good-by."

He departed hurriedly, glancing at his watch as he went.

Not a block from the house he met old Billy Stitts, who, though quite unknown to the New York man, knew Bostwick in a way of his own.

"Morning, Uncle.—Howdy?" he said, blocking Bostwick's path. "Back, I see. Welcome home. I guess you don't know me as well as I know you. My name is Stitts—Billy Stitts—and I'm gittin' on fine with your niece. I'm the one which runs her errands and gits the inside track."

Bostwick, staring at Billy ominously, and about to sweep him aside as a bit of old rubbish, too familiar and impudent for tolerance, paused abruptly in his impulse, at a hint which Billy had supplied.

"Oh," he said. "How are you? So you are the friend who runs Miss Kent's errands? You must be the one she asked me to befriend."

"Did she?" said old Billy, inordinately pleased. "What did I tell you about the inside track?"

"I'm glad if you have been of use," Bostwick told him insidiously. "You didn't say what your services have been. Just a few little errands, I suppose?"

"Never you mind," said Billy, with a profoundly impressive wink. "That's between her and me. That ain't even fer you, Uncle Bostwick," and he winked again.

"Of course, of course," agreed Bostwick, half consumed with rage at the old fellow's abominable manners and familiarity. "I'll keep you in mind and add some reward of my own on the next occasion."

He bowed and hastened on his way, boiling with curiosity to know what it was that Beth had been doing to require this old tattler's services. He meant to ascertain. His suspicions went at once to Van, at thought of whom he closed down his jaw like a vise.

Filled with a turmoil of thoughts that seethed in his brain, like a brew in a witch's cauldron—some of them dark and some golden bright, and some of them red with lust for many things—he proceeded down street to McCoppet's place, to find himself locked out of the private den, where the gambler was closeted with Lawrence.



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CHAPTER XXX

BETH'S ONE EXPEDIENT

Bostwick had told Beth partial truths. His journey had been hard. His car had been twice disabled on the desert; Lawrence had been difficult to find; delays had confronted him at every turn, and not until midnight of the day before this had he come with his quarry to Goldite—barely in time to save the situation, with the reservation opening less than forty-eight hours away.

He had not seen Glen, nor approached the town of Starlight closer than fifteen miles. He had not yet expended Beth's money, which only that morning had been practically placed at McCoppet's disposal. But having finally landed the Government surveyor in camp, he had achieved the first desirable end in the game they were playing, and matters were moving at last with a speed to suit the most exacting.

During the interim between Searle's departure and return affairs had been a trifle complicated in another direction—affairs that lay between the gambler and his friend, the lumberman, big Trimmer.

Trimmer had been paid one thousand dollars only of the sum agreed upon when he gave the name of Culver to the half-breed Indian, Cayuse. He had since spent his money, demanded the balance due, and threatened McCoppet with exposure, only to be met with a counter threat of prison for life as the half-breed's accomplice in the crime. McCoppet meant to pay a portion of the creature's price, but intended to get it from Bostwick. Indeed, to-day he had the money, but was far too much engrossed with Lawrence to give the lumberman a thought.

Trimmer, waxing greedy through the ease with which he had blackmailed McCoppet, had developed a cunning of his own. Convinced that the gambler was accustomed to incubating plans in his private office, the lumberman made shift to excavate a hole beneath the floor of that particular den of privacy, and, after having spent half a night in vain, in this place of concealment, was at last being duly rewarded as he listened to McCoppet and Lawrence.

With his ear to a knot-hole he gathered in everything essential to a knowledge of the plot. He became aware that Lawrence "fell" for twenty thousand dollars; he overheard the details of the "survey" about to be made; but to save his very life he could not have fathomed the means that were about to be employed to "jump" the mining property belonging to Van Buren and his partners.

Equipped with this latest means of squeezing McCoppet, the creature emerged from his hole in time to meet the gambler at the bar, during a moment of Bostwick's temporary absence.

“Opal,” he said significantly, “I need to see you fer a minute. It won’t be no healthier to refuse me now than it was the first time I come.”

The gambler looked at him coldly. “I haven’t got time to talk now, Larry, but some of your money is at your order any time you want it, in gold, or poker chips, or gin.”

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Trimmer was placated. "All right," he said, and cunningly resolved, upon the spot, to keep his latest secret on the ice.

Lawrence had already disappeared to hasten arrangements for getting out upon his work.

Bostwick had waited half an hour in the utmost impatience. With a hundred things to increase his restlessness of mind and body, he had finally gone to the postoffice and there discovered a letter from Glenmore Kent.

It was short, and now no longer fresh. It had been composed just after the young man's accident, and after relating how he had received a not inconsiderable injury, requested Searle to come to Starlight at once, if possible, and not to divulge any needless facts to Beth.

"I'm broke, and this knock puts me down and out," the letter concluded. "Come down, like a good old chap, and cheer me up."

Bostwick destroyed the letter promptly, lest it fall by some accident into other hands than his own. Not without a slight feeling of guilt, the man shut out all thought, for the present, of deserting Goldite and the plot. That Beth would learn nothing from himself as to Glen's condition was a certainty. He was glad of this wisdom in the boy—this show of courage whereby he had wished his sister spared.

But the more he thought upon Beth's attitude towards himself, and the mystifying confessions old Billy Stitts had made, concerning the errands he was running for the girl, the more Bostwick fretted and warmed with exasperation, suspicion, and jealousy. He returned to McCoppet's. The door to the den was still barred. Impatiently he started again for Mrs. Dick's. He was not in the least certain as to what he meant to do or say, but felt obliged to do something.

Meantime, Beth had written to her brother. Bostwick's evasions and lies had aroused more than merely a vague alarm in her breast. She had begun to feel, perhaps partially by intuition, that something was altogether wrong. Searle's anxiety to assure her she need not write to Glen—that he was coming to Goldite—had provided the one required element to excite a new trend in her thought. She knew that Glen would not come soon to town. She knew she must get him word. She had thought of one way only to insure herself and Glen against deceit—ask Van to go in person with her letter, and bring her Glen's reply.

Had she felt the affair to be in the slightest degree unimportant she might have hesitated to think of making this request, but the more she dwelt upon it the more essential it seemed to become. Her brother's very life might be dependent upon this promptness of action. A very large sum of money was certainly involved in some sort of

business of which, she felt, both she and Glen were in ignorance. Bostwick had certainly not seen Glen at all. His deceptions might mean anything!—the gravest of dangers to them all!

It had taken her the briefest time only to resolve upon her course—and then old Billy came upon the scene, as if in answer to a question she had asked—how to get her request and the letter to Glen across the hills to Van, at the “Laughing Water” claim?

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Three letters she wrote, and tore to scraps, before one was finally composed to express all she felt, in the way that she wished it expressed. Old Billy went off to wait and returned there duly, enormously pleased by his commission. He knew the way to the “Laughing Water” claim and could ride the borrowed pony.

As pleased as a dog with a parcel of meat, entrusted to his keeping by a confident master, he finally started for the hay-yard, with two dainty letters in his keeping. One was to Van, with Beth’s request; the other was, of course, to her brother.

Bostwick met the proud old beau at the corner of the street.

“Say, Uncle, what did I tell you,” said Billy at once. “This time it’s the biggest errand yet.”

Bostwick had wondered if he might not catch Mr. Stitts in some such service as he boasted now, and his wit was worthy of his nature.

“Yes,” he said readily, “Miss Kent was saying she thought perhaps she could get you to carry a note to Mr. Van Buren.” It was a hazardous coup but he dared it with the utmost show of pleasure in his smile. For a second, however, as he watched the old man’s face, he feared he had overshot the mark.

Old Billy was pleased and disappointed together. However, his wish to prove his importance greatly outweighed his chagrin that Beth should have taken even “Uncle” Bostwick into her confidence.

“That ain’t all she give me,” he announced, as foolishly as a child. “I’ve got her letter to her brother, over to Starlight, too, and nothin’ couldn’t stop me from takin’ it up to the ‘Laughing Water’ claim. You bet I’ll see Van Buren gits it right into his hand from me!”

If Bostwick had contemplated making an attempt to bribe the old beau into permitting him a glance at the letters, he abandoned the thought with sagacious alacrity. He must think of something safer. A letter to Van Buren and one to Glen was more than he had counted on discovering. It made him decidedly uneasy.

“I’m sure you’ll deliver everything safely,” he said, masking his annoyance with a smile. “Before you go, perhaps, you’d take something to drink.”

The suggestion in his mind was crude, but at least it was something.

“Huh!” said old Billy, “Me!—drink and git a jag when she’s expectin’ me to hike right out of camp? Guess you don’t know me, Uncle, not worth a mice! Didn’t I say nuthin’ couldn’t stop me? And I’m goin’ right now.”

He clapped his bony old hand over his pocket, where the two precious letters reposed, and winking prodigiously at Bostwick, departed forthwith from the scene.

Bostwick could have run him down, beaten him to the ground and snatched the letters from him, but he did not dare. Instead, he merely continued to grin while Billy remained in sight. Then instead of going on to Beth's, he circled a building and returned down street towards McCoppet's.

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CHAPTER XXXI

MCCOPPET BUSIES HIS MIND

Unfortunately for Bostwick he knew no ruffians in the camp—none of the Trimmers who would, perhaps, accept a sum of money to waylay a man, bash him over the head, and filch required letters from his pocket. He was not precisely willing, moreover, to broach such an undertaking to the gambler. This, after all, was his private affair, to be shared with no one he knew.

The man had arrived at the truth concerning the letters with commendable skill in deduction. He had himself destroyed Beth's earlier letter to her brother, for reasons of policy. He had found her conduct cold, if not suspicious, this morning. How far she had been excited to distrust himself or the mails he could not estimate. He was certain, however, she had sent a request to Van Buren to carry a letter to Glen.

Her reasons for taking precautions so extraordinary were undoubtedly significant. He was galled; his anger against Van Buren was consuming. But first and foremost he must block the harm Beth's letter to her brother might accomplish. For two days more young Kent and Beth must remain in ignorance of what was being done through the use of her money—of the fact that no mine of Glen's discovery was the object of the scheme he was working, and that none of his own alleged money was being employed in the game.

He made up his mind to go to Starlight himself—to be on hand when Van Buren should arrive. With Glenmore ill, or injured, in his bed, the case might offer simple handling. Further neglect of Glenmore might, indeed, be fatal, at a juncture so delicate. From every possible viewpoint the thing to do was to intercept Van Buren.

He found McCoppet just returned from launching Lawrence forth upon his work. Three of the gambler's chosen men had accompanied the Government's surveyor. They had taken Bostwick's car. Instructions had been simple enough. Push over the reservation line to cover the "Laughing Water" claim, by night of the following day.

Searle was taken to the private den. McCoppet imparted his information with the utmost brevity.

"Nothing for us to do but to wait till six o'clock, day after to-morrow morning," he concluded, "then play our cards—and play 'em quick."

"You've taken my car?" said Bostwick, whose personal plans were thrown into utter confusion, for the moment. "I wanted that car for my own use. I've got to go to Starlight to-morrow."

“Sit down,” said McCoppet, throwing away his unsmoked cigar and taking another from his pocket. “What’s going on at Starlight?”

Bostwick had no intention of divulging his personal affairs, but there was something in this that trenched upon “company” concerns.

“Van Buren’s going over there, to see young Kent,” he admitted. “I’ve got to see him first.”

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McCoppet looked up at him sharply.

"Young Kent ain't next to anything?" he demanded.

"Not yet."

"Look here," said the gambler, whose wits were inordinately keen, "is anything leaking, Bostwick? What about the girl—the young chump's sister? You're not putting her wise to the layout?"

"Certainly not!" said Bostwick. "She knows nothing. But it wouldn't be safe for this mix-up to occur. At any rate, I propose to be there when Van Buren arrives."

McCoppet arose, plunged his hands in his pockets, and paced up and down reflectively.

"Someways I'm glad Van Buren's going," he said. "I've been trying to figure how I could play the game to have him away when we come to take the trick. He's hostile in a fight. I guess it's all right. Don't need you here. You can copper any possible harm down there at Starlight, and meantime I'll see if there's any known way of delaying Van Buren's return."

"But how am I going to get down there and back?" said Bostwick, intent upon the need for haste. "I can't get around without a car."

"Don't get tropical," said McCoppet calmly. "I can get you a car in fifteen minutes. It ain't as good as yours, but we needed the one that was surest to keep on its legs. If you ain't got anything more on your mind, I want to chase around for a lumberman—a friend of mine—before he gits any drunker."

Bostwick arose.

"Arrange for that car to take me to-night, after dinner. I think that's all."

He repaired to his room to attend to a dozen small affairs, then went once more to Beth's. She was not in the least surprised to hear him say he meant to return to Starlight and to Glen that night, on business of importance to them all, but she did not believe him in the least. He remained in the hope of entrapping her into some sort of self-betrayal as to what she had recently done, but without avail.

The hour that he spent at Mrs. Dick's was dull for them both—dull and distasteful to the girl, growing so rapidly to hate and distrust him, dull and aggravating to Bostwick, with jealousy increasing upon him. His one consolation lay in the fact that in less than two days Van Buren would be no better off than a pauper at best with scarcely a shelter for his head.

One of the interesting and vital chapters in the whole affair was meanwhile in McCoppet's hands and receiving his attention. Trimmer had been captured, far more sober than the gambler could have hoped. The two were in the den once more, the lumberman smoking an excellent cigar as if it had been a stick of candy.

McCoppet came to his subject promptly.

"Look here, Larry," he said, "you know Van Buren when you see him."

Trimmer glanced up sharply, ready in an instant to resent what he felt to partake of the nature of a personal affront.

"Don't git funny, Opal. If ever I fight Van Buren when I'm sober I'll eat him alive. I was drunk when he licked me, and you know it!"

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McCoppet leaned back in his chair and half closed his eyes.

"I didn't know but what you'd like to sober up and lick him."

Trimmer stared, shifted uneasily in his seat, and demanded:

"Where? Where is he at?"

"He's going to Starlight to-morrow—from up by the reservation—from his claim. If he don't git back for a couple of days—I could make it worth your while; and you could cash in for that time he licked you when you wasn't in condition."

Again Trimmer fidgeted. "I guess he licked me fair enough. I admit he's all right in a scrap. I ain't holdin' nuthin' agin him. Goldite's good enough fer me."

McCoppet knew the creature was afraid to meet his man—that Trimmer's attack on Van Buren, once before, had been planned with much deliberation, had amounted to an ambush, in point of fact, resulting in disaster to the bully.

"I counted on you to help me, Larry," he said, drumming on the table with his fingers. "You're the only man of your kind with brains in all the camp."

Trimmer had smoked his cigar to within an inch of his mouth. He extinguished the fire and chewed up the stump voraciously.

"Say!" he suddenly ejaculated, leaping to his feet and coming around the table, "I can fix him all right," and he lowered his voice to a whisper. "Barger would give up a leg to git a show at Van Buren!"

"Barger?" echoed McCoppet. "Matt? But they got him! Got 'em all."

"Got nuthin'," the lumberman ejaculated. "What's the good of all these lyin' papers when I seen Matt myself, readin' the piece about him goin' back to the pen?"

McCoppet rose, went to the window, and returned again.

"Larry, you're all right," he said. "Where's Barger now?"

Trimmer winked. "That's his business, and mine."

"All right—that's all right," agreed the gambler. "Wouldn't he take it as a favor if you passed him some money and the word about Van Buren's hike to Starlight?"

Trimmer got out a new cigar, lit up, and began to smoke as before.

"I was goin' to pass him some of mine," he confessed. "Yours will suit me just as good."

“Five hundred ought to help him some,” said the gambler. “Come out to the bar.”

At dark the lumberman left the camp on foot, heading for the mountains. Bostwick departed in the borrowed car at eight. The whole town was ablaze with light, and tumultuous with sound. Glare and disturbance together, however, only faintly symbolized the excitement and fever in the camp. A thousand men were making final preparations for the rush so soon to come—the mad stampede upon the reservation ground, barely more than a day removed.

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Miners with outfits, gamblers with their paraphernalia, saloon men with case on case of liquors, assayers, lawyers, teamsters, cooks—even a half dozen women—comprised the heterogeneous army making ready for the charge. The streets were filled with horses, men, and mules. The saloons were jammed to suffocation. Musical discord filled the air. Only the land, the silent old hills, the ancient, burned-out furnace of gold, was absolutely calm. Overhead a few clouds blurred the sky. Beyond them the eternal march of the stars proceeded in the majesty of space, with billions of years in which to fulfil the cosmic cycle of existence.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE HARDSHIPS OF THE TRAIL

In the night, far out to the northward, a storm descended like a cataclysm. Torrential rains were poured upon the hills from a cloudburst exceptionally savage. Only the scattered outposts, as it were, of the storm were blown as far as Goldite. A sprinkle of rain that dried at once was the most those mountains received.

Van made an early start from the “Laughing Water” claim, to deliver Beth’s letter in Starlight. Her note to himself he read once more as his pony jogged down the descent.

“Dear Mr. Van: I wonder if I dare to ask a favor—from one who has done so much already? My brother, in Starlight, is ill. He has hurt himself, I do not know how badly. A letter I sent has never been received, and I am worried. The effort I made to see him—well—at least, I’m glad I made the effort. But meantime, what of poor Glen? Some little fear I have may be groundless. I shall therefore keep it to myself—but I have it, perhaps because I am a woman. I must know the truth about my brother—how he is—what has been happening. It is far more important than I dare confess. I have written him a letter and sent it to you in the hope you may not find it impossible to carry it to Glen in person. If I am asking too much, please do not hesitate to say so. I am sure you will be friendly enough for that—to say ‘no’ if need be to another friend—*your* friend, BETH KENT.”

She did not regret that desert experience—that was almost enough for him to know! He had lived in a glow since that wonderful night—and this letter provided another. He rode like a proud young crusader of old, with his head in a region of sunshine and gold, his vision transfixed by a face. Her love had become his holy grail—and for that he would ride to death itself.

His way he shortened, or thought to shorten, by dropping down from the reservation heights to the new-made town a mile below. He came upon the place abruptly, after dipping once into a canyon, and looked with amazement on the place. In the past twelve hours it had doubled in size and increased twenty-fold in its fever. The face of

the desert was literally alive with men and animals. Half of Goldite and practically all of a dozen lesser camps were there. Confusion, discomfort, and distraction seemed hopelessly enthroned. The “rush” was written in men’s faces, in their actions, in their baggage, words, and rising temperature.

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A dozen stalwart stampeders pounced upon Van like wolves. They wanted to know what he thought of the reservation, where to go, whether or not there was any more ground like that of the "Laughing Water" claim, what he had heard from his Indian friends, and what he would take for his placer. The crowd about him rapidly increased. Men in a time of excitement such as this flock as madly as sheep whenever one may lead. Anything is news—any man is of interest who has in his pocket a piece of rock, or has in his eye a wink. No man is willing to be left outside. He must know all there is to be known.

It was utterly useless for Van to protest his ignorance of the reservation ground. He owned a deposit of placer gold. Success had crowned his efforts. It was something to get in touch with success, rub shoulders with a man who had the gold.

His friends were there in the red-faced mob. They said they were his friends, and they doubtless knew. Some were, indeed, old acquaintances whom Van would gladly have assisted towards a needed change of fortune. He was powerless, not only to aid these men, but also to escape. Despite his utmost endeavors they held him there an hour, and to make up the time, he chose the hottest, roughest trail through the range, when at last he was clear of the town.

The climb he made on his pony to slice a few miles from his route was over a mountain and through a gulch that was known as The Devil's Slide. It was gravel that moved underfoot with never-failing treachery, gravel made hot by the rays of the sun, and flinging up a scorching heat while it crawled and blistered underfoot. On midsummer days men had perished here, driven mad by the dancing of the air and the dread of the movement where they trod. The last two miles of this desolate slope Van walked and led his broncho.

He entered "Solid Canyon" finally, and mounting once more let Suvy pick the way between great boulders, where gray rattlesnakes abounded in exceptional numbers. These were the hardships of the ride, all there were that Van felt worth the counting. He had reckoned without that far-off storm, which had raged in the darkness of the night.

He came to the river, the ford between the banks where he and Beth had found a shallow stream. For a moment he stared at it speechlessly. A great, swiftly-moving flood was there, tawny, roiled with the mud torn down and dissolved in the water's violence, and foaming still from a plunge it had taken above.

It was ten to twenty feet deep. This Van realized as he sat there on his sweating horse, measuring up the banks. The depth had encroached upon the slope whereon he was wont to ascend the further side. There was one place only where he felt assured a landing might be achieved.

“Well, Suvy,” he said to the animal presently, “it looks more like a swim than a waltz quadrille, and neither of us built web-footed.”

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Without further ado he placed Beth's letter in his hat, then rode his pony down the bank and into the angry-looking water. Suvy halted a moment uncertainly, then, like his master, determined to proceed.

Five feet out he was swimming, headed instinctively up the stream and buried deep under the surface. Van still remained in the saddle. He was more than waist under, loosely clinging to his seat and giving the pony the reins.

Suvy was powerful, he swam doggedly, but the current was tremendous in its sheer liquid mass and momentum. Van slipped off and swam by the broncho's side. Together the two breasted the surge of the tide, and now made more rapid progress. It required tremendous effort to forge ahead and not be swept headlong to a choppy stretch of rapids, just below.

"Up stream, boy, up stream," said Van, as if to a comrade, for he had noted the one likely place to land, and Suvy was drifting too far downward.

They came in close to the bank, as Van had feared, below the one fair landing. Despite his utmost efforts, to which the pony willingly responded, they could not regain what had been lost. The broncho made a fine but futile attempt to gain a footing and scramble up the almost perpendicular wall of rock and earth by which he was confronted. Time after time he circled completely in the surge, to no avail. He may have become either confused or discouraged, Whichever it was, he turned about, during a moment when Van released the reins, and swam sturdily back whence he come.

Van, in the utmost patience, turned and followed. Suvy awaited his advent on the shore.

"Try to keep a little further up, boy, if you can," said the man, and he mounted and rode as before against the current.

The broncho was eager to obey directions, eager to do the bidding of the man he strangely loved. All of the first hard struggle was repeated—and the current caught them as before. Again, as formerly, Van slipped off and swam by his pony's side. He could not hold his shoulder against the animal, and guide him thus up the stream, but was trailed out lengthwise and flung about in utter helplessness, forming a drag against which the pony's most desperate efforts could not prevail.

They came to the bank precisely as they had before, and once again, perhaps more persistently, Suvy made wild, eager efforts to scramble out where escape was impossible. Again and again he circled, pawed the bank, and turned his eyes appealingly to Van, as if for help or suggestions.

At last he acknowledged defeat, or lost comprehension of the struggle. He swam as on the former trial to the bank on the homeward side.

There was nothing for Van but to follow as before. When he came out, dripping and panting, by the animal, whose sides were fairly heaving as he labored for breath, he was still all cheer and encouragement.

“Suvy,” said he, “a failure is a chap who couldn’t make a fire in hell. We’ve got to cross this river if we have to burn it up.”

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He took the broncho's velvety nose in his hands and gave him a rough little shake. Then he patted him smartly on the neck.

"For a pocket-size river," he said as he looked at the flood, "this is certainly the infant prodigy. Well, let's try it again."

Had the plunge been straight to sudden death that broncho would have risked it unswervingly at the urging of his master. Suvy was somewhat exhausted by the trials already made, in vain. But into the turgid down-sweep he headed with a newly conjured vigor.

Van now waited merely for the pony to get started on his way, when he lifted away from the saddle, with the water's aid, and clung snugly up to the stirrup. He swam with one hand only. To keep himself afloat and offer no resistance to the broncho was the most that he could do, and the best.

The struggle was tremendous. Suvy had headed more obliquely than before against the current, and having encountered a greater resistance, with his strength somewhat sapped, was toiling like an engine.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, he forged his way against the liquid wall that split upon him. Van felt a great final quiver of muscular energy shake the living dynamic by his side, as Suvy poured all his fine young might into one supreme effort at the end. Then he came to the landing, got all his feet upon the slope, and up they heaved in triumph!

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE CLOUDS OF TROUBLE GATHER

By the route beyond the river that Van was obliged to choose, the distance from his claim to Starlight was more than forty miles. His pony had no shoes, and having never been ridden far, was a trifle soft for a trip involving difficulties such as this mountain work abundantly afforded. When they came to Phonolite Pass, the last of the cut-offs on the trail, Van rode no more than a hundred yards into its shadows before he feared he must turn.

Phonolite is broken shale, a thin, sharp rock that gives forth a pleasant, metallic sound when struck, like shattered crockery. For a mile this deposit lay along the trail across the width of the pass. For the bare-footed pony there was cruelty in every step. The barrier of rock was far more formidable than the river in its flood.

Van was not to be halted in his object. He had a letter to deliver; he meant to take it through, though doom itself should yawn across his path. The hour was late; the sun was rapidly sinking. Van pulled up his broncho and debated.

Absolute silence reigned in the world of mountains. But if the place seemed desolate, it likewise seemed secure. Nevertheless, death lurked in the trail ahead. Barger was there. He was lying in the rocks, concealed where the chasm was narrow. He had ridden four hours—on the mare Beth had lost—to arrive ahead of Van Buren. The muzzle of a long black revolver that he held in hand rested upon a shattered boulder. His narrow eyes lay level with a rift in the group of rocks that hid him completely from view. Van was in sight, and the convict's breath came quickly as he waited.

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Van dismounted from his pony's back and picked up one of his hoofs.

"Worn down pretty flat," he told the animal. "Perhaps if I walk we can make it." He started on foot up the tinkling way, watching the broncho with solicitude.

Suvy followed obediently, but the pointed rocks played havoc with his feet. He lurched, in attempting to right his foot on one that turned, and the long lasso, secured to the saddle, flopped out, fell back, and made him jump. Van halted as before. The convict was barely fifty yards away. His pistol was leveled, but he waited for a deadlier aim, a shorter shot.

"Nope! We'll have to climb the hill," Van decided reluctantly. "You're a friend of mine, Suvy, and even if you weren't, you'd have to last to get back." He turned his back on death, unwittingly, to spare the horse he loved.

Delayed no less than an hour by this enforced retreat, he patiently led the broncho back to the opening of the pass, and, still on foot, led the steep way up over the mountain.

Barger rose up and cursed himself for not having risked a shot. He dared not attempt a dash upon his man; he could not know where Van might again be intercepted; he was helpless, baffled, enraged. Half starved, keenly alive only in his instinct to accomplish his revenge, the creature was more like a hunted, retaliating animal than like a man. He had sworn to even the score with Van Buren; he was not to be deflected from his course. But to get his man here was no longer possible. The horse Beth had lost, now in the convict's possession, was all but famished for water, not to mention food. There was nothing to choose but retreat towards the river, to the northward, where the mountains might yet afford an ambush as Van was returning home.

Far away in the mountains, at the "Laughing Water" claim, while the sun was setting on a scene of labors, all but concluded for the day, the group of surveyors, with Lawrence in charge, appeared along the southern ridge.

Gettysburg, Napoleon, and Dave were still in the water by the sluices. They were grimed, soiled with perspiration, wearied by the long, hard day of toil. Shovel in hand old Gettysburg discovered the men with an instrument who trekked along the outside edge of the claim. Chain-man, rod-man, and Lawrence with his shining theodolite, set on its three slender legs, they were silhouetted sharply against the evening sky. Their movements and their presence here were beyond the partners' comprehension. It was Gettysburg who climbed up the slope, and anchored himself in their path.

"What you doin'?" he said to the rod-man presently, when that tired individual approached and continued on his way.

“What does it look like—playing checkers?” said the man. “Can’t the Government do nuthin’—run no county line ner nuthin’ without everybody sittin’ up to notice?”

No less than fifty men they had met that day had questioned what the Government was doing. The “county line” suggestion had been the only hint vouchsafed—and that had sufficed to allay the keenest suspicion.

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"That all?" said Gettysburg, and, watching as he went, he slowly returned to his partners. His explanation was ample. The surveyors proceeded on.

Meantime, in absolute ignorance of all that was happening on his property, Van continued towards Starlight unmolested. An hour after sundown he rode to the camp, inquired his way to the rough-board shack, where Kent was lying ill, and was met at the door by a stranger, whom Glen had employed as cook and "general nurse."

Bostwick was there. He remained unseen. His instructions were imperative—and the "nurse" had no choice but to obey.

"Of course, Kent's here," he admitted, in response to Van's first question. "He can't see no one, neither—no matter who it is."

"I've brought a letter from his sister," Van explained. "He's got to have it, and have it now. If he wishes to send any answer back, I'm here to take it."

The "nurse" looked him over.

"The orders from the doctor is no visitors!" he said. "And that goes. If you want to leave the letter, why you kin."

Van produced the letter.

"If the man's as ill as that, I have no desire to butt in for an interview," he said. "Oblige me by ascertaining at your earliest convenience whether or not I may be of service to Mr. Kent in returning his reply."

The man looked bewildered. He received the letter, somewhat dubiously, and disappeared. Van waited. The reception was not precisely what he might have expected, but, for the matter of that, neither had the trip been altogether what he might have chosen.

It was fully twenty minutes before the nurse reappeared.

"He was just woke up enough to say thank you and wants to know if you'll oblige him with the favor of takin' his hand-write back to his sister in the mornin'?"

Van looked him over steadily. After all, the man within might be utterly sick and weak. His request was natural. And the service was for Beth.

"Certainly," he said. "I'll be here at seven in the morning."

Starlight was nearly deserted. Gratified to discover sufficient food and bedding for himself and his pony, Van made no complaint.

At six in the morning he was rousing up the blacksmith, fortunately not yet gone to join the reservation rush. Suvy was shod, and at seven o'clock he and Van were again at Glenmore's cabin.

His man was in waiting. In his hand he held an envelope, unsealed.

"Mr. Kent's asleep, but here's his hand-write to his sister," he said. "He wants you to read it out before you hike."

Van received the envelope, glanced at the man inquiringly, and removed a single sheet of paper. It was not a note from Glen; it appeared to be the final page of Beth's own letter to her brother. Van knew the strong, large chirography. His eye ran swiftly over all the lines.

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“—so I felt I ought to know about things, and let you know of what is going on. There is more that I cannot tell you. I wrote you much in my former letter—much, I mean, about the man who will carry this letter, so unsuspectingly—the man I shall yet repay if it lies within my power. For the things he has done—and for what he is—for what he represents—this is the man I hate more than anything or anyone else in the world. You would understand me if you knew it all—all! Let him carry some word from you to Your loving sister, BETH.”

Van had read and comprehended the full significance of the lines before he realized some error had been made—that this piece of Beth’s letter had been placed by mistake in the envelope for him to take, instead of the letter Glen had written.

He did not know and could not know that Bostwick, within, by the sick man’s side, had kept Glen stupid and hazy with drugs, that the one word “hate” had been “love” on the sheet he held in his hand till altered by the man from New York, or that something far different from an utterly despicable treachery towards himself had been planned in Beth’s warm, happy heart.

The thing, in its enormity, struck him a blow that made him reel, for a moment, till he could grasp at his self-control. He had made no sign, and he made none now as he folded the sheet in its creases.

“I’m afraid you made some mistake,” he said. “This is not the note from Mr. Kent. Perhaps you will bring me the other.”

“What?” said the man, unaware of the fact that Bostwick had purposely arranged this scheme for putting the altered sheet in Van Buren’s hands.

“What’s that?” He glanced at the sheet in genuine surprise. “Keerect,” he said. “I’ll go and git you the letter.”

Van mounted his horse. His face had taken on a chiseled appearance, as if it had been cut in stone. He had ridden here through desert heat and flood, for this—to fetch such a letter as this, to a man he had never seen nor cared to see, and whose answer he had promised to return.

He made no effort to understand it—why she should send him when the regular mail would have answered every purpose. The vague, dark hints contained in her letter—hints at things going on—things she could not tell—held little to arouse his interest. A stabbed man would have taken more interest in the name of the maker of the weapon, stamped on the dagger’s blade, than did Van in the detail of affairs between Glenmore Kent and his sister. Beth had done this thing, and he had fondly believed her love was welded to his own. She had meant it, then, when she cried in her passion that she hated him for what he had done. Her anger that night upon the hill by Mrs. Dick’s had

not been jealousy of Queenie, but rage against himself. She was doubtless in love with Bostwick after all—and would share this joke with her lover.

He shrugged his shoulders. Luck had never been his friend. By what right had he recently begun to expect her smile? And why had he continued, for years, to believe in man or in Fate? All the madness of joy he had felt for days, concerning Beth and the “Laughing Water” claim, departed as if through a sieve. He cared for nothing, the claim, the world, or his life. As for Beth—what was the use of wishing to understand?

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The “nurse” came out at the door again, this time with a note which Bostwick had written, with a few suggestions from Glen, in an unsealed cover as before.

“I told young Kent you didn’t take no time to read the other,” he said, holding up the epistle. “If you want to read this——”

“Thank you,” Van interrupted, taking the letter and thrusting it at once in his pocket. “Thank Mr. Kent for his courtesies, in my behalf.” He turned and rode away.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE TAKING OF THE CLAIM

Before six o’clock that morning, while Van was arousing the blacksmith, the reservation madness broke its bounds. Twenty-five hundred gold-blinded men made the rush for coveted grounds.

The night had been one long revel of drinking, gambling, and excitement. No one had slept in the reservation town—for no one had dared. Bawling, singing, and shouting, the jollier element had shamed the coyotes from the land. Half a thousand camp fires had flared all night upon the plain. The desert had developed an oasis of flowing liquors, glaring lights, and turmoil of life, lust, and laughter. Good nature and bitter antagonism, often hand in hand, had watched the night hours pale.

By daylight the “dead line” of the reservation boundary—the old, accepted line that all had acknowledged—resembled a thin, dark battle formation, ready for the charge. It was a heterogeneous array, where every unit, instead of being one of an army mobilized against a common foe, was the enemy of all the others, lined up beside him. There were men on foot, men on horses, mules, and burros, men in wagons, buckboards, and buggies, and men in automobiles.

At half-past five the pressure of greed became too great to bear. A few unruly stragglers, far down the line, no longer to be held in check, bent portions of the long formation inward as they started out across the land. The human stampede began almost upon the instant. Keepers on their horses, riding up and down, were swept away like chips before a flood. Scattering wildly over hill and plain, through gulches, swales, and canyons, the mad troop entered on the unknown field, racing as if for their lives.

Gettysburg, Napoleon, and Dave had watched for an hour the human hedge below the “Laughing Water” claim. They, too, had been up since daylight, intent upon seeing the fun. They had eaten their breakfast at half-past four. At a quarter of six they returned, to their shack and began at their daily work.

The cold mountain stream, diverted to the sluices, went purling down over the riffles. The drip from countless negligible leaks commenced in its monotony. Into the puddles of mud and water the three old miners sloshed, with shovels and picks in hand. They were tired before their work began. Gettysburg, at sixty-five, had been tired for twenty-five years. Nevertheless, he began his day with song, his cheery,

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Rinktum bolly kimo.

They were only fairly limbered up when four active men appeared abruptly on the property, at the corners of the claim, and began the work of putting up white location posts, after knocking others down. They were agents employed by McCoppet, in behalf of Bostwick and himself.

Napoleon was the first to note their presence. He was calling attention to the nearest man when a fifth man appeared by the cabin. He, too, had a new location post, or stake, to be planted at the center of the claim. He was not only armed as to weapons, but protruding from his pocket was a wad of “legal” documents, more to be feared than his gun.

He came straight towards Gettysburg, walking briskly.

“Morning,” he said. “I’ve come to notify you men to get off of this here claim. This ground belongs to me and my partners, by right of prior location—made right now.”

He thrust his stake a little into the yielding sand and had posted a notice, made out in due form, before the wet old workers by the sluice could conclude that the man had lost his wits.

“What you givin’ us, anyway?” said Gettysburg, remaining ankle-deep in the mud. “Don’t you know this here is the ‘Laughin’ Water’ claim, which was located proper——”

“This claim on the reservation,” interrupted McCoppet’s agent. “The line was run out yesterday, according to Government instructions, and the line takes in this ground.” He continued at his work.

Napoleon got stirred up then and there.

“You’re a liar!” he cried out recklessly, “—metaphorical speakin’. Belay there, my hearty. You and your dog-gone pirate craft——”

McCoppet himself, on horseback, came riding down the slope.

“That’s enough from you!” interrupted the gambler’s agent. “You and your crowd is liable for trespass, or Government prosecution, getting on the reservation land ahead of date. This ground belongs to me and my company, understand, with everything on it—and all the gold you’ve took out! And all you take away is your personal effects—and you take ’em and git, right now!”

“Now hold on,” said Gettysburg, dazed by what he heard. “I seen that Government surveyor cuss. He said he was only running out a county line.”

McCoppet took the case in hand, as he halted by the boxes.

“Now, boys, don’t waste your time in argument,” he said. “You’ve made a mistake, that’s all. Take my advice and hike to the reservation now, before the gang stakes everything in sight. You can’t go up against the law, and you’ve done too much illegal work already.”

“Illegal?” cried Napoleon. “You’re a liar, Opal. Ain’t mad, are you? I’ve drunk at your saloon, and you know this claim belongs to Van and us!”

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"Don't I say you've made a mistake?" repeated the gambler. "I don't hold any feelings about it. Nobody was on for a sure thing about the reservation line till Lawrence run it out. We had suspicions, from a study of the maps, but it took the Government surveyor to make the matter certain. It's a cinch you're on the reservation land. You can copper all your rights, and play to win the bet this claim belongs to me—and everything else that's any good. Now don't stop to talk. Go to Lawrence for Government facts—and git a-going pronto."

Gettysburg was pulling down his sleeves. Old age had suddenly claimed him for its own. The song had dried from his heart, and the light of his wonderful youth and hope departed from his eye. Dave was too stunned to think. All three felt the weight of conviction sink them in the chilling mire. The survey of the day before made doubt impossible.

Gettysburg looked at the boxes, the pits they had dug, the water running over the riffles, behind which lay the gold.

"I wish Van was to home," he said. "He'd know."

Their helplessness without the absent Van was complete. In the game of life they were just old boys who would never become mature.

"Van Buren couldn't do no good," McCoppet assured them. "This ain't a matter of wrangling or fighting; it's a matter of law. If the law ain't with us you'll get the property back. Van Buren would tell you the same. He didn't know the ground was reservation. We give him the benefit of that. But all the gold you've got on the place you'll have to leave with me. You never had no rights on the Government preserves, and I'm here ahead of all the bunch in staking it out at six o'clock, the legal opening hour."

Napoleon started to speak again, but glanced at Gettysburg instead. A bluff was useless, especially with Gettysburg looking so utterly defeated. From his tall, old partner, Napoleon looked at Dave.

"Can't we tack somewhere?" he said. "Couldn't we hold the wheel and wait fer Van?"

Gettysburg repeated: "I wish Van was to home."

"Come on, come on," McCoppet urged, beginning to lose his patience. "If you think you've got any rights, go to Lawrence and see. You're trespassing here. I don't want to tell you harsh to pack your duds and hunt another game, but you can't stay here no longer."

Gettysburg hesitated, then slowly came out of the water. He looked at the sluices hazily.

“Just gittin’ her to pay,” he said. “The only easy minin’ I ever done.”

Napoleon, suddenly dispirited—utterly dispirited—had nothing more to say. Slowly and in broken order the three old cronies wended towards the cabin. Less than an hour later, with all their meager treasure in worldly goods roped to the last of Dave’s horses, they quitted the claim, taking Algy, the Chinese cook, along. They were homeless wanderers with no place in all the world to turn. Without Van they were utterly lost. They expected him to come that day to the cove. Therefore, on a desert spot, not far from the new reservation line, taking possession of a bit of hill so poor that no one had staked it, they made their camp in the sand and rocks, to await Van’s pleasure in returning.

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CHAPTER XXXV

THE MEETINGS OF TWO STRONG MEN

Matt Barger, riding in the night, intent upon nothing save the chance to deal out his vengeance to Van Buren, had camped beside the river, at the turn where Van and Beth had skirted the bank to the regular fording below. The convict's horse, which Beth had lost, was tethered where the water-way had encouraged a meager growth of grass. Barger himself had eaten a snake and returned to a narrow defile in the range, where his ambush could be made.

To insure himself against all misadventure he rolled a mass of boulders down the hill, to block the trail. His barrier was crude but efficient. Neither man nor horse could have scaled it readily, and the slopes on either side were not only well-nigh perpendicular, they were also built of crumbling stone that broke beneath the smallest weight. He labored doggedly, persistently, despite his half-starved condition, and when he had finished he looked to his gun, proceeded down the trail some fifty yards or more, climbed the slope, and there in the rocks, where the walls gave way to a sandy acclivity, concealed himself to wait.

The sun at noon found Van a mark for punishment. The day was the hottest of the season. The earth and rocks irradiated heat that danced in the air before him. All the world was vibrant, the atmosphere a shimmer, as if in very mockery of the thoughts that similarly rose and gyrated in his brain. His horse was suffering for water. The river was still an hour away, so steep was the climb through the range.

The trail he would gladly have avoided, had such a course been practical. He had ridden here with Beth, and therefore the mockery was all the more intense. His inward heat and the outward heat combined to make him savage. There was nothing, however, on which to vent his feelings. Suvy he loved. Perhaps, he reflected, the horse was his one faithful friend. Certainly the broncho toiled most willingly across the zone of lifelessness to bear him on his way.

Up through the narrowing walls of sand and adamant they slowly ascended. Barger saw them once, far down the trail, then lost them again as they rounded a spur of the shimmering hillside, coming nearer where he lay. He was up the slope a considerable distance—farther than he meant to risk a shot. His breath came hard as he presently beheld Van Buren fairly entering the trap.

Van's head had fallen forward on his breast. He looked at nothing. His face was set and hard. Barger raised his pistol, sighted down the barrel—and repressed the impulse to fire as the horseman came onward, unsuspectingly.

No sooner was Van around the turn, where in less than a minute he would find his progress blocked, than Barger arose and ran with all his might down the slope.

He let out a yell of exultation as he came to the trail. Van turned in his saddle instantly, beholding the man in the pass. He knew that sinister form.

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His pony had bounded forward, frightened by the cry. Down went Van's hand to his own revolver, and the gun came up cocked for action.

One glance he cast up the trail ahead—and saw through Barger's trick. The *cul de sac* was perfect, and the convict had halted to fire.

It made a singular picture on Van Buren's retina—that gaunt, savage being, hairy, wild of eye, instinct with hatred and malice, posing awkwardly, and the sun-lit barrel of polished steel, just before its yawning muzzle belched lead and a cloud and a roaring detonation.

The bullet went wide, and Barger fired again, quickly, but more steadily. That one landed. It got Van just along the arm, burning in a long, shallow wound that barely brought the blood.

Van's gun was down, despite Suvy's panic of cavortings. He pulled the trigger. The hammer leaped two ways, up and back—but the gun made no report, no buck, no cloud to answer Barger's. The cartridges, subjected to all that water of the day before, were worthless.

The third of Barger's shots was fired from a closer range, as the eager creature closed in upon his enemy. It let the daylight enter Van's hat, near the top.

Van had snapped every shell in his weapon, with amazing rapidity—to no avail. The cylinder had flung around like a wheel, but the sounds were those of a toy.

Barger was steadied in his tracks for better marksmanship. He had heard that succession of metallic snaps; he knew he had Van Buren at his mercy. Three of his shots remained unfired, and a second, unused pistol in his belt, with more ammunition. The fellow even smiled as he was aiming.

There was one thing to do—and Van did it. He leaped his broncho clean against the wall, then spurred him straight for Barger. The shot that split the air again was splattered on the rocks. Before the convict could make ready to avoid the charge, Suvy was almost upon him. He partially fell and partially leaped a little from the broncho's path, but was struck as the pony bounded by.

He yelled, for his leg was trampled and hurt by the pressure of Suvy's shoe, nevertheless he scrambled to his feet at once, and fired wildly at his man.

He emptied his gun, drew the other, and ran, too eager for his deed of revenge to halt and take a steady aim. A bullet punctured the broncho's ear, and the blood flew back upon Van.

They were past the walls in the briefest time, and Van attacked the slope. Barger came after, yelling in rage. He tripped, and his hurt leg dropped him down.

Already wearied, and famished for drink, Suvy nevertheless rose to the needs of the moment with a strength incredible. He scaled that sandy, treacherous slope like an engine built for the purpose. It was love, pure love for the master on his back, that steeled the mighty sinews in his body.

Two shots and two bullets from below proclaimed renewed activities where Barger was once more on his feet. But the man had lost too much ground to recover his advantage. He knew that Van Buren, with a horse like that, could win the high ridge and escape.

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He raged; he cursed himself and his God, for this second failure of his deed. Then once again he abruptly thought of a chance whereby to redeem his galling failures. His man on the horse would be more than an hour in reaching the river by the slopes. A man on foot could beat him there, and beat him across to the farther side, from which to attack with surer aim—from the cover of the willows by the ford. The flood had subsided. This Barger knew. The water was hardly knee high on a man, and better than all, Van Buren would scarcely dream of such a plan as within the range of possibilities.

Laboriously, in a fever of impatience, Barger made shift, after strenuous work, to climb his barrier of rock. Then up to the summit of the trail he sped, and down on the farther side.

Meantime Van, disgusted with himself for riding away from a fight, could only revile his useless gun and excuse himself a trifle because of his defenselessness. The skirmish had served to arouse him, however, and for that he was thankful to the convict who had waited in the pass.

Then he wondered how it came at all that Matt should have thus been lying there in wait. The fellow must have been informed, to prepare so elaborate a trap. It hardly seemed as if a plot against his life could explain this trip that Beth had desired him to take. He could scarcely credit a thing so utterly despicable, so murderous, to her, yet for what earthly reasons had she sent him on the trip with a letter the stage could have carried?

The thing was preposterous! No woman on earth could have sanctioned an alliance with Barger. But—what of Bostwick—the man who had spent a portion of his time with the liberated convicts? A revenge like this would appeal to him, would seem to him singularly appropriate. Beth could have lent her assistance to the plan without guilty knowledge of an outcome such as this, and Bostwick—Beth knew that Barger was Van's enemy. He had told her so himself. Facts were facts. Her letter to Glen revealed her state of mind—and here was this attack, a planned attack, proving conclusively that Barger had been prepared beforehand with knowledge of the trip.

From having been depressed before, Van was made thoroughly angry. The whole thing was infamous, dastardly—and Beth could not be acquitted. Strangely enough, against the convict, Barger, the horseman felt no wrath. Barger had a grievance, howsoever mistaken, that was adequate. He was following his bent consistently. He had made his threat in the open; he must plan out his work according to his wits. He was simply a hunted beast, who turned upon his hunters.

It was Bostwick on whom Van concentrated a rising heat—and he promised the man would find things warm in camp, and the fight only well under way.



Even when the summit was achieved, the broncho slacked off nothing of his pace. Sweat glistened wetly upon him. His bleeding ear was going backward and forward tremulously, as he listened for any word from Van, and for anything suspicious before them. Van noted a certain wistfulness in the pony's demeanor.

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"Take it easy, boy," he urged in a voice of affection that the broncho understood. "Take it easy." He dismounted to lead the animal down the slope, since a steep descent is far more trying on a ridden horse than climbing up the grade. He halted to pat the pony on the neck, and give his nose a rough caress, then on they went, the shadow they cast the only shade upon the burning hill.

It was fully an hour after leaving the pass, where Barger had piled in the rock, before the horseman and his broncho dropped again in the trail that led onward to the river. Van was again in the saddle. Alert for possible surprises, but assured that his man could find no adequate cover hereabouts, he emerged from behind the last of the turns all eagerness to give his horse a drink.

A yell broke suddenly, terribly, on the desert stillness. It came from Barger, out in the river, on the bar—strangely anchored where he stood.

Van saw him instantly, saw a human fantastic, struggling, writhing, twisting with maniacal might, the while the horrible quicksand held him by the legs, and swallowed him, inch by inch.

"Fer Christ's sake—help!" the creature shrilled in his plight. He had flung away revolvers, cartridges, even his coat, reducing his weight when the stuff only gripped him by the ankles. He was half to his thighs. He was sinking to his waist, and with all of his furious efforts, the frightful sand was shuddering, as if in animal ecstasy—some abominable ecstasy of hunger, voracious from long denial, as it sucked him further down.

"Fer Christ's sake, Van Buren—fer Christ's sake, man! I'm a human being," shrieked the victim of the sand. "*I'm a human being*, man!"

Van had not hesitated by so much as a moment as to what he meant to do. He was off his horse in a leap. He paused for a second to look about for any accidental means of assistance the place might afford. It afforded none. The man in the quicksand continued to yell, to struggle hopelessly, to sink in that shivering pool of life-engulfing stuff.

Then the horseman thought of his rope, the raw-hide lasso, always secured upon his saddle. He snatched at the knots to tear it loose.

"Don't move—don't struggle!" he shouted at the man, and down toward the edge he came running, the rope-noose running out as he sped.

He dared not step beyond the bank, and so involve himself. Barger was well out from the edge. The throw at best was long and difficult.

"Hold up your hands, above your head!" he called. "Don't thrash around!"



The convict obeyed. His haggard, bearded face was turned to Van like a mask of horror. The eyes were blazing fearfully. The fellow's attitude, as he held his hands above his head, and continued to sink, was a terrible pose of supplication—an awful eloquence of prayer.

Van threw—and the cast fell short.

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Barger groaned. He had ceased to yell. He remained mutely holding up his hands, while the cold abyss crept upward to his waist—the wet lips swallowing, swallowing in silence.

Van jerked in the rope with one impatient gesture. He coiled it swiftly, but with nicety. Then round and round he swung the gaping loop—and threw with all his strength.

For a second the loop hung snake-like in the air, above the convict's head. Then it fell about him, splashed the curdled sand, and was pulled up taut, embracing Barger's waist.

"Hoist it up under your arms!" called Van. "Try to move your legs when I pull!"

He wasted no time in attempting to haul the convict out himself. He led his pony quickly to the edge, took two half hitches of the rope about the pommel of the saddle, then shouted once more to his man.

"Ready, Barger. Try to kick your feet." To the horse he said: "Now, Suvy, a strong, steady pull." And taking the pony's bit in hand he urged him slowly forward,

It was wonderful, the comprehension in the broncho's mind. But the pull was an awful thing. The rope came taut—and began to be strained, and Suvy was sweating as he labored. Out on the end of it, bitten by the loop, that slipped ever tighter about him, the human figure was bent over sharply, between the two contending forces.

He let out one yell, for the pain about his chest—then made no further sound. The rawhide rope was like a fiddle-string. It seemed absurd that an anchor so small, so limber, in the sand, could hold so hard against the horse. Van urged a greater strain. He knew that the rope would hold. He did not know how much the man could bear before something awful might occur. There was nothing else to do.

It seemed a time interminable. No one made a sound. The queer, distorted figure out in the stream could have uttered no sound to save his life. The silence was beginning to be hideous.

Then an inch of the rope came landward, as the broncho strained upon it. The anchor had started from its hold.

"Now! now!" said Van, and with quick, skillful urging he caught at the slight advantage.

Like an old, half-buried pile, reluctant to budge from its bed in sand and ooze, the human form was slowly dragged from the place. No corpse, rudely snatched from its grave, could have been more helplessly inert—more stretched out of all living semblance to a man.

[Illustration: No corpse snatched from its grave could have been more helplessly inert.]

Across the firmer sand, and through a lagoon of water, Barger was hurriedly drawn. The pony was halted when the man was at the bank, and back to the convict Van went running, to loosen the bite of the noose.

Barger lay prostrate on the earth, his eyes dully blinking in the sun. His feet were bare. They had slipped from his boots, which were buried beyond in the sand. His face had taken on a hue of death. From hair to his ankles he was shockingly emaciated—a gaunt, wasted figure, motionless as clay.

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Van fetched a pint of water in his hat. He sprinkled it roughly in the convict's face, and, propping up his head, helped him to take a drink.

Barger could not lift a hand, or utter a word. Van recoiled the rope, secured it on the saddle, then sat down to await the man's recovery. It was slow. Barger's speech was the first returning function. It was faint, and weak, and blasphemous.

"It's hell," he said, "when God Almighty turns agin a man. Ain't the sheriff's enough—*without a thing like that?*" His thumb made a gesture towards the river, which he cursed abominably—cursing it for a trap, a seeming benefit, here in the desert, ready to eat a man alive.

Van made no reply. He rather felt the man was justified—at least in some opinions. Towards Barger he felt no anger, but rather a pity instead.

After a time the convict moved sufficiently to prop himself up against the bank. He looked at Van dully. This was the man who had "sent him up"—and saved him from the sand. There was much that lay between them, much that must always lie. He had no issues to dodge. There was nothing cowardly in Barger, despite his ways.

"I nearly got you, up yonder," he said, and he jerked his thumb towards the mountains, to indicate the pass where he and Van had met an hour before.

Van nodded. "You sure did. Who told you to look for me here?"

Barger closed his eyes. "Nothing doing." He could not have been forced to tell.

Van smiled. "That's all right." There was no resentment in the tone.

Barger looked at him curiously.

"What for did you pull me out?"

"Don't know," Van confessed. "Perhaps I hated to have the quicksand cheat the pen."

"Must have had some good reason," agreed the prostrate man. He was silent for a moment, and then he added: "I s'pose I'm your meat."

As before, Van nodded: "I reckon you are."

Barger spat. It was his first vigorous indication of returning strength.

"Someways," he said, "I'd rather you'd shoot me here, right now, than send me back to the pen. But I couldn't stand fer that!" He made his characteristic gesture towards the river. As Van made no comment the fellow concluded: "I s'pose you need the reward."

Van was aware there was ten thousand dollars as a price on the convict's head, a fact which he somehow resented. To-day, more than at any time within his life, he felt out of sympathy with law—with man's law, made against man.

He began to pull off his boots.

"No," he said, "I don't want any State's reward, much less express company money. Maybe if it wasn't for those rewards I'd take you into camp." He inverted his boots and shook out a few grains of sand.

Barger glanced at him suspiciously.

"What are you goin' to do with me, then, now you've got me to rights?"

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"Nothing," said Van, "nothing this afternoon." He stood up. "You and I break even, Barger, understand? Don't take me wrong. I'm not turning you loose entirely. You belong to me. Whenever I call for the joker, Matt, I want you to come."

He would never call, and he knew it. He merely left the matter thus to establish a species of ownership that Barger must acknowledge. There is law of the State, and law of God, and law of man to man. The latter it was that concerned Van Buren now, and upon it he was acting.

Laboriously, weakly, Barger arose to his feet. He looked at Van peculiarly, with a strange light dully firing in his eyes.

"I agree to that," he answered slowly. "I agree to that."

He put out his hand to shake—to bind his agreement. It was almost like offering his oath.

Van took it, and gave it his usual grip.

"So long, Barger," he said. "I reckon you need these boots."

He waved his hand loosely at the boots that lay upon the ground, went at once to his horse, and mounted to his seat.

"The regular ford of this river's down below," he added to the speechless convict, standing there gaunt and wondering upon the marge. "So long."

Barger said nothing. Van rode away on the trail by the stream, and was presently gone, around the bend.

CHAPTER XXXVI

VAN RUNS AMUCK

Instead of turning northward in the mountain range and riding on to the "Laughing Water" claim, Van continued straight ahead to Goldite. The letter to Beth was heavy in his pocket. Until he should rid himself of its burden he knew he should have no peace—no freedom to act for himself.

He had been delayed. The sun was setting when at last he rode his broncho to the hay-yard in the camp, and saw that he was fed with proper care. Then he got some boots and walked to Mrs. Dick's.

Beth, from her window, looking towards the sun, discovered him coming to the place. She had never in her life felt so wildly joyous at beholding any being of the earth. She had watched for hours, counting his steps across the desert's desolation one by one, tracing his course from Starlight "home" by all the signs along the trail which she and he had traveled together.

She ran downstairs like a child. She had momentarily forgotten even Glen. Nothing counted but this sight of Van—his presence here with herself. When she suddenly burst from the door into all the golden glory of the sunset, herself as glorious with color, warmth, and youth as the great day-orb in the west, Van felt his heart give one tumultuous heave in his breast, despite the resentment he harbored.

There had never been a moment when her smile had been so radiant, when the brown of her eyes had been so softly lighted and glowing, when her cheeks had so mirrored her beauty.

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How superb she was, he said to himself—how splendid was her acting! He could almost forgive himself for having played the fool. His helplessness, his defenselessness had been warranted. But—her smile could befuddle him no more. He took off his hat, with a certain cold elegance of grace. His face still wore that chiseled appearance of stone-like hardness.

“Oh!” she cried, in her irrepressible happiness of heart. “You’re home! You’re safe! I’m glad!”

It was nothing, her cry that he was safe. She had worried only for the desert’s customary perils, but this he could not know. He thought she referred to a possible meeting with Barger. He was almost swept from his balance by her look, for a bright bit of moisture had sprung in her eyes and her smile took on a tenderness that all but conquered him anew.

“I delivered your letter in Starlight,” he said. “I return your brother’s reply.”

He had taken the letter from his pocket. He held it forth.

She took it. If memories of Glen started rushingly upon her, they were halted by something she felt in the air, something in the cold, set speech of the man she loved as never she had thought to love a creature of the earth. She made no reply, but stood looking peculiarly upon him, a question written plainly in her glance.

“If there is nothing more,” he added, “permit me to wish you good-day.” He swept off his hat as he had before, turned promptly on his heel, and departed the scene forthwith.

She tried to cry out, to ask him what it meant, but the thing had come like a blow. It had not been what he had said, so much as the manner of its saying—not so much what she had heard as what her heart had felt. A deluge of ice water, suddenly thrown upon her, could scarcely have chilled or shocked her more than the coldness that had bristled from his being.

Wholly at a loss to understand, she leaned in sudden weakness against the frame of the door, and watched him disappearing. Her smile was gone. In its place a dumb, white look of pain and bewilderment had frozen on her face. Had not that something, akin to anger, which her nature had felt to be emanating from him remained so potently to oppress her, she could almost have thought the thing a joke—some freakish mood of playfulness after all the other moods he had shown. But no such thought was possible. The glitter in his eyes had been unmistakable. Then, what could it mean?

She almost cried, as she stood there and saw him vanish. She had counted so much upon this moment. She had prayed for his coming safely back from the desert. She had so utterly unbound the fetters from her love. Confession of it all had been ready in

her heart, her eyes, and on her lips. Reaction smote her a dulling blow. Her whole impulsive nature crept back upon itself, abashed—like something discarded, flung at her feet ingloriously.

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"Oh—Van!" she finally cried, in a weak, hurt utterance, and back along the darkening hall she went, her hand with Glen's crushed letter pressed hard upon her breast.

Van, for his part, far more torn than he could have believed possible, proceeded down the street in such a daze as a drunken man might experience, emerging from liquor's false delights to life's cold, merciless facts. The camp was more emptied than he had ever known it since first it was discovered. Only a handful of the reservation stragglers had returned. The darkness would pour them in by hundreds.

Half way down the thoroughfare Van paused to remember what it was his body wanted. It was food. He started again, and was passing the bank when someone called from within.

"Hello, there—Van!" came the cry. "Hello! Come in!"

Van obeyed mechanically. The cashier, Rickart, it was who had shouted the summons—a little, gray-eyed, thin-faced man, with a very long moustache.

"How are you, Rick?" said the horseman familiarly. "What's going on?"

"Haven't *you* heard?—*you*?" interrogated Rickart. "I thought it was funny you were loafing along so leisurely. Didn't you know to-day was the day for the rush?"

"I did," said Van. "What about it?"

"Not much," his friend replied, "except your claim has been jumped by McCoppet and one J. Searle Bostwick, who got on to the fact that the reservation line included all your ground."

Van looked his incredulity.

"What's the joke?" he said. "I bite. What's the answer?"

"Joke?" the cashier echoed. "Joke? They had the line surveyed through, yesterday, and Lawrence confirmed their tip. Your claim, I tell you, was on reservation ground, and McCoppet had his crowd on deck at six o'clock this morning. They staked it out, according to law, as the first men on the job after the Government threw it open—and there they are."

Van leaned against the counter carelessly, and looked at his friend unmoved.

"Who told you the story?" he inquired. "Who brought it into camp?"

“Why a dozen men—all mad to think they never got on,” said Rickart, not without heat. “It’s an outrage, Van! You might have fought them off if you’d been on deck, and made the location yourself! Where have you been?”

Van smiled. The neatness of the whole arrangement began to be presented to his mind.

“Oh, I was out of the way all right,” he said. “My friends took care of that.”

“I thought there was something in the wind, all along,” imparted the little cashier. “Bostwick and McCoppet have been thicker than thieves for a week. But the money they needed wasn’t Bostwick’s. I wired to New York to get his standing—and he’s got about as much as a pin. But the girl stood in, you bet! She’s got enough—and dug up thirty thousand bucks to handle the crowd’s expenses.”

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Van straightened up slowly.

"The girl?"

"Miss Kent—engaged to Bostwick—you ought to know," replied the man behind the counter. "She's put up the dough and I guess she's in the game, for she turned it all over like a man."

Van laughed, suddenly, almost terribly.

"Oh, hell, Rick, come out and git a drink!" he said. "Here," as he noted a bottle in the desk, "give me some of that!"

Rickart gave him the bottle and a glass. He poured a stiff amber draught and raised it on high, a wild, fevered look in his eyes.

"Here's to the gods of law and order!" he said. "Here's to faith, hope, and charity. Here's to friendship, honor, and loyalty. Here's to the gallant little minority that love their neighbors as themselves. Give me perfidy or give me death! Hurray for treason, strategy, and spoils!"

He drank the liquid fire at one reckless gulp, and laughing again, in ghastly humor, lurched suddenly out at the open door and across to the nearest saloon.

Rickart, in sudden apprehension for the "boy" he genuinely loved, called out to him shrilly, but in vain. Then he scurried to the telephone, rang up the office of the sheriff, and presently had a deputy on the wire.

"Say, friend," he called, "if Bostwick or McCoppet should return to camp to-night, warn them to keep off the street. Van Buren's in, and I don't want the boy to mix himself in trouble."

"All right," came the answer, "I'm on."

In less than an hour the town was "on." Men returning by the scores and dozens, nineteen out of every twenty exhausted, angered with disappointment, and clamorous for refreshments, filled the streets, saloons, and eating houses, all of them talking of the "Laughing Water" claim, and all of them ready to sympathize with Van—especially at his expense.

His night was a mixture of wildness, outflamings of satire on the virtues, witty defiance of the fates, and recklessness of everything save reference to women. Not a word escaped his lips whereby his keenest, most delighted listener could have probed to the heart of his mood. To the loss of his claim was attributed all his pyrotechnics, and no

one, unless it was Rickart, was aware of the old proverbial “woman in the case,” who had planted the sting that stung.

Rickart, like a worried animal, following the footsteps of his master, sought vainly all night to head Van off and quiet him down in bed. At two in the morning, at McCoppet’s gambling hall, where Van perhaps expected to encounter the jumpers of his claim, the little cashier succeeded at last in commanding Van’s attention. Van had a glass of stuff in his hand—stuff too strong to be scathed by all the pure food enactments in the world.

“Look here, boy,” said Rickart, clutching the horseman’s wrist in his hand, “do you know that Gettysburg, and Nap, and Dave are camping on the desert, waiting for you to come home?”

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Van looked at him steadily. He was far from being dizzied in his brain. Since the blow received at the hands of Beth had not sufficed to make him utterly witless, then nothing drinkable could overcome his reason.

"Home?" he said. *"Waiting for me to come home."*

Suddenly wrenching his hand from Rickart's grip he hurled the glass of liquor with all his might against the mirror of the bar. The crash rose high above the din of human voices. A radiating star was abruptly created in the firmament of glass, and Van was starting for the door.

The barkeeper scarcely turned his head. He was serving half a dozen men, and he said: "Gents, what's your poison?"

A crowd of half-intoxicated revelers started for Van and attempted to haul him back. He flung them off like a lot of pestiferous puppies, and cleared the door.

He went straight to the hay-yard, saddled his horse, and headed up over the mountains. He had eaten no dinner; he wanted none. The fresh, clean air began its work of restoration.

It was daylight when he reached the camp his partners had made on the desert. Napoleon and Gettysburg were drunk. Discouraged by his long delay, homeless, and utterly disheartened, they had readily succumbed to the conveniently bottled sympathy of friends.

No sooner had the horseman alighted at the camp than Napoleon flung himself upon him. He was weeping.

"What did I sh-sh-sh-sh-(whistle) shay?" he interrogated brokenly, "home from a foreign—quothe r-r-r-r-(whistle) raven—NEVER MORE!"

Gettysburg waxed apologetic, as he held his glass eye in his hand.

"Didn't mean to git in thish condition, Van—didn't go to do it," he imparted confidentially. "Serpent that lurks in the glash."

Van resumed his paternal role with a meed of ready forgiveness.

"Let him who hath an untainted breath cast the first bottle," he said. Even old Dave, thought sober, was disqualified, and Algy was asleep.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE PRIMITIVE LAW

Bostwick and McCoppet had made ample provision against attack at the claim. Their miners, who set to work at once to enlarge the facilities for extracting the gold from the ground, were gun-fighters first and toilers afterward. The place was guarded night and day, visitors being ordered off with a strictness exceptionally rigid.

Van and his partners were down and out. They had saved almost nothing of the gold extracted from the sand, since the bulk of their treasure had fallen, by "right of law" into the hands of the jumpers.

Bostwick avoided Van as he would a plague. There was never a day or night that fear did not possess him, when he thought of a possible encounter; yet Van had planned no deed of violence and could not have told what the results would be should he and Bostwick meet.

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In his customary way of vigor, the horseman had begun a semi-legal inquiry the first day succeeding the rush. He interviewed Lawrence, the Government representative, since Culver's removal from the scene. Lawrence was prepared for the visit. He expressed his regrets at the flight Van's fortunes had taken. Bostwick had come, he said, with authority from Washington, ordering the new survey. No expectation had been entertained, he was sure, that the old, "somewhat imaginary" and "decidedly vague" reservation line would be disturbed, or that any notable properties would be involved. Naturally, after the line was run, establishing the inclusion of the "Laughing Water" claim, and much other ground, in the reservation tract, Mr. Bostwick had been justified in summary action. It was the law of human kind to reach for all coveted things.

Van listened in patience to the exposition of the case. He studied the maps and data as he might have studied the laws of Confucius written in their native tongue. The thing looked convincing. It was not at all incredible or unique. It bore Government sanction, if not its trademark. And granting that the reservation tract did actually extend so far as to lap across the "Laughing Water" claim, the right of an entrant to locate the ground and oust all previous trespassers after the legal opening was undeniable.

Much of the natural fighting spirit, welded by nature into Van's being, had been sickened into inactivity by the blow succeeding blow received at the hands of Beth Kent. The case against her was complete.

Her letter to her brother was sufficient in itself. The need for its delivery in person to her brother he thought undoubtedly a ruse to get himself out of the way. If she had not planned with the others to warn the convict, Barger, of his trip, she had certainly loaned her money to Bostwick for his needs—and her letter contained the threat, "I will repay!"

At the end of three days of dulling disgust and helplessness, Van and his "family" were camping in a tent above the town of Goldite, on a hill. They were all but penniless: they had no occupation, no hope. They were down once more at the ladder's bottom rung, depleted in spirit, less young than formerly, and with no idea of which way to turn.

Van meant to fight, if the slightest excuse could be discovered. His partners would back him, with their lives. But he and they, as they looked their prospects fairly in the face, found themselves utterly disarmed. Except for the credit, extended by friends of Van, starvation might have lurked about their tent. All delayed seeking for outside work while the prospect of putting up a fight to regain their property held forth a dim glimmer of hope.

The last of Van's money went to meet a debt—such a debt as he would not disregard. The account was rendered by a cutter of stone, who had carved upon a marble post the single legend:

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QUEENIE.

This post was planted where a small earth mound was raised upon the hill—and word of the tribute went the rounds of the camp, where everyone else had forgotten.

The town's excitement concerning the rush had subsided with greater alacrity as reports came back, in rapid procession—no gold on the reservation. The normal excitements of the mining field resumed where the men had left them off. News that Matt Barger was not only still at large, but preying on wayside travelers, aroused new demands for the sheriff's demonstrations of his fitness to survive. The fact was recalled that Cayuse, the half-breed murderer of Culver, was as yet unreported from the hills.

The sheriff, who had ridden day and night, in quest of either of the "wanted" men, came back to Goldite from a week's excursion, packed full of hardships, vigilance, and work, to renew his force and make another attempt. He offered a job to Van.

"There's ten thousand dollars in Barger," he said. "And I guess you could use the money. There's nothing but glory in gittin' Cayuse, but I'll give you your pick of the pair."

That some half-formed notion of procuring a secret survey of the reservation line, in his own behalf, had occupied Van's thoughts somewhat insistently, was quite to be expected. That the work would prove expensive was a matter of course. Money was the one particular thing of which he stood in need. Nevertheless, at the sheriff's suggestion he calmly shook his head.

"Thanks, old man. Blood-money wouldn't circulate worth a whoop in my system. But I think I could land Cayuse." He held no grudge against Culver now. Perhaps he regretted the fuss he had made on the day of Culver's death. "I'll take ten dollars a day," he added, "and see what I can do about the Indian."

"I knew it! I knew you'd do more than all the gang—myself in the count," the sheriff exclaimed in profound relief. "I'm beat! I own it! I ain't seen a trace of that black-headed devil since I started. If you'll fetch him in——"

"Don't promise more than ten dollars a day," Van interrupted. "If you do you can get him yourself. I haven't said I'll fetch him in. I merely said perhaps I could get him."

"All right," said the sheriff, bewildered. "All right. I don't care what happens, if you git him."

Glad, perhaps, to escape the town—to flee from the air that Beth was breathing, Van rode off that afternoon.

He did not seek the Indian murderer, nor for traces of his place of concealment. He went due west, to the nearest Indian camp, on the now diminished reservation. He called upon a wise and grave Piute, as old as some of the hills.

“Captain Sides,” he said, when the due formalities of greeting had been gratified, “I want you to get Cayuse. He stabbed a white man, Culver, Government man—and you Piutes know all about it. Indians know where an Indian hides. This man has broken the law. He’s got to pay. I want your men to get him.”

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Old Captain Sides was standing before his house. He was tall and dignified.

“Yesh—he’s broke the law,” he agreed. “Mebbe my boys, they’s get him.”

[Illustration: “Yesh—he’s broke the law.”]

That was all, but a strange thing happened. On the following night four grim Piutes brought Cayuse from his mountain retreat. They were all his kinsmen, uncles, brothers, and cousins. He was taken to a council in the brush, a family council with Captain Sides as Chieftain, Magistrate, and father of the tribe. And a solemn procedure followed. Cayuse was formally charged with infraction of the law and asked for his defense. He had no defense—nothing but justification. He admitted the killing, and told of why it had been done. He had taken an eye for an eye.

“I have broken the white man’s law,” he said. “The white man first broke mine. I’m ready to pay. The Indian stands no show to get away. I broke the law, and I am glad. They want my life. That’s all right. That’s the law. But I don’t want the white man to hang me. That ain’t good Indian way. My people can satisfy this law. They can shoot me like a man. No white is going to hang Cayuse, and that’s all I’ve got to say.”

To an Anglo Saxon mind this attitude is not to be readily comprehended. To the Indian members of Cayuse’s clan it addressed itself as wisdom, logic, and right. The council agreed to his demands. The case, historical, but perhaps not unique, has never been widely known.

As solemnly as doom itself, the council proceeded with its task. Some manner of balloting was adopted, and immediate members of the Cayuse totem drew lots as to which must perform the lawful deed. It fell to a brother of the prisoner—a half-brother only, to be accurate, since the doomed man’s father had been white.

Together Cayuse and this kinsman departed from the camp, walking forth through the darkness in the brush. They chatted in all pleasantness, upon the way. Cayuse could have broken and run. He never for a moment so much as entertained the thought.

They came to a place appropriate, and, still in all friendliness, backed by a sense of justice and of doom, the guiltless brother shot the half-breed dead—and the chapter, with the Indians, was concluded.

Van was gone three days from Goldite camp. He returned and reported all that had been done. He had seen the executed man. An even thirty dollars he accepted for his time, and with it bought food for his partners.



CHAPTER XXXVIII

BETH MAKES DEMANDS

Beth Kent, while the camp was writing its feverish annals, had undergone emotions in the whole varied order of the gamut. She had felt herself utterly deserted and utterly unhappy. She had hoped against hope that Van would come, that something might explain away his behavior, that she herself might have an opportunity of ascertaining what had occurred.

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One clew only was vouchsafed her puzzling mind: Searle had actually gone to Glen at last, had been there at the hour of Van's arrival, and had written Glen's letter to herself. Some encounter between the men had doubtless transpired, she thought, and Van had been poisoned against her. What else could it mean, his coldness, his abrupt departure, after all that had been, and his stubborn silence since?

The letter from Glen had been wholly unsatisfactory. Bostwick had written it, he said, at Glen's dictation. It echoed the phrases that Searle himself had employed so persistently, many of them grossly mendacious, as Beth was sufficiently aware. Her effort had been futile, after all. She was not at all certain as to Glen's condition; she was wholly in the dark in all directions.

On the day succeeding the reservation rush she received the news at Mrs. Dick's, not only that Van had lost his claim, and that McCoppet and Searle were its latest owners, but also that Van had run amuck that night after leaving herself.

Some vague, half-terrifying intuition that Searle was engaged in a lawless, retaliatory enterprise crept athwart her mind and rendered her intensely uneasy. Her own considerable sum of money might even be involved in—she could not fathom what. Something that lay behind it all must doubtless explain Van's extraordinary change. It was maddening; she felt there must be *something* she could do—there *must* be something! She was not content to wait in utter helplessness for anything more to happen—anything more that served to wreck human happiness, if not very life itself!

She felt, moreover, she had a right to know what it was affecting Van. He had come unbidden into her life. He had swept her away with his riotous love. He had taught her new, almost frightening joys of existence. He had drawn upon her very soul—kissing into being a nature demanding love for love. He had taken her all for himself, despite her real resistance. She could not cease to love so quickly as he. She had rights, acquired in surrender—at least the right to know what evil thing had wrought its way upon him.

But fret as she might, and burn as she might, with impatience, love-created anger and resentment of some infamy, doubtless practiced on them both, there was nothing in the world she could do.

She wrote again to Glen and had the letter posted in the mail. She asked for information. Was he better? Could he come to Goldite soon? Had he met Mr. Van? Had he understood that confession in her letter? Had he really purchased a mine, with Searle, or had he, by some strange mischance, concerned himself with the others in taking the "Laughing Water" claim?

She explained that she was wholly in the dark, that worry was her only companion. She begged him to come, if traveling were possible, and told of her effort to see him.

That Bostwick had opened and read her letter to Glen, suppressing that final page, together with sundry questions and references to himself, she could never have dreamed. It is ignorance always that baffles, as we grope our way in the world. And Beth had not yet entirely lost all trust in Bostwick himself.

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Searle, in the meantime, having gone straight to the “Laughing Water” claim from Glenmore Kent, had remained three days away from Goldite and had taken no time to write. When he came at last the girl’s suspicions were thoroughly aroused. That the man was a dangerous trickster, a liar, and perhaps a scoundrel she was rapidly becoming convinced.

He arrived at the house in the late afternoon while Mrs. Dick and Beth were engaged together in the dining-room, sewing at a quilt. The meeting was therefore a quiet one and Beth escaped any lover-like demonstrations he might otherwise have made.

Mrs. Dick, in her frank dislike of Bostwick, finally carried her work upstairs.

“Well, well, sweetheart!” Bostwick exclaimed. “You must have heard the news, of course. I expect your congratulations!”

He rose and approached her eagerly. She was standing. She moved a chair and placed herself behind it.

“I suppose you mean the claim you’ve—taken,” she said. “You’re elated over that?”

“Good Lord! aren’t you?” he answered. “It’s the biggest thing I’ve ever done! It’s worth a million, maybe more—that ‘Laughing Water’ claim! And to think that Van Buren, the romantic fool, putting marble slabs on the graves of the *demi-monde*, and riding about like a big tin toreador, should have bought a property on reservation ground, and lost it, gold and all!”

His relish in the triumph was fairly unctuous. His jaw seemed to oscillate in oil as he mouthed his contempt of the horseman.

Beth flamed with resentment. Her love for Van increased despite her judgment, despite her wish, as she heard him thus assailed. She knew he had placed a stone on Queenie’s grave. She admired the fearless friendliness of the action—the token whereby he had linked the unfortunate girl in death to the human family from which she had severed herself in life.

Not to be goaded to indiscretion now she sat down as before with her work.

“And the money—yours and mine—did it go to assist in this unexpected enterprise, and not to buy a claim with Glen?”

“Certainly. No—no—not all of it—certainly not,” he stammered, caught for a moment off his guard. “Some of my funds I used, of course, in necessary ways. Don’t you worry about your thirty thousand. You’ll get it back a hundredfold, from your interest in the claim.”

She glanced up suddenly, startled by what he had said.

"My interest in the claim?"

"Certainly, your interest. You didn't suppose I'd freeze you out, my little woman—my little wife—to be? You are one of the company, of course. You'll be a director later on—and we'll clean up a fortune in a year!"

She was exceedingly pale. What wonder Van had a grievance! He had doubtless heard it all before he came that night to deliver Glen's letter from Starlight. He might even have thought she had sent him to Glen to get him away from his claim.

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A thousand thoughts, that seemed to scorch like fire, went rocketing through her brain. The thing was too much to be understood at once—it went too deep—it involved such possibilities. She must try to hold herself in check—try to be clever with this man.

“Oh,” she said, dropping her eyes to her work, “and Glen is in it too?”

Bostwick was nervous. He sat down.

“Well, yes—to some extent—a little slice of mine,” he faltered. “Naturally he has less than I’ve given to you.”

“But—didn’t he discover the opportunity—the chance?”

“Certainly not!” he declared vehemently. “It’s all my doing—everything! Wholly my idea from the start!” The impulse to boast, to vaunt his cleverness, was not to be resisted. “I told Van Buren the game had only begun! He thought himself so clever!”

She clung to her point.

“But—of course you told me Glen had found the chance, requiring sixty thousand dollars.”

“That was a different proposition—nothing to do with this. I’ve dropped that game entirely. This is big enough for us all!”

She looked the picture of unsophisticated innocence, sewing at a gaudy square of cloth.

“Did this affair also require the expenditure of sixty thousand dollars?”

“No, of course not. Didn’t I say so before?”

“How much did it need—if I may ask?”

Bostwick colored. He could not escape. He dared not even hint at the sum he had employed.

“Oh, just the bare expenses of the survey—nothing much.”

“Then,” she said, “if you don’t mind returning my thirty thousand dollars, I think I’ll relinquish my share.”

He rose hurriedly.

“But I—but you—it won’t be possible—just yet,” he stammered. “This is perfectly absurd! I want you in—want you to retain your interest. There are certain development expenses—and—they can’t be handled without considerable money.”

“Why not use your own? I much prefer to withdraw.” She said it calmly, and looked him in the eye.

He avoided her glance, and paced up and down the room.

“It can’t be done!” he said. “I’ve pledged my support—our support—to get the claim on its feet.”

She grew calmer and colder.

“Wasn’t the claim already on its feet. I heard it was paying well—that quite a lot of gold was seized when—when you and the others took the place.”

His impatience and uneasiness increased.

“Oh, it was being worked—in a pickyune, primitive fashion. We’re going at it right!”

The color came and went in her face. She felt that the man had employed her money, and could not repay it if he would. She pushed the point.

“Of course, you’ll remember I gave you the money to assist my brother Glen. It was not to help secure or develop this other property. I much prefer not to invest my money this way. I shall have to request its return.”



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Bostwick was white.

"Look here, Beth, is this some maudlin sentiment over that brigand, Van Buren? Is that what you mean?"

She rose once more and confronted him angrily. It was not a mere girl, but a strong and resolute woman he was facing.

"Mr. Bostwick," she said, "you haven't yet acquired the right to demand such a thing as that of me. For reasons of my own, maudlin or otherwise, I refuse to have my funds employed in the manner you say you mean to use them. I insist upon the immediate return to me of thirty thousand dollars."

If rage at Van Buren consumed his blood, Bostwick's fear was a greater emotion. Before him he could plainly discern the abject failure of his plans—the plan to marry this beautiful girl, the plan to go on with McCoppet and snatch a fortune from the earth. It was not a time for defiance. He must fence. He must yield as far as possible—till the claim should make him independent. Of the tirade on his tongue against Van Buren he dared not utter a word. His own affairs of love would serve no better.

He summoned a smile to his ghastly lips and attempted to assume a calm demeanor.

"Very well," he said. "If that is the way you feel about your money, I will pay you back at once."

"If you please," she said. "To-day."

"But—the bank isn't open after three," he said in a species of panic. "You can't be utterly unreasonable."

"It was open much later when we were wiring New York some time ago," she reminded him coldly. "I think you'll find it open to-night till nine."

"Well—perhaps I can arrange it, then," he said in desperation. "I'll get down there now and see what I can do."

He took his hat and, glad to escape a further inquisition, made remarkable haste from the house.

Trembling with excitement, quivering on the verge of half-discovered things, flashes of intuition, fragments of deduction, Beth waited an hour for developments.

Searle did not return. She had felt he would not. She was certain her money was gone.

At dusk a messenger boy arrived with the briefest note, in Bostwick's familiar hand.

“Sudden, urgent call to the claim. No time for business. Back as soon as possible. With love and faith, yours, SEARLE.”

How she loathed his miserable lie!

CHAPTER XXXIX

ALGY’S COOKING AND BETH’S DESPAIR

Van and the new supply of provender arrived together at the tent where the partners made their temporary home. It was nearly dusk, the mellow end of a balmy day. Gettysburg, Napoleon, and Dave were all inside the canvas, filling the small hollow cube of air with a mighty reek from their pipes, and playing seven-up on a greasy box. The Chinese cook was away, much to Van’s surprise.

“Gett,” he said, throwing off his belt and revolver, “if Nap was to deal the cards on your tombstone, on the day of Gabriel’s trump, I’ll bet you’d break the crust and take a hand. What have you done with Algy?”

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"He's went to git a job," said Gettysburg. "He called us all a lot of babies. I doggone near kicked him in the lung."

Outside, where a wagon had halted with Van's new purchases, the driver hauled out two respectable boxes and dropped them on the earth.

"What's that?" demanded Napoleon, leaping to his feet. "If it's pirates come to board us again——"

"Don't scare it away," Van interrupted warningly. "It's grub."

With one accord the three old cronies started for the door of the tent. Van followed, prepared to get a dinner under way, since his system was woefully empty.

To the utter astonishment of all, a visitor was bustling up the hill. It was Mrs. Dick.

"Where's Van?" she panted, while still a rod away. "Here, Van!" she exclaimed, the moment she clapped her eyes upon him, "you're just the one I want to see, and I'm an awful busy woman, but I've got to make a deal with you and the sooner it's over the better. So as long as Charlie Sing is cookin' our victuals already I just run up to fight it out, and we might as well begin the program tonight, so all you boys come down to dinner in just about half an hour."

The men were all at sea, even Napoleon, who had once sailed a near-briny river.

"Sit down," said Van, "and give the grounds a chance to settle. We can almost see daylight through what you said, but who, for instance, is Charlie Sing?"

"As if you didn't know!" Mrs. Dick responded warmly. "If you think I'm goin' to call that Chinaman Algy, or anything white, you're way off your ca-base! Algy! for a Chinaman! Not but what he's a good enough cook, and I like him as a friend of yours—and him almost makin' me cry with his tryin' to nurse you four old helpless galoots, but I draw the line at fancy names, and don't you forget it!"

The "four old galoots" looked at one another in bewilderment. Van led Mrs. Dick gently but firmly to a box of provisions and pushed her down upon it.

"Now take a breath," he said, "and listen. Do we understand you to say that Algy has gone to your boarding-house and taken a job as cook?"

"He has," said Mrs. Dick, "but I've named him Charlie."

"That'll turn his stomick," ventured Gettysburg gravely. "He was proud of 'Algy.'"

"He certainly must be desperate," added Van. "I don't quite savvy how it happened."



“Oh, you don’t?” said little Mrs. Dick. “Well, I *do*. He come down there and says to me, says he, ‘We’re broke, Van and us,’ he says, ‘and I’ll go to work and cook for you if you’ll board all the family,’ or words to that effect, says he, ‘and give Van twenty dollars a month, salary,’ he says, and I says I’ll do it, quicker than scat. And that’s all there is to say, and if Charlie wasn’t a Chinaman I’d kiss him in the bargain!” With a quick, impatient gesture she made a daub at her eye and flecked away a jewel.

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Van hauled at his collar, which was loose enough around his neck.

"Say, boys," he said, "think of Algy, being kissed in the bargain. I always thought he got his face at a bargain counter."

"That's all right, Bronson Van Buren!" answered Mrs. Dick indignantly, "but I never come that near to kissin' you!"

Van suddenly swooped down upon her, picked her up bodily, and kissed her on the cheek. Then he placed her again on the box.

"Why didn't you say what you wanted, earlier?" he said. "Now, don't talk back. I want you to harken intently. I'm perfectly willing that Algy should waste his sweetness on the desert air of your boarding-house, if it pleases you and him. I'm willing these old ring-tailed galoots should continue to eat his fascinating poisons, and I certainly hope he'll draw his monthly wage, but I'm going to be too busy to board in any one place, and Algy's salary would make a load I must certainly decline to carry."

Mrs. Dick looked at the horseman in utter disappointment.

"You won't come? Maybe you mean my house ain't good enough?"

Napoleon was somewhat excited by prospects of again beholding Elsa, of whose absence he was wholly unaware.

"We won't go, neither!" he declared. "Doggone you, Van, you know we won't go without the skipper, and you're shovin' us right out of heaven!"

Gettysburg added: "I don't want to say nuthin', but my stomach will sure be the seat of anarchy if it has to git cheated out of goin' down to Mrs. Dick's."

Van was about to reply to them all. He had paused to frame his answer artfully, eager as he was to foster the comfort of his three old partners, but wholly unwilling to accept from either Mrs. Dick or Algernon the slightest hint of aid.

"I admit that a man's reach should be above the other fellow's grasp, and all that," he started, "but here's the point——"

He was interrupted suddenly. A man, running breathlessly up the slope and waving his hat in frantic gestures, began to shout as he came.

"Mrs. Dick! Mrs. Dick!" he cried at the top of his voice. "Help! help! You've got to come!"

Mrs. Dick leaped quickly to her feet to face the oncoming man. It was old Billy Stitts. He had come from Beth.

“Come on! Come on!” he cried as he neared the group, towards which he ceased to run, the better to catch his breath and yell. “There’s hell a-poppin’ in the boarding-house! You’ve got to come!”

He surged up the last remaining ascent at a lively stride.

“What’s the matter? What in the world are you drivin’ at?” demanded Mrs. Dick. “Hold your tongue long enough to tell me what’s the matter.”

“It’s the *chink*!” exploded Billy pantingly. “They tried to run him off the place! He’s locked the kitchen and gone to throwin’ out hot water and Chinese language like a fire-engine on a drunk. And now they’re all a-packin’ up to quit the house, and you won’t have a doggone boarder left, fer they won’t eat Chinese chuck!”

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"What?" said Van drawlingly, "refuse to eat Algy's confections?—a crowd like that? By all the culinary gods of Worcestershire and mustard, they'll eat out of Algy's hand."

He dived inside the tent, caught up his gun, and was strapping it on before Mrs. Dick could catch her breath to utter a word of her wrath.

"Well," said Gettysburg dubiously, "I hate trouble on an empty stomach, but——"

"You stay in camp till you hear the dinner bell," Van interrupted. "This game is mine and Mrs. Dick's. You'll get there in time for dessert."

He did not wait for Mrs. Dick. He started at a pace that none could follow. Mrs. Dick began to run at his heels, calling instructions as she went.

"Be careful of the crock'ry, Van! The stove's bran'-new! I'd hate to have you break the chairs! And don't forgit Miss Kent!"

Old Billy Stitts had remained with the others at the camp.

"Ain't she the female woman?" he said. "Ain't she just about it?"

No one answered. The three old cronies were watching Van as he went.

Van, for his part, heard nothing of what Mrs. Dick was saying, except the name "Miss Kent." He had not forgotten for a moment that Beth was at the seat of war, or that he would perhaps be wiser by far never to behold her again. He was speeding there despite all he felt at what she had done, for she might be involved in trouble at the house, and—at least she was a woman.

He arrived in the midst of a newly concerted plan on the part of lodgers and strangers combined to smoke Algy out of the kitchen. They had broken windows, overturned the furniture, and worked up a lively humor. Algy had exhausted his supply of hot water, but not his supply of language. It seemed as if the stream of Oriental invective being poured through the walls of the building might have withered almost anything extant. But Goldite whisky had failed on his besiegers earlier and their vitals were proof against attack.

Van arrived among them abruptly.

"What's all this pillow-fight about?" he demanded in a voice that all could hear. "Which one of you fellows is it that's forgotten he's a man? Who's looking for trouble with my Chinese cook and Mrs. Dick?"

He boded no good to any man sufficiently hardy to argue the matter to a finish. The attackers lost heart as they faced about and found him there ready for action. From a half-open window above the scene Beth was watching all that was done.

A spokesman for the lodgers found his voice.

“Well, we ain’t a-goin’ to stay in no doggone house with a chink shoved in fer a cook.”

Van nodded: “Have you ever tried Algy’s cooking?”

“No, we ain’t! And we ain’t a-goin’ to, neither!”

The others murmured their assent.

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"You're a fine discriminating cluster of bifurcated, viviparous idiots," said Van in visibly disturbing scorn. "You fellows would have to be grabbed by the scruff of the neck and kicked into Eden, I reckon, even if the snake was killed and flung over the fence, and the fruit offered up on silver platters. The man who hasn't eaten one of Algy's dinners isn't fit to live. The man who refuses to eat one better begin right now on his prayers." He took out his gun and waved it loosely about, adding: "Which one of you remembers 'Now I lay me down to sleep'?"

There was no response. The ten or twelve disturbers of the peace were stirring uneasily in their tracks.

Van gave them a chance.

"All who prefer to recite, 'Now I sit me up to eat,' please raise their hands. Raise 'em up, raise 'em up!" he commanded with the gun. "Put up both hands, while you're at it."

Up went all the hands. Mrs. Dick arrived, and stood looking on and panting in excitement.

"Thanks for this unanimous vote," Van resumed. "I want to inform you boarders in particular that if ever I hear of one of you missing a meal of Algy's cooking, or playing hookey from this lodging-house, as long as Mrs. Dick desires your inglorious company, I'll hand you forthwith over to the pound-keeper with instructions not to waste his chloroform, but to drown the whole litter in a bag."

"Oh, well!" said the spokesman, "I'd just as soon eat the chink's cookin', if it's good."

"Me, too," said a follower, meek as a lamb. A number echoed "Me, too." One added: "We was just having a little bit of fun."

"Well," said Van judicially, "Algy's entitled to his share." He raised his voice: "Hey there, Algy—come out here and play with the boys."

Mrs. Dick had caught sufficient breath to explode.

"Fun!" she said. "My windows broken! My house all upset. Snakes alive, if ever I heard _____"

Algy appeared and interrupted.

"What's mallah you, Van?" he said. "I got no time fool lound now. Been play too much. All time play, that velly superstich! Nobody got time to work."

"That's all right," Van assured him. "The boys here wish to apologize for wasting your valuable time. In fact, they insist. Now then, boys, down on your knees, every Jack in the crowd."

That gun of his had a horribly loose way of waving about to cover all the men. They slumped to, rather than knelt on, their knees.

"Suminagot!" said Algy. "All time too muchee monkey fooling! My dinner not git leady, Van, you savvy that? What's mallah you?"

Van ignored the cook, in addressing the men.

"It's your earnest desire to apologize, boys, I believe," he said. "All in favor will please say Aye."

The men said Aye in growlings, rumblings, and pipings.

Van addressed his cook. "Do you want them to kiss your hand?"

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"Ah! Unema! hong oy!" said Algy blasphemously. "You makee me velly sick! Just wash my hands for finish my dinner. Too much monkey-doodle!" and off he went to his work, followed at once by Mrs. Dick.

"Algy's too modest," Van assured the crowd. "And none of you chaps are fit to apologize to Mrs. Dick, so you'd better go wash up for dinner. But don't let me hear so much as a peep about Algy from one of this bunch, or Eden will turn into Hades." As the men arose to their feet sheepishly, and began to slink away he added to the spokesman, "You there with the face for pie, go up to my camp and call the boys to feed."

The men disappeared. Van, left alone, was turning away when his glance was attracted to the window, up above, where Beth was looking down. His face turned red to the topmost rim of his ears.

The girl was pale, but resolute.

"May I see you a moment, please?" she said, "before the men come in?"

"Certainly." Van went to the front and waited at the foot of the stairs.

When Beth came down he was standing in the doorway, looking off at the shadowy hills. He heard her steps upon the stairs and turned, removing his hat.

For a moment Beth faced him silently, her color coming and going in rapid alternations. She had never seemed more beautiful than now, in her mood of worry and courage.

"Thank you for waiting," she said to him faintly, her heart beating wildly in her bosom, "I felt as if I had the right—felt it only right—won't you please tell me what I have done?"

It was not an easy matter for Van to hold his own, to check an impulse utterly incontinent, utterly weak, that urged him fairly to the edge of surrender. But his nature was one of intensity, and inasmuch as he had loved intensely, he distrusted now with equal force.

"What you have done?" he repeated. "I'm sure I can't tell you of anything that you do not know yourself. What do you wish me to say?"

"I don't know! I don't know," she told him honestly. "I thought if I asked you—asked you like this—you'd tell me what is the matter."

"There's nothing the matter."

"But there is!" she said. "Why not be frank? I know that you're in trouble. Perhaps you blame——"

"I told you once that taking trouble and having trouble supply all the fun I have," he interrupted. "The man without trouble became extinct before he was born."

"Oh, please don't jest," she begged him earnestly. "You and I were friends—I'm sure we were friends—but now——"

"Now, if we are not, do you think the fault is mine?"

He, too, was white, for the struggle was great in his soul.

"It isn't mine!" she said. "I want to say that! I had to say that. I stopped you—just to say that." She blushed to say so much, but she met his stern gaze fearlessly with courage in her eyes.

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He could not understand her in the least, unless she still had more to do, and thought to hold his friendship, perhaps for Searle's protection. He forced himself to probe in that direction.

"And you'd wish to go on being friends?"

It was a hard question—hard to ask and hard to answer. She colored anew, but she did not flinch. Her love was too vast, too strong and elemental to shrink at a crucial moment.

"I valued your friendship—very much," she confessed steadily. "Why shouldn't I wish it to continue?"

It was aggravating to have her seem so honest, so splendid, so womanly and fine, when he thought of that line in her letter. He could not spare himself or her in the agitation of his nature.

"Your way and mine are different," he said. "My arts in deceit were neglected, I'm afraid."

Her eyes blazed more widely than before. Her color went like sunset tints from the sky, leaving her face an ashen hue of chill.

"Deceit?" she repeated. "You mean that I—I have deceived you? What do you mean?"

He could bear no more of her apparent innocence. It was breaking his resolution down.

"Oh, we may as well be candid!" he exclaimed. "What's the use of beating round the bush? I saw your letter—read your letter—by mistake."

"My letter?"

"Your letter to your brother. Through some mistake I was given the final page—a fragment merely—instead of your brother's reply to be brought to you. I was asked to read it—which I did. Is that enough?"

"My letter to—— The last——" At a sudden memory of that letter's last page, with her heart's confession upon it, she burned a blinding crimson. "You read——" she stammered, "—and now——" She could not look him in the face. She leaned against the stair in sudden weakness.

"After that," he said, "does my conduct occasion surprise?"

What he meant, in the light of the letter as she had written it to Glen, as she thought he must have read it, was beyond her comprehension. She had fondly believed he loved

her. He had told her so in actions, words, and kisses. What terrible secret, deep hidden in his breast, could possibly lie behind this thing was more than mind could fathom. Or did he scorn and loathe her now for having succumbed to his love? He had read her confession that she loved him more than anything else in all the world. He knew the last faint word in her heart—and flung her away like this!

She cast one frightened, inquiring look at his face. It was set and hard as stone. The light in his eyes was cold, an accusing glitter. She felt herself utterly abashed, utterly shamed. Her heart had lain naked before him, throbbing with its secret. His foot was upon it. There was nothing to cover its nakedness—nothing to cover her confusion.

For a moment she stood there, attempting to shrink within herself. Her attitude of pain and shame appeared to him as guilt. He felt the whole thing poignantly—felt sorry to send his shaft so truly home, sorry to see the effect of the blow. But, what was the use? His was the way of plain, straightforward dealing. Better one swift wound, even unto death, than a lingering torture for years.

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He opened his lips as if to speak. But there was nothing more to say. He turned towards the door.

Beth could not suppress one little cry.

“Oh!” It was half a moan, half a shuddering gasp.

With her last rally of strength she faced the stairway, and weakly stumbled up the steps.

A spasm of agony seized Van by the cords of his heart. He went blindly away, with a vision in his eyes of Beth groping weakly up the stairs—a doe with a mortal hurt.

CHAPTER XL

GLEN AND REVELATIONS

How she spent that night Beth never could have told. Her mind had refused to work. Only her heart was sensible of life and emotions, for there lay her wound, burning fiercely all the long hours through. That Van had made excuses to his partners and disappeared on “business” was a matter of which she received no account.

In the morning the unexpected happened. Her brother Glen arrived in Goldite, having driven from Starlight with a friend. He appeared at Mrs. Dick’s while Beth was still in her room, indisposed. She had eaten no dinner. She took no breakfast. But with Glenmore’s advent she was suddenly awakened to a new excitement, almost a new sort of hope.

Young Kent was a smooth-faced, boyish chap, slightly stooped, exceedingly neat, black-haired, and of medium height. He was like Beth only in a “family” manner. His nose was a trifle large for his face, but something in his modest, good-natured way, coupled to his earnest delivery of slang in all his conversation, lent him a certain charm that no one long resisted.

He was standing in his characteristic pose, with one hand buried in his pocket, as he laughingly explained himself to Mrs. Dick, when Beth came running down the stairs.

“Glen!” she cried, as she ran along the hall, and casting herself most fervently upon him, with her arms about his neck, she had a good, sky-clearing cry, furious and brief, and looked like a rain-wet rose when she pushed him away and scrutinized him quickly through her tears.

“I say, Sis, why this misplaced fountain on the job?” he said. “Do I look as bad as that?”



"Oh, Glen," she said, "you've been ill! You were hurt! I've worried so. You're well? You've entirely recovered? Oh, I'm so glad to see you. Glen! There's so much I've got to say!"

"Land snakes!" said Mrs. Dick. "If I don't hurry——" and off she went.

"You're the phonograph for mine," said Glen. "What's the matter with your eyes? Searle hasn't got you going on the lachrymals already?"

"No, I—I'm all right," she said excitedly. "I didn't sleep well, that's all. Do sit down. I've so many things to say, so much to ask, I don't know where to begin. It was such a surprise, your coming like this! And you're looking so well. You got my letter, of course?"

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Glen sat down, and Beth sat near, her hand upon his arm. They had been more like companions than mere half-brother and sister, all their lives. The bond of affection between them was exceptionally developed.

"I came up on account of your letter," he said. "Either my perceptive faculties are on the blink or there's something decaying in Denmark. It's you for the Goddess of Liberty enlightening the unenlightened savage. I'm from Missouri and I want you to start the ticker on the hum."

"You know what Searle has done?" she said. "How much do you know of what has happened?"

"Nothing. I've been retired on half knowledge for a month," said Glen. "I haven't been treated right. I'm here to register a roar. Nobody tells me you're in the State till I read that account in the paper. I dope it out to Searle that I am bumping the bumps, and there is nothing doing. He shows up at last and hands me a species of coma and leaves me with twenty-five dollars! That's what I get. What I've been doing is a longer story. I apologize for not having seen your friend who brought the letter, but it's up to you to apologize for a bum epistle to the Prodigal."

"Wait a minute, Glen—wait a minute, please; don't go so fast," she said, gripping tighter to his arm. "I must get this all as straight and plain as possible. You don't mean to say that Searle really drugged you, or something like that—what for?"

"I want to know," said Glen. "What's the answer? Perhaps he preferred I should not behold your Sir Cowboy Gallahad."

"There is something going on," she said, "something dark and horrible. How did you happen to show Mr. Van Buren—let him see the last page of my letter?"

"I didn't let him see anything," said Glen. "I was dopy, I tell you. I didn't even see the letter myself. Searle sat on the bed and read it aloud—and lit his cigar with part of it later."

"My letter?" she said, rising abruptly, and immediately sitting down again. "You never saw—— Searle got it—read it! Oh, the shamelessness! Then—it must have been Searle who made the mistake—let Mr. Van Buren see it—see what I wrote—see—— What did he read you—read about Van—Mr. Van Buren—almost the last thing in the letter?"

Glen was surprised at her agitation. He glanced at her blankly.

"Nothing," he said. "He read me nothing—as I remember—about your friend. Was it something in particular?"

She arose again abruptly and wrung her hands in a gesture of baffled impatience.

“Oh, I don’t know what it all means!” she said. “To think of Searle being there, and intercepting my letter!—daring to read it!—burning it up!—reading you only a portion! Of course, he didn’t read you my suspicions concerning himself?”

“Not on your half-tone,” Glen assured her. “What’s all this business, anyway? Put me wise, Sis, I’m groping like a blind snail in the mulligatawny.”

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Beth sat down as before and leaned her chin in her palm in an attitude of concentration.

"Don't you know what Searle has done—taking the 'Laughing Water' claim?—Mr. Van Buren's claim?"

"I don't know anything!" he told her convincingly. "I'm a howling wilderness of ignorance. I want to know."

"Let's start at the very beginning," she said. "Just as soon as Searle brought your letter—the first one, I mean—in which you asked for sixty thousand dollars to buy a mine——"

"Whoap! Jamb on the emergency!" Glen interrupted. "I never wrote such a letter in my life!"

She looked at him blankly.

"But—Glen—I saw your letter. I read it myself—at this very table."

Glen knitted his brows and became more serious.

"A letter from me?—touching Searle for sixty thou? Somebody's nutty."

"But Glen—what I saw with my own eyes——"

"Can't help it. Nothing doing!" he interrupted as before. "If Searle showed you any such letter as that he wrote it him—hold on, I wrote him for a grub-stake, fifty dollars at the most, but I haven't even seen a mine that any man would buy, that the other man would sell, and Searle sure got my first before I was bug-house from that wollop on the block." He put his hand to the sore spot on his head and rubbed it soothingly.

Beth was pale. She failed to observe his gesture, so absorbed were all her faculties in the maze of facts in which she was somewhat helplessly struggling.

"Could Searle have written such a letter as that?" she said. "What for?"

"For money—if he wrote it," said Glen. "Did he touch you for a loan?"

Beth's eyes were widely blazing. Her lips were white and stiff.

"Why, Glen, I advanced thirty thousand dollars—I thought to help you buy a mine. Searle was to put in a like amount—but recently——"

"Searle! Thirty thousand bucks!" said Glen. "He hasn't got thirty thousand cents! The man who drove me up last night knows the bank cashier, Mr. Rickart, like a brother——"

and Rickart told him Searle is a four-flusher—hasn't a bean—and looks like a mighty good imitation of a crook. Searle! You put up thirty—stung, Beth, stung, good and plenty!"

Beth's hand was on her cheek, pressing it to whiteness.

"Oh, I've been afraid that something was wrong—that something terrible—— Why, Glen, that would be *forgery*—obtaining money under false pretences! He may have done anything—*anything* to get the 'Laughing Water' claim! He may have done something—said something—written something to make Van—Mr. Van Buren think that I—— Oh, Glen, I don't know what to do!"

Her brother looked at her keenly.

"You're in trouble, Sis," he hazarded. "Is 'Van' the candy boy with you?"

She blushed suddenly. The contrast from her paleness was striking.

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"He's the one who is in trouble," she answered. "And he may think that I—he does think something. He has lost his mine—a very valuable property. Searle and some Mr. McCoppet have taken it away from Mr. Van Buren and all those poor old men—after all their work, their waiting—everything! You've got to help me to see what we can do!"

"McCoppet's a gambler—a short-card, tumble weed," said Glen. "You've got to put me next. Tell me the whole novelette, beginning at chapter one."

"As fast as I can," she answered, and she did. She related everything, even the manner in which she and Searle had first become engaged—a business at which she marveled now—and of how and when she had encountered Van, the results of the meeting, the subsequent events, and the heart-breaking outcome of the trip that Van had made to carry her letter to Starlight.

In her letter, her love had been confessed. She glossed that item over now as a spot too sensitive for exposure. She merely admitted that between herself and Van had existed a friendship such as comes but once in many a woman's life—a friendship recently destroyed, she feared, by some horrible machinations of Bostwick.

"You can see," she concluded, "that Mr. Van Buren must think me guilty of almost anything. He doubtless knows my money, that I thought was helping you, went to meet the expense of taking away his property. He probably thinks I sent him to you to get him out of the way, while Searle and the others were driving his partners off the claim.

"My money is gone. I asked for its return and I'm sure Searle cannot repay me. I'm told he couldn't have used so much as thirty thousand dollars in anything legitimate, so far, on the 'Laughing Water' claim. If he'd forge a letter from you, and lie like this and deceive me so, what wouldn't he do to rob these men of their mine?"

"I scent decay," said Glenmore gravely. "Have you got any plans in your attic?"

"Why, I don't know what to do, of course!" she admitted. "But I've got to do something. I've got to show Mr. Van Buren I'm not a willful party to these horrible things. I don't believe I'll ever get my money back. I don't want a share of a stolen mine. I'd be glad to let the money go, and more—all I've got in the world—if only I could prove to Van that I haven't deceived him, haven't taken part in anything wrong—if only I could make these cheats give the 'Laughing Water' back!"

"Van is the candy. I'll have to meet him, sure," said Glen with conviction, looking on her face. "I wish you were wise to more of this game—the way they worked it—how they doped it out. I'll look around and find out how the trick was done, and then we'll go to it together. Guess I'll look for Van right off the bat."

She glanced at him with startled eyes.



“No, Glen—please don’t. I’d rather you wouldn’t—just yet. You don’t understand. I can’t let him think I’m—making overtures. He must think I have a *little* pride. If his mine has been stolen I want to give it back—before he ever sees me again. If you knew how much—oh, how very much, I wish to do that——”

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"I'm on," he interrupted. "It will do me good to put a crimp in Searle."

CHAPTER XLI

SUVY PROVES HIS LOVE

If a single ray of far-off hope had lingered in Van's meditations concerning Beth, and the various occurrences involving himself and his mining property, it vanished when he told her of the letter he had seen and beheld her apparent look of guilt.

One thing the interview had done: it had cleared his decks for action. He had lain half stunned, as it were, till now, while Bostwick held the "Laughing Water" claim and worked it for its gold. A look that was grim and a heat that would brook no resistance had come together upon him.

That claim was his, by right of purchase, by right of discovery as to its worth! He had earned it by hardships, privations, suffering! He meant to have it back! If the law could avail him, well and good! If not, he'd make a law!

McCoppet he knew for a thief—a "law-abiding" criminal of the subtlest type. Bostwick, he was certain, was a crook. Behind these two lay possibilities of crime in all its forms. That suddenly ordered survey of the line was decidedly suspicious. Bostwick and his fiancée had come prepared for some such coup—and money was a worker of miracles such as no man might obstruct.

Van became so loaded full of fight that had anyone scratched a match upon him he might have exploded on the spot. He thought of the simplest thing to do—hire a private survey of the reservation line, either to confirm or disprove the work that Lawrence had done, and then map out his course. The line, however, was long, surveyors were fairly swamped with work, not a foot could be traveled without some ready cash.

He went to Rickart of the bank. Rickart listened to his plan of campaign and shook his head.

"Don't waste your money, Van," he said. "The Government wouldn't accept the word of any man you could hire. Lawrence would have to be discredited. Nobody doubts his ability or his squareness. The reservation boundary was wholly a matter of guess. You'll find it includes that ground—and the law will be against you. I'd gladly lend you the money if I could, but the bank people wouldn't stand behind me. And every bean I've got of my own I've put in the Siwash lease."

Van was in no mood for begging.

“All right, Rick,” he said. “But I’ll have that line overhauled if I have to hold up a private surveyor and put him over the course at the front of a gun.” He went out upon the street, more hot than before.

In two days time he was offered twenty dollars—a sum he smilingly refused. He was down and out, in debt all over the camp. He could not even negotiate a loan. From some of his “friends” he would not have accepted money to preserve his soul.

Meantime, spurred to the enterprise by little Mrs. Dick, old Gettysburg, Napoleon, and Dave accepted work underground and began to count on their savings for the fight.

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At the "Laughing Water" claim, during this period, tremendous elation existed. Not only had three lines of sluices been installed, with three shifts of men to shovel night and day, but a streak of gravel of sensational worth had been encountered in the cove. The clean-up at sunset every day was netting no less than a thousand dollars in gold for each twenty-four hours at work.

This news, when it "leaked," begot another rush, and men by the hundreds swarmed again upon the hills, in all that neighborhood, panning the gravel for their lives. Wild-catting started with an impetus that shook the State itself. And Van could only grit his teeth and continue, apparently, to smile.

All this and more came duly to the ears of Glenmore Kent and Beth. The girl was in despair as the days went by and nothing had been accomplished. The meager fact that Lawrence had run and corrected the reservation line, at Searle's behest, was all that Glen had learned.

But of all the men in Goldite he was doubtless best equipped with knowledge concerning Bostwick's Eastern standing. He knew that Searle had never had the slightest Government authority to order the survey made—and therein lay the crux of all the matter. It was all he had to go upon, but he felt it was almost enough.

The wires to New York were tapped again, and Beth was presently a local bank depositor with a credit of twenty thousand dollars. In a quiet, effective manner, Glen then went to work to secure a surveyor on his own account, or rather at Beth's suggestion.

With the fact of young Kent's advent in the town Van was early made acquainted. When Beth procured the transfer of her money from New York to Goldite, Rickart promptly reported the news. It appeared to Van a confirmation of all his previous suspicions. He could not fight a woman, and Bostwick and McCoppet remained upon the claim. Searle wrote nearly every day to Beth, excusing his absence, relating his success, and declaring the increase of his love.

On a Wednesday morning Glenmore's man arrived by stage from Starlight, instruments and all. His name was Pratt. He was a tall, slow-moving, blue-eyed man, nearly sixty years of age, but able still to carry a thirty-pound transit over the steepest mountain ever built. Glen met him by appointment at the transportation office and escorted him at once to Mrs. Dick's.

Already informed as to what would be required, the surveyor was provided with all the data possible concerning the reservation limits.

Beth was tremendously excited. "I'm glad you've come," she told him candidly. "Can you start the work to-day?"

“You will want to keep this quiet,” he said. “I need two men we can trust, and then I’m ready to start.”

“Two?” said Glen. “That’s awkward. I thought perhaps you could get along with little me.”

Beth, in her tumult of emotions, was changing color with bewildering rapidity.

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"Why—I expected to go along, of course," she said. "I've got a suit—I've done it before—I mean, I expect to dress as you are, Glen, and help to run the line."

Pratt grinned good-naturedly. "Keeps it all in the family. That's one advantage."

"All right," said Glen. "Hike upstairs and don your splendors."

He had hired a car and stocked it with provisions, tents, and bedding. He hastened off and returned with the chauffeur to the door.

Beth, in the costume she had worn on the day when Van found her lost in the desert, made a shy, frightened youth, when at length she appeared, but her courage was superb.

At ten o'clock they left the town, and rolled far out to the westward on their course.

Van learned of their departure. He was certain that Beth had gone to the "Laughing Water" claim, perhaps to be married to Bostwick. Three times he went to the hay-yard that day, intent upon saddling his broncho, riding to the claim himself, and fighting out his rights by the methods of primitive man.

On the third of his visits he met a stranger who offered to purchase Suvy on the spot at a price of two hundred dollars.

"Don't offer me a million or I might be tempted," Van told him gravely. "I'll sell you my soul for a hundred."

The would-be purchaser was dry.

"I want a soul I can ride."

Van looked him over critically.

"Think you could ride my cayuse?"

"This broach?" said the man. "Surest thing you know."

"I need the money," Van admitted. "I'll bet you the pony against your two hundred you can't."

"You're on."

Van called to his friend, the man who ran the yard.

"Come over here, Charlie, and hold the stakes. Here's a man who wants to ride my horse."

Charlie came, heard the plan of the wager, accepted the money, and watched Van throw on the saddle.

"I didn't know you wanted to sell," he said. "You know I want that animal."

"If he goes he sells himself," said Van. "If he doesn't, you're next, same terms."

"Let me have that pair of spurs," said the stranger, denoting a pair that hung upon a nail. "I guess they'll fit."

He adjusted the spurs as one accustomed to their use. Van merely glanced around. Nevertheless, he felt a sinking of the heart. Five hundred dollars, much as he needed money, would not have purchased his horse. And inasmuch as luck had been against him, he suddenly feared he might be on the point of losing Suvy now for a price he would have scorned.

"Boy," he said in a murmur to the broncho, "if I thought you'd let any bleached-out anthropoid like that remain on deck, I wouldn't want you anyway—savvy that?"

Suvy's ears were playing back and forth in excessive nervousness and questioning. He had turned his head to look at Van with evident joy at the thought of bearing him away to the hills—they two afar off together. Then came a disappointment.

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"There you are," said Van, and swinging the bridle reins towards the waiting man, he walked to a feed-trough and leaned against it carelessly.

"Thanks," said the stranger. He threw away a cigarette, caught up the reins, adjusted them over Suvy's neck, rocked the saddle to test its firmness, and mounted with a certain dexterity that lessened Van's confidence again. After all, Suvy was thoroughly broken. He had quietly submitted to be ridden by Beth. His war-like spirit might be gone—and all would be lost.

Indeed, it appeared that Suvy was indifferent—that a cow would have shown a manner no less docile or resigned. He did look at Van with a certain expression of surprise and hurt, or so, at least, the horseman hoped. Then the man on his back shook up the reins, gave a prick with the spurs, and Suvy moved perhaps a yard.

The rider pricked again, impatiently. Instantly Suvy's old-time fulminate was jarred into violent response. He went up in the air prodigiously, a rigid, distorted thing of hardened muscles and engine-like activities. He came down like a new device for breaking rocks—and the bucking he had always loved was on, in a fury of resentment.

"Good boy!" said Van, who stood up stiffly, craning and bending to watch the broncho's fight.

But the man in the saddle was a rider. He sat in the loose security of men who knew the game. He gave himself over to becoming part of the broncho's very self. He accepted Suvy's momentum, spine-disturbing jolts, and sudden gyrations with the calmness and art of a master.

All this Van beheld, as the pony bucked with warming enthusiasm, and again his heart descended to the depths. It was not the bucking he had hoped to see. It was not the best that lay in Suvy's thongs. The beating he himself had given the animal, on the day when their friendship was cemented, had doubtless reduced the pony's confidence of winning such a struggle, while increasing his awe of man. Some miners passing saw the dust as the conflict waged in the yard. They hastened in to witness the show. Then from everywhere in town they appeared to pour upon the scene. The word went around that the thing was a bet—and more came running to the scene.

Meantime, Suvy was rocketing madly all over the place. Chasing a couple of cows that roamed at large, charging at a monster pile of household furnishings, barely avoiding the feed-trough, set in the center of the place, scattering men in all directions, and raising a dust like a concentrated storm, the broncho waxed more and more hot in the blood, more desperately wild to fling his rider headlong through the air. But still that rider clung.

Van had lost all sense save that of worry, love for his horse, and desire to see him win this vital struggle. A wild passion for Suvy's response to himself—for a proving love in the broncho's being—possessed his nature. He leaned far forward, awkwardly, following Suvy about.

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"I'm ashamed of you, Suvy!" he began to cry. "Suvy! Suvy, where's your pride? Why don't you do him, boy? Why don't you show them? Where's your pride? My boy! my boy!—don't you love me any more? You're a baby, Suvy! You're a baby!" He paused for a moment, following still and watching narrowly. "Suvy! Suvy! You're gone if you let him ride you, lad! If you love me, boy, don't break my heart with shame!"

Suvy and a hundred men heard his wild, impassioned appeal. The men responded as if in some pain of the heart they could not escape, thus to see Van Buren so completely wrapped up in his horse. Then some all but groaned to behold the bucking cease.

It seemed as if Suvy had quit. The man in the saddle eased.

"Boy!" yelled Van, in a shrill, startling cry that made the pony shiver. He had seen some sign that no one but himself could understand. "Boy! not that! not that!"

Already Suvy had started to rise, to drop himself backwards on his rider.

He heard and obeyed. He went up no more than to half his height, then seemed to be struck by a cyclone. Had all the frightful dynamic of an earthquake abruptly focused in his being, the fearful convulsion of his muscles could scarcely have been greater. It was all so sudden, so swift and terrible, that no man beheld how it was done. It was simply a mad delirium of violence, begun and ended while one tumultuous shudder shook the crowd.

Everyone saw something loose and twisting detached from the pony's back. Everyone witnessed a blur upon the air and knew it was the man. He was flung with catapultic force against a frightened cow. He struck with arms and legs extended. He clung like a bur to the bovine's side, for a moment before he dropped—and everyone roared unfeelingly, in relief of the tension on the nerves.

The next they knew Van was there with his horse, shaking the animal's muzzle.

"My boy!" he said. "My boy! My luck has changed!"

Apparently it had. The man who had thought he could ride the horse limped weakly to a blanket-roll, and sat himself down to gather up the pieces of his breath and consciousness. He wanted no more. He felt it was cheap at the price he had paid to escape with a hint of his life.

Van waited for nothing, not even the money that Charlie of the hay-yard was holding. He mounted to the saddle that had been the seat of hell, and in joy unspeakable Suvy walked away, in response to the pressure of his knees.

CHAPTER XLII

THE FURNACE OF GOLD

All the following day, which was Thursday, two small companies were out in the hills. One was Beth's, where she, Glen, and Pratt toiled slowly over miles and miles of baking mountains and desert slopes and rocks, tracing out the reservation boundary with a long slender ribbon of steel.

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The other group, equally, if less openly, active, comprised the sheriff and three of his men. They were trailing out the boundary of one man's endurance, against fatigue, starvation, and the hatred of his kind.

Barger had been at his work once more, slaying and robbing for his needs. He had killed a Piute trailer, put upon his tracks; he had robbed a stage, three private travelers, and a freight-team loaded with provisions. He had lived on canned tomatoes and ginger snaps for a week—and the empty tins sufficiently blazed his orbit.

He was known to be mounted, armed, and once more reduced to extremities in the way of procuring food. A trap had been laid, a highway baited with an apparently defenseless wagon, with two mere desert prospectors and their outfit for a load—and this he was expected to attack.

The morning waned and the afternoon was speeding. Old Pratt, with Beth and Glen, was eager to finish by sunset. The farther he walked the more the surveyor apparently warmed to his work. Beth became footsore by noon. But she made no complaint. She plodded doggedly ahead, the ribbon-like "chain" creeping like a serpent, on and on before her.

At the forward end Glen was dragging the thing persistently over hills and dales, and bearing the rod for Pratt with his transit to sight.

The surveyor himself was at times as much as a mile or more behind, dumbly waving Glen to right or left, as he peered through his glass and set the course by the compass and angles of his transit. Anon he signaled the two to wait, and Beth sat down to watch him come, "set up," and wave them onward as before.

She was thus alone, at the end of the chain, for hours at a stretch. So often as Pratt came up from the rear and established a station for his instrument, she asked how the line was working out, and what were the prospects for the end.

"Can't tell till we get much closer to the claim," said Pratt, with never varying patience. "We'll know before we die."

In the heat that poured from sky and rocks it might have been possible to doubt the surveyor's prediction. But Beth went on. Her exhaustion increased. The glare of the cloudless sky and greenless earth seemed to burn all the moisture from her eyes. The terrible silence, the dread austerity of mountains so rock-ribbed and desolate, oppressed her with a sense of awe.

She was toiling as many a man has toiled, through the ancient, burned-out furnace of gold, so intensely physical all about her; and also she was toiling no less painfully through the furnace of gold that love must ever create so long as the dross must be

burned from human ore that the bullion of honor, loyalty, and faith may shine in its purity and worth.

She began to feel, in a slight degree, the tortures that Van, old Gettysburg, Napoleon, and Dave had undergone for many weary years. It was not their weakness for the gold of earth that had drawn them relentlessly on in lands like these; it was more their fate, a species of doom, to which, like the helpless puppets that we are, we must all at last respond.

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She felt a new weight in the cruelty whereby the owners of the “Laughing Water” claim had been suddenly bereft of all they possessed after all their patient years of serving here in this arid waste of minerals. The older men in Van’s partnership she pitied.

For Van she felt a sense of championing love. His cause was her cause, come what might—at least until she could no longer keep alive her hope. Her passion to set herself to rights in his mind was great, but secondary, after all, to the love in her heart, which would not, could not die, and which, by dint of its intensity, bore her onward to fight for his rights.

Alone so much in the burning land all day, she had long, long hours in which to think of Van, long hours in which to contemplate the silence and the vast dispassion of this mountain world. Her own inward burning offset the heat of air and earth; a sense of the aridness her heart would know without Van’s love once more returned, was counter to the aridness of all these barren rocks. The fervor of her love it was that bore her onward, weary, sore, and drooping.

What would happen at the end of day, if Pratt should confirm the Lawrence survey, bestowing the claim on Bostwick and McCoppet, she did not dare to think. Her excitement increased with every chain length moving her onward towards the cove. She did not know the hills or ravines, the canyons descended or acclivities so toilsomely climbed, and, therefore, had not a guide in the world to raise or depress her hope. There was nothing to do but sustain the weary march and await the survey’s end.

All day in Goldite, meanwhile, Van had been working towards an end. He had two hundred dollars, the merest drop in the bucket, as he knew, with which to fight the Bostwick combination. He was thoroughly aware that even when the line could be run, establishing some error or fraud on the part of surveyor Lawrence, the fight would barely be opened.

McCoppet and Bostwick, with thousands of dollars at command, could delay him, block his progress, force him into court, and perhaps even beat him in the end. The enginery of dollars was crushing in its might. Nevertheless, if a survey showed that the line had been falsely moved, he felt he could somewhat rely upon himself to make the seat of war too warm for comfort.

There was no surveyor nearer than two hundred miles, with Pratt, as Van expressed it, “camping with the foe.” He had shaken his partners untimely from their beds that morning—the trio were mining nights, on the four-to-midnight shift—and busied them all with the work of the day, by way of making preparations.

He spent nearly twenty silver dollars on the wire, telegraphing various towns to secure a competent man. He sent a friend to the Government office, where Lawrence was up to

his ears in work, and procured all the data, including metes and bounds, of the reservation tract before its fateful opening.

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The day was consumed in the petty affairs attendant upon such a campaign. When his three old partners went away to their work at four o'clock in the afternoon, a wire had come from far out north that a man who was competent to run the line was starting for Goldite forthwith.

The moonless night, at ten o'clock, found Van alone at his tent. From the top of the hill whereon he had camped a panoramic view of all the town swung far in both directions. The glare of the lamps, the noise of life—even the odor of man upon the air—impinged upon his senses here, as he sat before the door and gazed far down upon it. He thought that man with his fire, smells, and din made chaos in a spot that was otherwise sacred to nature.

He thought of the ceaseless persistence with which the human family haunts all the corners of the earth, pursues life's mysteries, invades its very God. He thought of this desert as a place created barren, lifeless, dead, and severe for some inscrutable purpose—perhaps even fashioned by the Maker as His place to be alone. But the haunter was there with his garish town, his canvas-tented circus of a day, and God had doubtless moved.

How little the game amounted to, at the end of a man's short span! What a senseless repetition it seemed—the same old comedies, the same old tragedies, the same old bits of generosity, and greed, of weakness, hope, and despair! Except for a warm little heartful of love—ah *love*! He paused at that and laughed, unmirthfully. That was the thing that made of it a Hades, or converted the desert into heaven!

"Dreamers! dreamers—all of us!" he said, and he went within to flatten down his blankets for the night.

He had finally blown out his candle and stretched himself upon the ground, to continue his turmoil of thinking, when abruptly his sharp ear caught at a sound as of someone slipping on a stone that turned, just out upon the slope. He sat up alertly.

Half a minute passed. Then something heavy lurched against the tent, the flap was lifted, and a man appeared, stooped double as if in pain.

"Who's there?" demanded Van. "Is that you, Gett?" He caught up his gun, but it and the hand that held it were invisible.

"It's me," said a voice—a croaking voice. "Matt Barger."

He fell on the floor, breathing in some sort of anguish, and Van struck a match, to light the candle.

The flame flared blindingly inside the canvas whiteness. A great, moving shadow of Van was projected behind him on the wall. The light gleamed brightly from his gun. But it fell on an inert mass where Barger had fallen to the earth.

He did not move, and Van, mechanically igniting the candle's wick, while he eyed the man before him, beheld dry blood, and some that was fresh, on the haggard face, on the tattered clothing, and even on one loose hand.

"Barger!" he said. "What in thunder, man——"

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The outlaw rallied his failing strength and raised himself up on one hand. He could barely speak, but his lips attempted a smile.

"I thought I heard you—call fer the joker," he said, "and so—I come."

Van was up. He saw that the man had been literally shot to pieces. One of his arms was broken. A portion of his scalp was gone. He was pierced in the body and leg. He had met the posse, fought his fight, escaped with wounds that must have stopped any animal on earth, and then had dragged himself to Van, to repay his final debt.

"I haven't called—I haven't called for anything," said Van. "You're wounded, man, you're _____"

Barger rose up weakly to his knees.

"Need the money, don't you—now?" he interrupted. "You can—use the reward, I guess."

"Good God, I don't want that kind of money!" Van exclaimed. "Who got you, Matt—who got you?"

"Sheriff," said the convict dispassionately. "Good man, Christler—and a pretty good shot—but I got away with his lead."

He slumped again, like a waxen thing on melting props, deprived of all support.

Van plunged out to the water bench, with its bucket, near the door. He brought back a basin of water, knelt on the ground, and bathed the convict's face. He poured some liquor between the dead-white lips. He slashed and unbuttoned the clothing and tried to staunch the wounds. He bound up the arm, put a bandage on the leg and body, continuing from time to time to dash cold water in the pallid, bearded face.

Barger had fainted at last. What hideous tortures the fellow had endured to drag and drive himself across the mountain roughnesses to win to this tent, Van could but weakly imagine.

The convict finally opened his eyes and blinked in the light of the candle.

"What in hell—was the use of my comin' here," he faltered, "if you don't take the money—the reward?"

"I don't want it!" said Van. "I told you that before."

Barger spoke with difficulty.

"It's different now; they've—got you in a hole. Van Buren, I'm your meat! I'm—nuthin' but meat, but you acted—as if I was a man!"

"We're all in a hole—it's life," said Van, continuing his attentions to the wounds. "I don't want a cent of blood-money, Matt, if I have to starve on the desert. Now lie where you are, and maybe go to sleep. You won't be disturbed here till morning."

"By mornin'—all hell can't—disturb me," Barger told him painfully, with something like a ghastly smile upon his lips. "I'm goin'—there to see."

He lapsed off again into coma. Van feared the man was dead. But having lived a stubborn life, Barger relinquished his hold unwillingly, despite his having ceased at last to care.

For nearly an hour Van worked above him, on the ground. Then the man not only aroused as before, but sat up, propped on his arm.

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"God, I had to—wake!" he said. "I was sure—forgettin' to tell you."

Van thought the fellow's mind was wandering.

"Lie down, Matt, lie down," he answered. "Try to take it easy."

"Too late—fer me to take—anything easy," replied the outlaw, speaking with a stronger voice than heretofore. "Gimme a drink of whisky."

Van gave him the drink and he tossed it off at a draught.

"I said to myself I'd be—hanged if I'd tell you, that—day you cheated the quicksand," Barger imparted jerkily, "but you've got—a—right to know. McCoppet and that—pal of his give Lawrence twenty thousand—dollars, cash, to queer you on the—reservation line and run you off your claim."

Van scrutinized the sunken face and glittering eyes with the closest attention.

"What's that?" he said. "Bought Lawrence to fake out the reservation line? Who told you, Matt? Who told you that?"

The convict seemed to gain in strength. He was making a terrible effort to finish all he had to impart.

"Trimmer put me—on to all the game. It was him that told me—you was goin' through, when I—pretty near got you, in the pass."

Van's eyes took on a deep intensity.

"Trimmer? Trimmer?"

"Larry Trimmer—Pine-tree Trimmer," explained the convict impatiently. "McCoppet—wanted you detained, the day they—jumped your claim. Lawrence—he run the line out crooked fer—twenty thousand bucks. Culver was put away by Cayuse, mebbe because—he was square—Larry wasn't sure—I guess—that's all, but it ought to—help you some."

He dropped himself down and languidly closed his eyes.

"Good heavens, man," said Van, still staring, "are you sure of what you're saying?"

There was no response for a time. Then Barger murmured:

"Excuse me, Van Buren, fer—bein' so damn—long—dyin'."

"You're not dying, Matt—go to sleep," said. Van. "I'll be here beside you, all night."

He sat down, got up and sat down again, stirred to the depths of his being by the story the man had revealed. Beth's money, then, had gone for this, to bribe a Government agent! A tumult of mad, revengeful thoughts went roaring through his mind. A grim look came upon his face, and fire was flashing from his eyes. He arose and sat down a dozen times, all the while looking at the worn, broken figure that lay on the earth at his feet. What an ill-used, gaunt, and exhausted frame it was, loose and abandoned by the strength that once had filled it with vigor and might. What a boyish look had come at last upon the haggard, sunken face!

The night wind was chill. He had forgotten for himself, but he thought of it now for Barger. He laid his blankets on the inert limbs and up around the shoulders.

Perhaps another hour went by, with Van still sleepless by his charge. The convict stirred.

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"Van—Buren," he said in a hoarse, rattling whisper, "Van——"

Van was instantly alert.

"Hello."

Barger partially raised his hand.

"So long,"—and the hand dropped downward.

"Matt!" answered Van, quickly kneeling on the earth. He caught up the fingers, felt their faint attempt to close upon his own—and the man on the ground was dead.

CHAPTER XLIII

PREPARING THE NET FOR A DRAW

Beth Kent, as the sun was going from the sky, fell down three times in utter exhaustion. She and the others had come to within a mile of the "Laughing Water" claim. Pratt was far away in the rear, on the last of his stations. Glen, in the lead, was forging ahead on a second supply of strength. Hidden from the sight of either of the others, Beth was ready for collapse.

But onward crept that merciless ribbon of steel that Glen was dragging. Three times the girl rose and stumbled onward, up the last acclivity. Her legs were like lead. She stubbed her toes on every rock. She could almost have cried with the aches of weariness. It seemed as if that terrible hill unfolded new and steeper slopes for every one she climbed.

She went down repeatedly. To have lain there, hungry, but indifferent to anything but sleep, would have been the most heavenly thing she could conceive. She was literally falling up the hill, with all her machinery slumping towards inertia, when finally Pratt, on his distant hill, sent the signal for Glen to halt.

"All right, Beth—rest!" he called from the end of the chain, and she sank at once in her tracks.

It was almost dusk when Pratt came toiling up the hill. Glen had come down to Beth's position. He too was thoroughly tired. How the line had come out was more than he could care. But Beth, with the last of her flickering strength, arose to hasten Pratt.

"No use in the three of us being seen," he said, planting his transit in the sand, but making no effort to adjust it to a level. "That ridge there overlooks the claim. I'll climb up alone and take a bird's-eye view."

“We’re as near as that!” cried Beth in startled surprise. “Then what do you think? Does the line include the claim?”

“I’ll have to look around from the ridge,” repeated Pratt with aggravating caution. “You can wait ten minutes here.”

He started laboriously up the slope—and Beth stood tensely watching. She thought she saw him top the ridge, but he disappeared from sight.

The darkness was gathering swiftly in all the desert world. The girl’s excitement and impatience grew with a new flare up of energy. To think that Searle was so near at hand, with fate a-hover in the air, sent her pulses bounding madly.

It seemed as if Pratt would never return from the hill. She could almost have dashed to the summit herself, to learn the outcome of their labors. Then at last, from a small ravine, not far away, he appeared in his leisurely manner.

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Beth ran along the slope to meet him.

“Well?” she cried. “What did you find?”

He smiled. “Unless I’m crazy, Lawrence is either a liar or a fool. That claim is safe outside the line by nearly an eighth of a mile.”

“Oh!” cried the girl. She collapsed on the ground and sobbed in exhaustion and joy.

She could go no further. She had kept her strength and courage up for this, and now, inside the goal, she cared not what might happen.

They camped upon the spot. The man with the car, which had taken them out, had been ordered to meet them down at Reservation town—the mushroom camp which had sprung into being no more than a week before the rush. All the way down there Pratt continued alone. He and the chauffeur, long after dark, returned with provisions and blankets. They had driven the car as far as possible, then climbed the ravine on foot.

At nine o’clock Beth was asleep beneath the stars, dreaming of her meeting with Van.

At daylight all were up, and in the chill of the rarified mountain air were walking stiffly to the car. The chauffeur, who had slept in his machine, promised breakfast by eight at Mrs. Dick’s. He tore up the road and he tore away their breath, but he came into Goldite half an hour ahead of time, and claimed he had driven “pretty slow.”

Meantime, the night in the mining-camp had brought no untoward excitement. Van, at his tent, with the covered figure lying on the earth, had welcomed his partners at midnight with the news that a “homeless and worn-out pilgrim of the desert” had come desiring rest. He was sleeping hard; he was not to be disturbed. In the morning he was scheduled to depart.

Tired to utter unconcern, the three old worthies made their beds with Van beside the man at peace. And the whole five slept with a trust and abandon to nature that balanced the living and the dead.

Van was out, had eaten his breakfast, and was waiting for the sheriff when Beth and her party returned. He beheld them, felt his heart lift upward like a lever in his breast, at sight of Beth in her male attire, and grimly shut his jaws.

Christler, the sheriff, arrived a little after eight, bringing in a wounded deputy. Barger had shot him in the thigh. Van did not wait for his man to eat, but urged him home to his bachelor shack and sat him down to a drink of something strong, with a cracker to munch for a meal.

Christler was tired. He was somewhat stout; he had been in the saddle almost constantly for weeks, and now, as a victim of chagrin and disappointment, he was utterly dejected and done.

“Good Lord, Van, ain’t a man to breathe—hain’t he got no rights to live, whatsoever?” he inquired. “You’d chase me up, or somebody would, if I was in my grave.”

“You’d break out of your grave,” Van told him, “if you knew what’s going on.”

Christler looked dubious, draining at his glass.

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"Well, I dunno. It 'ud have to be something pretty rich."

"Bill," said Van, "you're going to stand in and work with me as you haven't worked for a year. It's going to be worth it. Opal McCoppet, and one Searle Bostwick, of New York, have stolen my claim by corrupting Lawrence for twenty thousand dollars, running a false reservation line, and maybe putting Culver out of the way because he was square in his business."

Christler paused in the act of biting his cracker.

"What!"

"There's going to be something doing, Bill," Van added, leaning forward on the table. "I'm going to round up all this gang to-day if it kills you to keep on the trail."

Christler still sat staring.

"By the Lord Harry!" he said. "By the Lord—but, Van, I didn't come home to rest. I've got Barger going, somewhere, shot to a sieve. But he's some disappeared. If that ain't just my luck! I'm goin' to git him though, you bet! Lord!—my pride—my profession pride—not to mention that little old reward! I admit I want that money, Van. I reckon I've pretty near——"

"Yes, you've earned it," Van interrupted. "I'm going to see that you get it. Bill, but first you get busy with me."

"You'll see that I get——" Christler put the cracker in his mouth. "Don't talk to a genuine friend like that. I'm tired already."

"Are you?" said Van. "Let's see. Barger is here—in camp."

Up shot the sheriff as if from the force of a blast.

"What!" he shrilled. "Barger! Van, I'll——"

Van grinned.

"Don't forget you're tired, Bill. Matt won't get away."

"Good Lord, boy—tell me where's he at!" cried Christler, dancing on the floor as he strapped his guns upon him. "Me a-thinkin' I had shot him up and all this time——"

"You shot him enough, poor devil," Van interrupted quietly. "He's dead in my tent on the hill."

The sheriff paused with one hand held in the air.

“Dead! Crawled all the way to Goldite!” He started for the door.

“Hold on,” said the horseman, blocking his path. “I told you Matt can’t get away. We’re going out to get Lawrence first, and then McCoppet and his friend.”

CHAPTER XLIV

THE ENGINES OF CLIMAX

McCoppet was in town. He had come to camp at midnight of the previous day, duly followed by his friend Larry Trimmer. The lumberman had waxed impatient. Fully two thousand dollars of the money he had “earned” was still unpaid—and hard to get. He had gone to the “Laughing Water” claim, in vain, and a surly heat was rising in his veins.

Bostwick was due, in his car, at nine o’clock. His visit to Goldite was not entirely one of business. He had grown alarmed at the lack of news from Beth. His letters had been ignored. He not only feared for the fate of his affairs of the heart, but perhaps even more for what she might have done with respect to the money she had asked him to return, a very small proportion of which he was now prepared to repay.

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Meantime, Beth, her brother, and Pratt had gratified their most crying needs on Algy's cooking, much to that worthy Celestial's delight. There were two things Beth intended to perform: report the results of her labors to Van, and attack Mr. Lawrence in his den.

Precisely what she meant to say or do to the Government representative she did not or could not determine. Some vague idea of making him confess to an infamy practiced at Bostwick's instance was the most she had in mind. If half the success already achieved could be expected here, she would have a report worth while to make when Van should be presently encountered.

Impetuous, eager to hasten with her work, she insisted upon an immediate advance. Glenmore readily supported her position. Pratt developed shyness. His forte was hiking over desert hills, lugging a transit, running lines or levels; he felt out of place as a fighter, or even an accuser. Nevertheless, he went, for Beth insisted.

Already the streets were crowded full of life, as the three proceeded down the thoroughfare. A mining-camp is a restless thing; its peoples live in the streets. Freight teams, flowing currents of men, chains of dusty mules, disordered cargoes on the sidewalks, and a couple of automobiles were glaringly cut out from their shadows, as the sunlight poured upon them. Sunlight and motion, false-fronted buildings, tents, and mountains, and fever—that is the camp on the desert.

With excitement increasing upon her at every step, Beth glanced at the crowds in a rapid search for Van. He was not to be seen. In all the throng, where old men and youths, pale and swarthy, lazy and alert were circulating like the blood of Goldite's arteries, there was not a face that she knew.

They came to the office where Lawrence presided just as a stranger was departing, Lawrence was alone. He occupied the inner apartment, as Culver had done, but the door was standing open.

It was Beth who knocked and entered first as the man called out his invitation. She had never in her life appeared more beautiful. Color was flaming in her cheeks as on a rose. Her eyes were exceptionally bright and brown. The exquisite coral of her lips was delicately tremulous with all her short, quick breathing.

Lawrence arose, as she and the others appeared in the door, and removed his hat. He was a short, florid person, with a beard of fiery red. His eyes were of the lightest gray; and they were shifting.

"Good-morning," he said, in undisguised astonishment, beholding Beth. "You—pardon me—you——"

"Good-morning," Beth replied faintly. "We called—are you Mr. Lawrence?"

“At your service.” Lawrence bowed. “I rarely expect—in my line of work—my business. Miss—Miss——”

“Miss Kent,” said Glenmore, interrupting. “And my name is Kent. I suppose you’re wise to Mr. Pratt.”

Lawrence continued to bow.

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"I'm very happy to—how are you, Pratt? How are you? Won't you have a chair, Miss Kent?"

Pratt nodded and murmured a greeting. He was decidedly uneasy.

Beth always moved by impulse. It hastened her now to the issue. She sat down and faced their man.

"Mr. Lawrence," she said, "I believe you ran the reservation line, not long ago, and gave Mr. Bostwick and a friend of his the 'Laughing Water' claim."

Lawrence looked alive.

"I certainly ran the line," he said. "Instructions came from—from headquarters, to ascertain the precise limitations of the reservation. The *results* gave the 'Laughing Water' claim to its present owners, by right of prior location, after the opening hour, as the claim was included in the tract." He had uttered this speech before. It fell very glibly from his tongue.

"Yes, we know all that—so far as it's true," said Beth with startling candor, "but we know it isn't true at all, and you've got to confess that you made some ridiculous blunder or else that you were bribed."

She had not intended to plump it out so bluntly, so baldly, but a certain indignation in her breast had been rapidly increasing, and her impulse was not to be stayed.

"Gee!" murmured Glen, "that's going some!"

Lawrence turned white, whether with anger or fright could not have been determined.

"Miss Kent!" he said. "You—you're making a very serious——"

"Oh, I know!" she interrupted. "I expect you to deny it. But a great deal of money—my money—has been used, and Mr. Pratt has run the line—with myself and my brother—yesterday—so we know that you've either been fooled or you've cheated."

Lawrence had risen. His face was scarlet.

"Upon my word!" he said. "Pratt, you and your friend I can order from the office! The lady——"

"You can't order anything!—not a thing!" said Beth. "Glen! Mr. Pratt!—you've got to stay and help! I know the truth—and it's got to be confessed! Mr. Van Buren——"

"I can leave myself, since you insist upon remaining," interrupted Lawrence, taking his hat and striding towards the door, in a panic to get to McCoppet for much-needed aid. "Such an utterly unheard of affront as this——"

"Glen! run and find Mr. Van Buren!" Beth broke in excitedly. "Don't let him go, Mr. Pratt!"

Lawrence had reached his outer office and was almost at the door. Beth was hastening after, with Glen at her heels. All were abruptly halted.

Van and the sheriff appeared in the door, before which idlers were passing. Beth was wild with joy.

"Van," she cried, "Oh, Mr. Van Buren, I'm sure this man has cheated you out of your claim! We ran the line ourselves—my brother, Mr. Pratt, and I—yesterday—we finished yesterday! We found the claim is not inside the reservation! My money was used—I'm sure for bribery! But they've got to give you back your claim, if it takes every penny I've got! I was sending Glen to let you know. I asked Mr. Lawrence to confess! You won't let him go! You mustn't let him go! I am sure there's something dreadful going on!"

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It was a swift, impassioned speech, clear, ringing, honest in every word. It thrilled Van wondrously, despite the things that had been—her letter, and subsequent events. He all but lost track of the business in hand, in the light of her sudden revelations. He did not answer readily, and Lawrence broke out in protestation.

“It’s infamous!” he cried. “If anyone here except a woman had charged—had been guilty of all these outrageous lies——”

Half a dozen loiterers had halted at the door, attracted by the shrill high tones of his voice.

“That’s enough of that, Lawrence,” Van interrupted quietly. “Every word of this is true. You accepted twenty thousand dollars to falsify that line. Your chief was murdered to get him out of the way, because it was *known* you could be bribed. I came here to get you, and I’ll get all the crowd, if it kills half the town in the fight.” With one quick movement he seized his man by the collar. “Here, Bill, hustle him out,” he said to Christler. “We’ve got no time to waste.”

Lawrence, the sheriff, and himself were projected out upon the sidewalk by one of his quick maneuvers. A crowd of men came running to the place. Above the rising murmur of their voices, raised in excitement, came a shrill and strident cry.

“Van! Van!” was the call from someone in the crowd.

It was lean old Gettysburg. Dave and Napoleon were pantingly chasing where he ran.

“Van!” yelled Gettysburg again. “It’s Barger!—Barger!—dead in the tent—it’s Barger—up there—dead!”

Barger! The name acted as swiftly on the crowd as oil upon a flame. It seemed as if the wave of news swept like a tide across the street, down the thoroughfare, and into every shop.

Two automobiles were halted in the road, their engines purring as they stood. Their drivers dismounted to join the gathering throng. One of the men was Bostwick, down from the hills. He had searched for Beth at Mrs. Dick’s, and then had followed here.

“Barger! Barger’s dead in camp and the ‘Laughing Water’ claim was stolen—and Culver killed!” One man bawled it to the crowd—and it sped to Bostwick’s ears.

One being only departed from the scene—Trimmer, the lumberman, swiftly seeking McCoppet.

Van, in his heat, had told too much, accusing the prisoner in hand. He silenced Gettysburg abruptly and started to force aside the crowd.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, move aside,” he said. “I’ve got—by Jupe! there’s Bostwick!”

It was Bostwick fleeing to his car that Van had discovered. Searle had seen enough in the briefest of glances. He had heard too much. He realized that only in flight could the temper of the mob be avoided. He had seen this mob in action once before—and the walls of his stomach caved.

Like a youthful Hercules in strength and action, Van went plunging through the crowd to get his man. But he could not win. Bostwick had speeded up his motor in a panic for haste and his car leaped away like a dragon on wings, the muffler cut-out roaring like a gattling.

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Van might perhaps have shot and killed the escaping man who held the wheel, but he wanted Searle alive.

A roar from the crowd replied to the car. A score of men ran madly in pursuit. None of them knew the details of the case, but they knew that Bostwick was wanted.

They drifted rearward from the hurtling car like fragments of paper in its wake. The few down street who danced for a moment before the modern juggernaut, to stop it in its course, sprang nimbly away as it rocketed past—and Searle was headed for the desert.

One wild, sweeping glance Van cast about, for a horse or something to ride. Suvy was stabled, unsaddled, up the street. Bostwick and his cloud of dust were dropping away in a swiftly narrowing perspective. And there stood a powerful, dusty-red car—empty—its motor in motion!

There was no time to search for its owner. There were half a dozen different cars with which Van Buren was familiar. He ran to it, glanced at its levers, wheel, and clutch, recognized the one type he had coveted, and hurled himself into the seat.

“Here! You!” yelled the owner, fighting through the crowd, but three big miners fell upon him and bore him to the earth. They hoped to see a race.

They saw it begin with a promptness incredible.

One—two changes of the snarling gears they heard before the deafening cut-out belched its explosions. Then down the street, in pursuit of the first, the second machine was fired.

The buildings, to Van, were blended in grayish streaks, on either side, as his gaze was fastened on the vanishing car ahead. He shoved up his spark, gave her all the gas, froze to the wheel like a man of steel—and swooped like a ground-skimming comet out upon the world.

The road for a distance of fully five miles was comparatively level. It was rutted by the wheels of heavy traffic, but with tires in the dusty ruts a car ran unimpeded.

Both, for a time were in the road, flaying up a cloud of smoke like a cyclone ripping out its path.

Searle had not only gained a half-mile lead, but his car was apparently swifter. He knew its every trick and ounce of power. He drove superbly. He was reckless now, for he had not missed the knowledge that behind him was a meteor burning up his trail.

Like a leaping beast—a road-devouring minotaur—the car with Van shot roaringly through space. He could not tell that Searle, ahead, was slipping yet further in the



lead. He only knew that, come what might, till the mechanism burst, or the earth should split, he would chase his man across the desert. The dust in the air from Bostwick's car drove blindingly upon him. Far, far away, a mere speck on the road, he beheld a freight-team approaching—a team of twenty animals at least, that he and Bostwick must encounter.

A sudden memory of road conditions decided him to move. The ruts where he was were bad enough—they were worse where the team must be passed.

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He did not reduce his speed to take to the brush. The car beneath him flung clean off the ground as he swung to climb out of the grooves. It landed with all four wheels a-spin, but only struck on two. A sudden swerve, far out of the course, and the monster righted abruptly. Another sharp turn, and away it went again, crushing the brush and flinging up the sand in a track of its own that paralleled the road, but rougher though free from the ruts.

The brush was small, six inches high, but the wheels bounced over it madly. The whole car hurtled and bounded in a riot of motion. It dived, it plunged nose upward, it roared like a fiend—but it shot with cannon-ball velocity across the desert's floor.

Five minutes later Bostwick's car was almost fronting the team in the road, with its score of dusty mules. He dared not take the ruts at speed, and groaned as he slowed to climb the bank. He lost but little time, however, since once on the side he was going ahead again like mad; nevertheless, he cast a glance behind and saw that his gap had narrowed. Moreover, he would not attempt to return to the ruts as before, as a second of the teams was coming a mile or so away.

Like two pitching porpoises, discharging fiery wrath and skimming the gray of the desert sea, the two devices raced upon the brush. And nerve began to tell. Van was absolutely reckless; Searle was not. The former would have crowded on another notch of speed, but Bostwick feared, and shut off a trifle of his power. Even then he was rocking, quivering, careening onward like a star escaped from its course; and the gains Van made were slow.

The man on the second team paused to see them pass. In smoke and dust and with war's own din they cleaved the startled air. And the man who saw the look that had set on Van's hard-chiseled face was aware that unless his car should fail there was nothing on earth he could not catch.

Bostwick had begun to weaken. The pace over sage-brush, rocks, and basins of sand was racking both the car and the nerves that held the wheel. How long such a flight could be continued he dared not guess. Even steel has limitations. To what he was fleeing he could scarcely have told, since the telegraph would send its word throughout the desert-land, and overhaul him finally.

A sickening apprehension assailed him, however, within the minute. One of his cylinders was missing. His trained ear caught at the change of the "tune," and he felt his speed decreasing. He glanced back briefly, where the dusty lump of steel, like a red-hot projectile, thundered in his wake.

He beheld a sudden fan-like flare of dust in the cloud Van was making. He even faintly heard the far report, and a grim joy sprang in his being.



Van had blown out a tire. Striking the high places, crowding on the speed, holding to a straight-away course like a merciless fate, the horseman heard an air cushion go, felt the lurch and lameness of the car, and steadied it back upon its road. He did not retreat by so much as a hair the lever advancing his spark. He did not budge the gas control, but left it still wide open. If all of his tires should blow out together he would not halt his pace. He would drive that car to destruction, or to triumph in the race.

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Searle's rejoicing endured but the briefest span. His motor had begun again to splutter, in mechanical death. Then, with a sudden memory, sweat broke out on Bostwick's face. His gasoline was gone! He had thoroughly intended refilling his tank, having barely had a sufficient supply to run him from the claim to camp; and this had been neglected.

His car bumped slowly for a score of yards, then died by the side of the road. He leaped out madly, to assure himself the tank was really dry. He cursed, he raved. It seemed absurd for this big, hot creature to be dead. And meantime, like a whirlwind coming on, Van Buren was crashing down upon him.

"By God!" he cried, "I'll fix you for this!" and a wild thought flashed to his mind—a thought of taking Van Buren's car and fleeing as before.

He leaped in the tonneau and caught up a heavy revolver, stored beneath the seat. He glanced at the cylinder. Four of the cartridges only were unused. He remained inside the "fort" of the car, with the weapon cocked and lowered out of sight.

Charging down like a meteor, melting its very course, Van and the red car came by leaps and plunges. He was shutting off the power gradually, but still rushing up with frightening speed, when Bostwick raised his gun and fired.

The bullet went wide, and Van came on. Bostwick steadied and fired again. There was no such thing as halting the demon in the car. But the target's size was rapidly increasing! Nevertheless, the third shot missed, like the others. Would the madman never halt?

Bostwick dropped a knee to the floor, steadied the barrel on the cushion, lined up the sights, and pulled the trigger.

With the roar of the weapon Van abruptly drooped. The bullet had pierced his shoulder. And he still came on. His face had suddenly paled; his lips had hardened in a manner new to his face. He halted the car, aware that his foe had exhausted his ammunition, since no more shots were fired.

His own big gun he drew deliberately. To sustain himself, through the shock of his wound, was draining the utmost of his nerve. He was hardly ten feet away from the man who stood there, a captive in his car.

"Well, Searle," he said, "you're a better shot than I thought—and a better driver. In fact you drive so almighty well I am going to let you drive me back to camp." He arose from his seat. He was bleeding. His left arm was all but useless. "Come down," he added. "Come down and take my seat. And don't make the slightest error in etiquette, Searle, or I'll see if a forty-some-odd ball will bounce when it lands on your skull."

Bostwick had expected to be shot on the spot. No cornered rat could have been more abjectly afraid. His nerve had oozed away the more for the grimness of the man who stood before him—a man with such a wound as that who was still the master of his forces!

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He was terribly white. His teeth fairly chattered in his head. He had played a desperate part—and lost. The race and this present *denouement* had shattered the man completely. He came down to the ground and stood there, silently staring at Van.

Despite his show of strength Van stepped with difficulty to the back of his car and seated himself within.

“Up in the seat there, Searle,” he repeated, “and drive back at moderate speed.”

Bostwick's surrender was complete. He climbed to the driver's position, still silently, and started the car in an automatic way that knew no thought of resistance. At the rear of his head Van held the gun, and back towards Goldite they rolled.

Two miles out the sheriff, in a borrowed car, grimly seated at the driver's side, came bearing down upon them. The cars were halted long enough for the sheriff to take his place with Searle, and then they hastened on.

Christler had instantly seen that Van was wounded. He as quickly realized that to rush Van to town and medical attendance was the only possible plan.

He merely said, “You're hurt.”

Van tried to smile. “Slightly punctured.” He was rapidly losing strength.

Christler thought to divert him. He shouted above the purring of the car.

“Found Matt all right. I'm goin' to take him back to the State authorities in that convict suit that's hangin' 'round the store.”

Van was instantly aroused. “No you don't Bill! No you don't! I've got use for those stripes myself. You'll buy Matt the best suit of clothes in town, and charge the bill to me.”

If Bostwick heard, or understood, he did not make a sign. He was driving like a servant on the box, but he could not have stood on his feet.

They were nearing the town. A cavalcade of horsemen, drivers of buggies, and men on foot came excitedly trooping down the road to meet the short procession.

Despite his utmost efforts, Van was gone. Weak from the loss of blood and the shock, he could hold up his frame no longer.

“Bill,” he said, as the sheriff turned around, “I guess I'm—all in—for a little. Cold storage *him*, till I get back on my feet.”

He waved a loose gesture towards Bostwick, then sank unconscious on the floor.

CHAPTER XLV

THE LAST CIGARS

Trimmer, the lumberman, not to be stayed, had broken in upon McCoppet ruthlessly, with perceptions unerring concerning the troubles in the air, when Lawrence was arrested. The gambler consented to an interview with instinctive regard for his safety. That something significant was laid on Trimmer's mind he felt with a subtle sense of divination.

The lumberman, smoking furiously, came to his point with utmost directness.

"Opal," he said, "I'm goin' away, and I want ten thousand dollars. I want it now. You owe me some you ain't paid up, and now I'm raisin' the ante."

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"You're raising bunions," McCoppet assured him softly, throwing away his unsmoked cigar and putting a fresh one in his mouth. "I'll pay you what I agreed—when I get the ready cash."

"Think so, do you, Opal?" inquired the lumberman, eying his man in growing restlessness. "I think different, savvy? I'm onto you and your game with Lawrence—you payin' him twenty thousand bucks to fake the reservation. I want ten thousand right away, in the next ten minutes, or you'd better pack your trunk."

McCoppet, startled by the accusation, watched the savage manner in which the lumberman ate up the smoke of his weed. He could think of one way only in which a man of Trimmer's mentality could have come upon certain private facts.

"So," he said presently, "you crawled in under this place, this floor, and caught it through the cracks."

"Knot-hole," said Trimmer gesturing, "that one over there. And I tell you, Opal, I want that money now. Do you hear? I want it now!" He smashed his heavy fist upon the table, and off flew the ash of his cigar.

"What will you do if I refuse?" the gambler asked him coldly. "Wait! Hold on! Don't forget, my friend, that Culver's murder is up to you, and I'll give you up in a minute."

The lumberman rose. Every moment that passed increased the danger to them both.

"Look a-here, Opal," he said in a threatening voice of anger, "I ain't a-goin' to fool with you no longer. Hear me shout? Culver's up to you as much as me. You stole the 'Laughin' Water' claim. There's hell a-sizzlin' down the street right now—down to Lawrence's. If you don't cough up ten thousand bucks pretty pronto——"

"So, Larry—so, you've split on me already," the gambler interrupted, rising and narrowing his gaze upon the bloated face. "You've peddled it maybe, and now you come to me——"

"I ain't peddled nuthin'!" Trimmer cut in angrily. "I didn't tell no one but Barger, and he ain't no friend of Van Buren's. But Lawrence is caught. Pratt run out the line, and now it's me that stands between you and trouble, and I want the money to stand."

McCoppet was far less calm than he appeared. How much was already really known to the town was a matter wholly of conjecture. And Trimmer's haste to cash in thus and probably vanish excited his gravest suspicions. He eyed his friend narrowly.

"Larry, we'll wait and see how much you've maybe leaked."



“No we won’t wait fer nuthin’!—not fer nuthin’, understand?” corrected Trimmer aggressively. “I ain’t a-trustin’ you, Opal, no more! You done me up at every turn, and now, by God! you’re goin’ to come to terms!” He pulled an ugly, rusty gun, and thumped with its muzzle on the table. “You’ll never leave this room alive if I don’t git the money. Ring fer it, Opal, ring the bell, and order it in with the drinks!”

McCoppet would have temporized. It was not so much the money now as the state of affairs in the street. How much was known?—and what was being done? These were the questions in his mind.

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"Don't get excited, friend," he said. "If things are out, and you and I are caught with the aces in our sleeves, we may have to fight back to back." He was edging around to draw his pistol unobserved,

But Trimmer was alert. "Stand still, there, Opal, I've got the drop," he said. "I'm lookin' out fer number one, this morning, understand? You ring the——"

A sudden, loud knock at the door broke in upon his speech, and both men started in alarm.

"Opal! Opal!" cried a muffled voice in accents of warning just outside the door, "Christler's on your trail! Come out! Come out and—huh! Too late! You'll have to get out the window!"

The roar and excitement of the coming crowd, aroused to a wild indignation, broke even to the den. An army of citizens, leading the way for Christler's deputies, was storming McCoppet's saloon.

He heard, and a little understood. He knew too much to attempt to explain, to accuse even Trimmer to a mob in heat. Nothing but flight was possible, and perhaps even that was a risk.

He started for the window. Trimmer leaped before him.

"No you don't!" he said. "I told you, Opal——"

"Take that!" the gambler cut in sharply. His gun leaped out with flame at its end; and the roar, fire, bullet, and all seemed to bury in the lumberman's body. A second shot and a third did the same—and Trimmer went down like a log.

His gun had fallen from his hand. With all his brute vitality he crawled to take it up. One of the bullets had pierced his heart, but yet he would not die.

McCoppet had snatched up a chair and with it he beat out the window. Then Trimmer's gun crashed tremendously—and Opal sank against the sill.

He faced his man. A ghastly pallor spread upon his countenance. He went down slowly, like a man of melting snow, his cigar still hanging on his lip.

He saw the lumberman shiver. But the fellow crowded his cigar stump in his mouth, with fire and all, and chewed it up as he was dying.

"Good shot," said McCoppet faintly. His head went forward on his breast and he crumpled on the floor.

CHAPTER XLVI

WASTED TIME

Van was conveyed to Mrs. Dick's. The fever attacked him in his helplessness and delirium claimed him for its own. He glided from unconsciousness into a wandering state of mind before the hour of noon.

His wound was an ugly, fiery affair, made worse by all that he did. For having returned from his lethargy, he promptly began to fight anew all his battles with horses, men, and love that had crossed his summer orbit.

Gettysburg, Dave, and Napoleon begged for the brunt of the battle. They got it. For three long days Van lay upon his bed and flung them all around the room. He hurt them, bruised them, even called them names, but ever like three faithful dogs, whom beatings will never discourage—the beatings at least of a master much beloved—they returned undaunted to the fray, with affection constantly increasing.

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There were three other nurses—two women and Algy, the cook. But Beth was the one who slept the least, who glided most often to the sick man's side, who wetted his lips and renewed the ice and gave him a cooler pillow. And she it was who suffered most when he called upon her name.

"Beth! Beth!" he would call in a wildness of joy, and then pass his hand across his eyes, repeating: "—this is the man I hate more than anyone else in the world!"

That she finally knew, that the tell-tale portion of her letter had been found when Bostwick was searched—all this availed her nothing now, as she pleaded with Van to understand. He fought his fights, and ran his race, and returned to that line so many times that she feared it would kill him in the end.

At midnight on that final day of struggling he lay quite exhausted and weak. His mind was still adrift upon its sea of dreams, but he fought his fights no more. The fever was still in possession, but its method had been changed. It had pinned him down as a victim at last, for resistance had given it strength.

At evening of the seventh day he had slept away the heat. He was wasted, his face had grown a tawny stubble of beard, but his strength had pulled him through.

The sunlight glory, as the great orb dipped into purple hills afar, streamed goldenly in through the window, on Beth, alone at his side. It blazoned her beauty, lingering in her hair, laying its roseate tint upon the pale moss-roses of her cheeks. It richened the wondrous luster of her eyes, and deepened their deep brown tenderness of love. She was gold and brown and creamy white, with tremulous coral lips. Yet on her face a greater beauty burned—the beauty of her inner-self—the beauty of her womanhood, her nature, shining through.

This was the vision Van looked upon, when his eyes were open at last. He opened them languidly, as one at peace and restored to control by rest. He looked at her long, and presently a faint smile dawned in his eyes.

She could not speak, as she knelt at his side, to see him thus return. She could only place her hand upon her cheek and give herself up to his gaze—give all she was, and all her love, and a yearning too vast to be expressed.

The smile from his eyes went creeping down his face as the dawn-glow creeps down a mountain. Perhaps in a dream he had come upon the truth, or perhaps from the light of her soul. For he said with a faint, wan smile upon his lips:

"I don't believe it, Beth. You meant to write 'love' in your letter."

The tears sprang out of her eyes.

“I did! I did! I did!” she sobbed in joy too great to be contained. “I’ve always loved you, *always!*”

Despite his wound, his weakness—all—she thrust an arm beneath his neck and pillowed her cheek on his breast. He wanted no further explanation, and she had no words to spend.

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One of his arms was remarkably efficient. It circled her promptly and drew her up till he kissed her on the lips. Then he presently said:

"How much time have we wasted?"

"Oh, *days!*" she said, warmly blushing. "Ever since that night on the desert."

He shook a smiling negative.

"Wrong. We've wasted all our lives."

He kissed her again, then sank into slumber with the dusk.

CHAPTER XLVII

A TRIBUTE TO THE DESERT

Love is a healer without a rival in the world. Van proved it—Van and Beth, of course, together, with Gettysburg, Dave, and Napoleon to help, and Algy to furnish the sauce. All were present, including Glen and Mrs. Dick, on the summer day of celebration when at last Van came down to dinner. At sight of the wan, wasted figure, Algy, in his characteristic way, fought down his heathen emotions.

"What's mallah you, Van?" he demanded, his face oddly twitching as he spoke. "Makee evlybody *sick!* That velly superstich! Nobody's got time cly for you come home—makee my dinner spoil!"

He bolted for the kitchen, swearing in loving Chinese.

But with that day passed, Van soon snatched back his own. His strength returned like a thing that was capable of gladness, lodging where it belonged. His spirit had never been dimmed.

Bostwick, who had been detained by the sheriff, faithfully waiting till Van should "get back on his feet," was almost relieved when his day for departure finally dawned. He was dressed, at Van's express desire, in the convict suit which he had worn on the day of his arrival.

Van was on hand when at last the stage, with Bostwick and Christler for passengers, was ready to pull up the street.

"Searle," he said, "for a man of your stripe you are really to be envied. You're going to about the only place I know where it's even remotely possible to be good and not be lonesome."

Searle went. Lawrence, perhaps more fortunate, had managed to escape. He had fled away to Mexico, taking the bulk of his plunder.

Gettysburg, Dave, and Napoleon returned once more to the placer and sluices on the hill. Glenmore Kent was of the party, as superintendent of the mine. He held a degree from a school of mines, and knew even more than he had learned. Moreover, he had saved the gold pilfered by Bostwick and McCoppet.

Then one sunny morning Van and Beth were married by a Justice of the Peace. Algy and Mrs. Dick were the lawful witnesses of the rites. The only nuptial present was the gift of a gold mine in the mountains to the bride.

"You see," said Van, "*you* are my 'Laughing Water' claim—and just about all I can handle."

They were alone. She came to his arms and kissed him with all the divinity and passion of her nature. He presently took her face in his hands and gave her a rough little shake.

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“Where shall we go to spend our honeymoon?”

She blushed like a tint of sunset, softly, warmly, and hid her cheek upon his shoulder.

“Out in the desert—underneath the sky.”

THE END