

The Black Pearl eBook

The Black Pearl

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THE BLACK PEARL

by

MRS. WILSON WOODROW

Author of "Sally Salt," "The New Missioner," *Etc.*

Illustrated

[Illustration: "'I'm feelin' particularly good right now.'" (Page 181)]

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THE BLACK PEARL

CHAPTER I

It was just at sunset that the train which had crawled across the desert drew up, puffing and panting, before the village of Paloma, not many miles from the Salton Sea. After a moment’s delay, one lone passenger descended. Paloma was not an important station.

Rudolf Hanson, the one passenger, whom either curiosity or business had brought thither, stood on the platform of the little station looking about him. To the right of him, beyond the village, blooming like an oasis from the irrigation afforded by the artesian wells, rose the mountains, the foothills green and dimpled, the slopes with their massed shadows of pines and oaks climbing upward and gashed with deep purple canons, and above them the great white, solemn peaks, austere and stately guardians of the desert which stretched away and away, its illimitable distances lost at last in the horizon line.

Hanson, of the far west, was used to magnificent scenic effects, but the desert that sparkled like the gold of man’s eternal quest, that lay with its sentinel hills enfolded and encompassed in color, colors that seemed as if some spinner of the sunset courts wove forever fresh combinations and sent these ethereal tapestries out to float over the wide spaces of the wilderness—this caused him to catch his breath and exclaim.

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It was truly a sight to take any man's breath away; but even such a view could only arrest Hanson's interest temporarily. He was hungry, and the station agent, a weedy youth, was making a noisy closing up. Intentionally noisy, for when one is the agent of a small desert station, the occasional visitor is apt to whet one's curiosity to razor edge.

Roused by these sounds, and by his growing hunger, which the cool purity of the air only augmented, Hanson turned to the boy.

"Where's a place to stay?" he asked.

"There ain't but one," replied the youth; "the San Gorgonio hotel. You walk right up this street until you come to it, on the left side. It's got a sign out, electric," he added with some pride. He looked curiously at Hanson, standing tall and straight with his ruddy, good-looking face, keen, quick, gray eyes and curling light hair. "Going to be here long?" he asked tentatively.

"I don't know," returned Hanson idly. "Guess not. No string on me, though, even if I'd choose to put in a month or so here. This way, you say?" He lifted his suit case and began to walk in the direction the station agent had indicated.

"Say," the latter called after him, "you don't want to miss the show to-night."

"What show?" Hanson turned, interest amounting almost to eagerness in his tone.

"Benefit." The boy rolled the word unctuously under his tongue. "I guess maybe you saw why in the papers. The river got on a tear and cut into a nice little town here on the desert, drowned some of the folks and did a lot of damage generally, so we're raising some money to send to 'em."

The stranger's interest had increased perceptibly. "Sounds good to me," he said heartily. "What's your features?"

"Just one," the other answered impressively. "We don't need no more in this part of the world, if we got her."

"Her!" cried Hanson, and now his cold eyes were alight. "Who the hell is her?"

"Why, the Black Pearl!" as if surprised that anyone should be unaware of the fact.

"Course we got a few thousand square miles of desert waiting to be reclaimed, and any amount of mountains full of ore, but to us they's small potatoes and few in a hill beside the Black Pearl."

Hanson swore softly and ecstatically. "If that ain't that good old blind luck of mine hitting me again after all these years," he muttered. "Say, son, I'm making no secret of my business. Don't have to. I am a theatrical manager—vaudeville. Got great backing this

year and am out for new features. Set my heart on the Black Pearl and got to figuring on her. Sweeney had her on his circuit last winter. Well, Sweeney, let me tell you, is pretty shrewd. He knows a good thing when he's got it, so I thought there was no show for me. Presently, I hear that she's scrapped with Sweeney and is off to the desert like a flash. So she's really here?"

"Sure," said the boy.

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“So,” continued Hanson, who was loquacious by nature, but sufficiently shrewd and experienced only to let himself be so when he thought it worth his while, “I begin to figure on my chances. I learn that Sweeney’s trying to coax her back by letter, so I says to myself: ‘Rudolf, you just chassez down to Paloma and see what you can do,’ but honest, son,” he put his suit case down in the road and pushed his hat back on his head and put his hands on his hips, “honest to God, I didn’t expect anything like this, the first night I got here, too.”

His companion shifted his quid of tobacco to the other side of his mouth and nodded understandingly.

Hanson’s eyes were fixed ruminatively but unseeingly upon the golden desert, its sand dunes touched with a deep rose soon to be eclipsed by the jealous tyrian purples which were beginning to mass themselves gorgeously beneath the oranges and flame of the setting sun.

“Gee whiz!” he muttered, “and I was figuring that if I hung round here a week or so and played my hand all right, I’d maybe get her to do a few steps for me in the parlor. Oh, Lordy! And now I got a chance to see her before the footlights and size up her capacity for getting over them.”

The station agent looked puzzled and a little offended. “There won’t be any footlights,” he said; “and you’re mistaken if you think she’s up to any rough work like climbing over them, any way.”

Hanson laughed loudly. “That’s all right, son, you ain’t on to the shop talk, that’s all. But now, where is this show and what time does it begin?”

“Oh, in an hour or so, whenever Pearl’s minded, and it’s to be held at Chickasaw Pete’s place—saloon. You see,” apologetically, “we ain’t a very big community, and that’s the only place where there’s a decent floor for her to dance on.”

Hanson raised his brows and laughed. “Well”—he pulled out his watch and looked at it —“I’ve got time to wash the upper crust of sand off anyway, and get a bite or so first. I suppose I’ll see you later. Up this way, you say?”

The agent nodded assent. “It’s a good betting proposition,” he mused. “He knows what he wants and he usually gets it, I’m thinking, or there’s something to pay. But what’ll the Pearl do? I guess she’s the biggest gamble any man could tackle.”

As his new acquaintance had predicted, Hanson had no difficulty in finding the San Gorgonio, a small hostelry not by any means so gorgeous as its name implied, being merely an unpretentious frame building with a few palms in the enclosure before it, and there he speedily got a room and some supper. It might be deemed significant that he

gave more time and attention to his toilet than his food, but that may have been because he believed in the value of a pleasing appearance as well as in a winning address when transacting business with a woman. In any event, his motives, whatever they might be, were quite justifiable, as he undoubtedly possessed a bold and striking type of good looks which had never failed of receiving a due appreciation from most women.

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Assured, aggressive, his customary good humor heightened by the comforting sense of his luck being with him, he finally emerged into the open air to discover that the stars were out and that it might be later than he thought. The air, infinitely pure, infinitely fresh, exhaled from the vast, breathing desert, and the delicious aromatic desert odors touched him like a caress. He drew them in in great draughts. The air seemed to him a wonderful, potent ichor infusing him with a new and vigorous life. Hanson was sure of himself always, but now, in this awakened sense of such power and dominance as he had never known, he threw back his head and laughed aloud.

"Gosh!" he muttered, "I feel like all I got to do was to reach up and pull down a few of those stars and use them for poker chips." He exulted like a sleek and lordly animal in this thrilling vitality, this imperious and insistent demand for conquest.

Chickasaw Pete's place, as he soon discovered, was no more pretentious in appearance than the San Gorgonio. It also was a long, low frame building with some great cottonwood trees before it and a few palms with their infinite and haunting suggestions of the tropics.

It was with a sense of mounting excitement which still held that strong element of exultation that Hanson crossed the porch, opened the door and walked in. He saw before him a long room well lighted with electricity and with a shining polished floor. The bar ran along one side, and behind it lounged a short, stout, round-faced man with very black hair and eyes and a perpetual smile. This was the bar-keeper, known familiarly as Jimmy. At the rear of the room, covering about half of the floor, were rows and rows of chairs, occupied by both men and women, strong, sun-burned looking people in the main, but with the invariable and unmistakable sprinkling of "lungers" in various stages of recovery.

Hanson saw his friend, the station agent, leaning across the bar talking to Jimmy, and knew from the interested glances cast in his direction that he was the topic of conversation.

At the opposite end of the room was a piano. A young man sat before it facing the wall, while beside him there stood a woman intently tuning a violin which she held tucked under her chin. Approaching middle age, she was rather stout, with a sallow, discontented face, which yet held some traces of its former evanescent prettiness. Both lashes and brows of her faded light eyes were heavily blackened, and the rouge which lay thickly on her cheeks only served to accentuate their haggard lines. The hair, dark at the roots, was blondined to a canary color where it rolled back under her hat, large and black, of a dashing Gainsborough style and covered with faded red roses. For the rest, her costume consisted of a white shirt waist, a wine-colored skirt and shoes with very high heels which were conspicuously, and no doubt uncomfortably, run over.

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Her violin finally tuned to her satisfaction, she bent her head to speak to the young man at the piano. He turned to answer her, and for a moment his delicate, sad face was outlined against the wall behind him. Then, with an emphatic little nod, he began to play and the woman lifted her violin and swung in with him.

The only virtue she possessed as a violinist was that she kept good time, but although it was extremely unlikely that any member of that audience recognized the fact, the boy was a musician by the divine right of gift, a gift bestowed at birth. A wheezy old piano, and yet he drew from it sweet and thrilling notes; a hackneyed, cheap waltz measure, and yet he invested it with the glamour of romance.

A ripple stirred all those waiting people, as a wind stirs a field of wheat, a movement of settling and attention. Hanson, who had been careful to secure a seat in the front row of chairs, was conscious that his heart was beating faster.

"This is where she whirls in through that door by the piano," he muttered to himself with the acumen born of long knowledge of the stage and its conventions. He had a swift mental vision of a graceful painted creature, all undulating movement, alluring smiles, twinkling feet and waving arms. This passed with a slight shock as a girl entered the door by the piano, as he had foreseen, and walked indifferently to the center of the room, and then, without a bow to her audience, began, still with an air of languor and absorption, to take vague, sliding steps, gradually falling in with the waltz rhythm, but, even so, the movement was without any definite form, certainly not enough to call it a dance.

As she swayed about, listless, apparently indifferent to any effect she might be producing, Hanson had a full opportunity to study her, and, in that concentrated attention, the man and the manager were fused. He was at once the cynical showman discounting every favorable impression and the most critical and disillusioned of audiences.

In this dancer he saw a woman who was like the desert willow and younger than he had supposed; straight and supple, with a body of such plasticity, such instant response to the directing will of its possessor as only comes from the constant and arduous exercises begun in early childhood.

"Been trained for it since she was born, almost," was Hanson's first unspoken comment.

She wore a soft, clinging frock of scarlet crepe. It was short enough to display her ankles, slender for a dancer, and her arched feet in heelless black slippers. In contrast to her red frock was a string of sparkling green stones which fell low on her breast. Her long, brown fingers blazed with rings, and in her ears, swinging against her olive cheeks, were great hoops of dull gold. Her black shining hair was gathered low on her neck, her unsmiling lips were scarlet as a pomegranate flower, and exquisitely cut; and

the fainter, duskier pomegranate bloom on her oval cheeks faded into delicate stains like pale coffee beneath her long, narrow eyes.

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"She ain't done a thing yet; she ain't even showed whether she can dance a few bars or not, but, Lord! how she has got over!" was Hanson's unspoken comment. "Clean to the back seats. There's nobody else here."

Although still aimlessly moving with the rhythm of the waltz she no longer merely followed the music. She and it were one now. And Hanson, a connoisseur, familiar with the best, at least in his part of the world, recognized the artist whose technique is so perfect that it is absorbed, assimilated and forgotten; but its essence remains, nevertheless, a sure foundation upon which to build securely future combinations and improvisations.

The Black Pearl was generous to-night. She was the program—its one feature. She gave the audience its money's worth, judged by their standards, which were measured by time; and yet, when she finished, she gave one no idea of having exhausted her repertoire. In fact, she could not have defined that repertoire. Dancing was her expression, and the Black Pearl was conscious of infinite and unsounded phases of self.

Most of the features of the program were familiar to Hanson by her reputation. They included some old Spanish dances, some gypsy ones and others manifestly her own. But dancer though she was by nature and training, her personality dominated and eclipsed her art.

Hanson was not imaginative, but as he watched her he seemed to be gazing at some gorgeous cactus blossom opening its scentless petals to the burning sun. Beneath and beyond her stretched the gray wastes of the desert turning to gold under her feet, but still untrammelled and merciless, holding strange secrets close to its savage heart; now, exerting all its magic of illusion in delicate and exquisite mirages, all of its luring fascination which has drawn men to it from the beginning of the world; and now revealing itself desolate and unashamed in all of its repulsive, stark aridity.

The Pearl certainly made no effort to attract. If a glance from those narrow eyes enthralled, it stung too. It was the flame of wine in the blood, the flick of a whip on the raw, which roused in a man's heart, in Hanson's at least, the passionate disposition to conquer and subdue.

Finally she gave a slight signal to the musicians, her steps slowed, the music stopped, and she went over and sat down beside the woman, who had placed her violin on the piano, and then flung herself into a chair, where she sat, carefully dabbing her warm brow with her handkerchief.

The vague pictures which Hanson had been seeing vanished. "Gee! She got me going!" he said to himself, half dazedly, "hypnotized me sure." This, the manager. But the man exulted: "She ain't easy. She ain't easy."

The moment the Pearl stopped dancing the audience was on its feet applauding, and then, to a man, it eddied about her, casting banknotes into her lap. These she lifted in handfuls and gave to two men who had sat down beside her to count, while a third bent over them watching the operation.

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Hanson, although he had drawn nearer her, still stood on the edge of the crowd, leaning against the bar. "So that's the Black Pearl!" he said presently to the bar-keeper.

"That's her," responded Jimmy equably. "Can't be beat. What'll you have?"

"Nothing, just yet. Say, those stones around her neck look good to me." Hanson narrowed his eyes.

"Good!" Jimmy laughed shortly, a characteristic, mirthful little chuckle. "I guess so. Bob Flick, up there beside Pearl, counting that money, he gave 'em to her after she found him when he'd been lost on the desert about three days. I'll tell you about it when I got more time."

Hanson had been conscious from time to time of the close but furtive scrutiny of the man whom the bar-keeper had designated as Bob Flick, and now he, in turn, made Flick an object of observation.

He saw a tall man of noticeable languor and deliberation of movement, doubtless so long studied that it had become natural. His face, with regular, rather aquiline features, was devoid of expression, almost mask-like, while the deep lines about the mouth and eyes showed that he lived much in the hard, brilliant, western sunlight.

Hanson was quick enough to size up a man and a situation. "I'll make a note to look out for you," he thought, "just about as cold and just about as deadly as a rattler."

"Say," he turned to Jimmy again, "I want to meet her. I'm a theatrical manager, always looking out for new turns. Heard of this Black Pearl and thought I'd run down and sign her up if I could."

"She does go traveling once in a while," returned Jimmy dubiously, "but it's all in the mood she's in whether she'll let you even talk to her. You might as well count on the desert out there as the Pearl."

"I suppose she's out for big money?" queried Hanson.

"She'll get all she can, I guess," Jimmy chuckled. "But," he added boastfully, "she can make big money by staying right here. Look at what she's pulled in to-night. And there's her father, old Gallito, he's got more than one good 'prospect,' and is foreman beside of one of the big mines in the mountains. And her mother, there, that played the violin, she's got some nice irrigated land, and even Hughie, that played, he makes money playing for dances in the different towns. Oh, they're smart folks."

"Is Hughie the brother?" asked Hanson, looking at the boy, who sat listlessly at the piano.

"No. Adopted." Jimmy spoke briefly. "Born blind, but let me tell you, he sees considerable more than those of us who have eyes."

"Well, the Pearl's a certain winner," said the manager earnestly, "a flower of the desert, a what-you-may-call-'em, a cactus bloom."

"Correct, and don't forget the spines," chuckled Jimmy. "Looks as if they were all out to-night, too. Kind of sulky, ain't she? Well, did you say you was waitin' to be introduced? I'll take you up and ask her. Like as not, she'll turn you down. She ain't looked at you once, I notice. I been watching her."

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"So've I," said Hanson good humoredly, "but you're wrong, son"—there was a brief, triumphant flash of his light eyes—"she's looked at me twice, took me all in, too. Numbered the hairs of my head and the size of my shoes. Threw a search light on my heart and soul. Gee! It felt like the violet rays. Now, look here, friend, I ain't going to take chances on a turn-down, nor of your Mr. Bob Flick having fun all night shooting holes in the floor while this little Johnny Tenderfoot does his imitation Black Pearl dancing. Listen," he tapped the bar sharply, "when I meet the Black Pearl, it's because she requested an introduction. You take me up to that old lion tamer, her mother."

Jimmy threw him a glance of ungrudging admiration. "You ain't so dumb," he vouchsafed. "Say, have one on me."

"A little later," replied the other. "Never drink during business hours."

A small table had been placed before Mrs. Gallito, upon which were two glasses, one of beer for herself, and one of lemonade for her daughter.

As Jimmy performed the introduction, she put down her beer from which she had been somewhat thirstily drinking and received Hanson with a perfunctory bow and a brief mechanical smile. "Think of settling here?" she asked politely.

"No, I'm just down for a few days," replied Hanson genially. He had drawn a chair up and seated himself on the other side of the table, directly opposite Mrs. Gallito and her daughter.

The surprise of the glance she threw at him was heightened by a quick curiosity. "Just prospecting?" she asked. "I saw at once that you weren't a 'lunger.' I didn't think you were an engineer, so I made up my mind that you were looking for land."

"None of them," returned Hanson, smiling, and hastened to inform her of his real calling. Immediately she relaxed, her smile became genuine, the bored and constrained politeness vanished from her manner.

"Well, that is certainly nice," she exclaimed with real animation and cordiality. "I'm always glad to meet any of the profession. No folks like your own folks, you know." She bridled a little.

"That's so," agreed Hanson heartily. "I knew the minute that I saw you that you belonged."

She lifted her head with a gesture of pride, the glow and color came back into her face, giving it a transitory appearance of youth, and restoring, for a fugitive moment, something of its vanishing beauty.

“Born to it,” she said. “My mother and her mother, and my father and his father, and, ’way back on both sides, was all circus people. Yes, I was born in the sawdust—rode—drove—tight-rope—trapeze—learned dancing on the side—ambitious, you know. Say, you must have heard of my mother—greatest bare-back rider ever in the ring. Isobel Montmorenci. English, you know. I wasn’t so shy myself, Queenie Madrew.”

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"Gee! Well, you were some. Shake." Hanson extended his hand, which Mrs. Gallito shook warmly. "And I do remember your mother. I should say so. First time I went to the circus, I was about ten years old—ran off you know. Knew well enough what I'd get when I turned up at home. Pop laying for me with a strap. Goodness! It takes me right back. It's all a kind of jumble, sawdust ring and animals and clowns and all; but what I do remember plain is Isobel Montmorenci, her and a big black horse she was riding."

"Caesar!" cried Mrs. Gallito excitedly. "Lord! don't I remember! I learned to ride on him."

"Yes," mused the manager, "all I recall of that circus is her and my two nickels. I broke my bank to get 'em. They seemed a fortune to me; but even then I was a shrewd kid and meant to get my money's worth. Well—the first one I laid out in a great tall glass of lemonade. Say, that was the first time I came up against the disillusion of life. Nothing but a little sweetened water. The next nickel went for peanuts, and they were too stale for even a kid to chew."

"Ain't that just like a young one at the circus!" Mrs. Gallito laughed loudly.

"What's the joke, mom?" drawled a lazy, sliding, soft voice on the other side of her.

"A circus story, honey. Oh!" as the sudden formal silence recalled her to her duty. "I forget. You two ain't been introduced, have you? Pearl, make you acquainted with Mr. Hanson. He's in the show business."

Pearl bowed without lifting her eyes, giving Hanson ample opportunity to note the incredible length, as it seemed to him, of the upcurling lashes upon her smooth cheeks. But just as he bent forward to speak to her, she half-turned from him and said something to one of the men beside her.

The manager's quickness saved him. He was perfectly aware of all those jealous masculine eyes, flickering now with repressed and delighted laughter over his discomfiture. He recovered himself in a moment and slipped easily and with unabated geniality into a conversation with Mrs. Gallito.

"Funny you should marry out of the profession," deftly catching up his threads.

"She didn't," again that soft, sliding voice. "Pop was born in the sawdust, too."

Without a change of expression in his face, Hanson waited imperturbably for Mrs. Gallito's answer. Since his eyes were fixed on the red spark at the end of his cigarette, who could see the quick flash in them?

Mrs. Gallito took a hasty gulp of beer. "It's just like Pearl says," she murmured. "Her pop came of a long line of circus people, same as me, but he broke clean away from it,

couldn't bear the life." There was unabated wonder in her tones. "I guess," resignedly, "it's the Spanish of him."

"Say," cried Hanson, and now his voice rang with a new note in it, something of gay, masterful, masculine dominance, "say, what you ladies drinking beer and lemonade for? It's got to be wine to-night. Hey, Jimmy. Wine for this table, and treat the house. Wine, understand? Got enough to float 'em?"

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"Hold on a minute, Jimmy." Hanson heard Bob Flick's voice for the first time, soft as the Pearl's, liquidly southern, gentle, even apologetic. "I'm sorry, stranger"—he leaned forward courteously to Hanson—"we all would enjoy accepting your hospitality, but you see, it ain't etiquette."

A silence that could be felt had fallen upon the room. Mrs. Gallito, pale under her paint, was nervously biting her handkerchief and glancing from one man to the other, while the Pearl leaned back in her chair as lazily, languidly, scornfully indifferent as ever.

Then Hanson laughed, and a little thrill went over the room. The new man was game. "Ain't that just your ruling, stranger?" he asked pleasantly. "Since we've not been introduced, I can't call your name. But I hold that it is etiquette. Jimmy, get on your job. The occasion when I first set my eyes upon the Black Pearl has got to be honored."

"Hold on just a moment, Jimmy." It was Flick now. "You see," again to Hanson, his voice more apologetic than ever, "you being new here, naturally don't understand. It ain't etiquette on a Benefit night, when Miss Pearl Gallito, whose name you have, most unfortunately, just miscalled, condescends to dance. I'm afraid I got to ask you to take back your order and to apologize to Miss Gallito."

Hanson was on his feet in a minute. "I'm sure ready now and always to apologize my humblest to Miss Gallito, although I don't know what's the offense. But the order stands."

"Oh, Pearl," wailed her mother, "you raise mischief wherever you go. You know Bob wouldn't go on so if you'd ask him to stop. You just like to raise the devil."

Then, for the first time, the Pearl's face became animated. It broke into brilliance, her eyes gleamed, she showed her white teeth when she laughed.

"Quit your fooling, both of you," she said composedly, rising to her feet. "I ain't going to have tales flying all over the desert about the ructions stirred up the night I danced for the benefit of the flood sufferers. Shake hands, you two," imperiously. "Go on, do what I tell you. That's right," as the two men perfunctorily shook hands. "Bob don't mean a thing, Mr. Hanson. It's just his temper, and there ain't going to be any wine, because I'm going home, but—" and here she smiled into his eyes—"you can walk a piece of the way with me, if you want to. Come on, mother and Hughie. Good-night, Bob."

CHAPTER II

Hanson had decided that the best way to gain certain information he desired was to seek the bar-keeper, who, after his constitution, gossiped as naturally and as volubly as a bird sings; so, quite early the next morning, he sauntered into Chickasaw Pete's place.

Jimmy, who was industriously polishing the bar and singing the while one of the more lugubrious and monotonous hymns, looked up with his customary little chuckle.

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"Feeling fine, ain't you?" he said derisively. "Want to start right out and corral the whole desert, don't you? Think you can travel right over to San Bernardino yonder? Looks about three miles off, don't he?"

"Me?" said Hanson, expanding his chest. "I feel like I was about sixteen. Like I was home in Kaintucky, jumping a six-bar fence after a breakfast of about fifty buckwheat cakes and syrup."

"That's the way it takes them all; but you just wait until about noon, and you won't feel so gay," warned Jimmy. "What are you doin' to-day, anyway, hunting more trouble?"

"Not me," cried the other. "I came here to the desert pearl fishing."

"That's a good one." Jimmy's chuckle expanded into a series. "But you ain't the only one. There's Bob Flick, for instance, as you discovered last night."

The smile went out of Hanson's eyes, his face set. He ceased to lounge against the bar and involuntarily straightened himself:

"What about Bob Flick?" he asked.

"Lots about Bob." Jimmy's tone was equable, but he shot Hanson a quick glance. "He was our faro dealer for a while, but he's interested in mines now. He's dead sure. Come to think of it, he's a lot of dead things," he mused; "but don't ever confuse him with a dead one." Delight at his own wit expressed itself in mirthful chuckles. "He's dead game, and he's a dead shot, two important things for a man that's playing to win when in certain localities, and he's dead certain that he's the God-appointed guardeen of the Black Pearl."

"What's she got to say about it?" growled Hanson.

The bar-keeper shrugged his shoulders. "Ask me what the desert out there's thinking, and I'll tell you what's going on inside the Pearl's head. Say," animatedly, "I told you to ask me about those emeralds last night, didn't I?"

The manager laughed shortly. "I saw 'em close, son, after I left you. I know stones. Square cut emeralds. Lord! They sure cost some good man his pile, and he was no piker, either."

"Bob Flick," said Jimmy, with a glow of local pride. "Kind of thank offering, when the Pearl found him in the desert after he'd been lost three days. Bob was new to this country then and reckless, like a tenderfoot is, and the first thing he did was to go and get lost. Well, they had several searching parties looking for him, but the Pearl, she got on her horse and went after him alone, and, by George! she found him, lying about gone in a dry arroyo.

“Bob said he’d been wandering round crazy as a loon, seeing three big lions with eyes like coals of fire stalking him night and day, and him always trying to dodge ’em. He says at last they came nearer and nearer until he stumbled and fell, and then he felt their hot breath on his cheek, and he knew nothing more until he finally realized that some one was trying to pour water down his throat and he kind of half come to himself; and suddenly,

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he said, that awful gray desert, worse than any hell a man ever feared, seemed all kind and tender like a mother, and then, some way, it burst into bloom, and that bloom was the Black Pearl bending over him. Oh, you ought to hear him tell it! Well—she got him up on her horse and got him home, and her and her mother nursed him back to health. And since that time Bob ain't never felt the same about the desert. You couldn't drive him away now.

"When he was well enough to travel, he went to 'Frisco and ordered a jeweler there to get him the handsomest string of matched emeralds that money could buy. The fellow was a year matching them, had to make two trips to the other side. They do say," Jimmy lowered his voice cautiously, "that Bob's father was a rich man and left him a nice little fortune, and that he blew every cent of it in on those stones. The Pearl certainly likes jewels. All the rings and things that she wears were given her by the boys."

"Umm-m-hum. Great story!" he nodded perfunctorily. "Guess I'll take a walk." He strolled toward the door.

"Bet I know which way you're going," chuckled Jimmy, as he disappeared.

The unspoken surmise was perfectly correct. Hanson took his way slowly and with apparent abstraction in the direction of the Gallito home, and it was not until he was at the very gate that he paused and looked up with a start of well simulated surprise.

The house stood beyond a garden of brilliant flowers, and in the shadow of the long porch—a porch facing the desert and not the mountains—sat Pearl, swinging back and forth in a rocking chair and talking impartially to the blind boy, who sat on the step beneath her, and a gorgeous crimson and green parrot, which walked back and forth in its pigeon-toed fashion on the arm of her chair, muttering, occasionally screaming, and sometimes inclining its head to be scratched.

"Good morning," called Hanson in his blithest, most assured fashion. "Can I come in?"

"Sure," drawled the Pearl. "Hughie and I were just waiting for company, weren't we, Hughie?"

The boy tossed his head impatiently, but made no answer. From the moment Hanson had spoken he had assumed an air of immobile and concentrated attention, tense as that of an Indian listening and sighting in a forest, or of a highly trained dog on guard.

"Take you at your word," laughed Hanson, and swung up the path, a big, dominant presence, as vital as the morning. "Howdy," he shook hands with Pearl and then turned

to the boy, but Hugh drew quickly away from that extended hand, quite as if he saw it before him.

Hanson raised his eyebrows in involuntary surprise, but his good humor was unabated. "What's the good word with Hughie?" he asked genially. "I can't call you anything else, because I don't know your last name."

"My name is Hugh Braddock," said the boy coldly.

Again Hanson lifted his brows, this time humorously, as at a child's unexpected rebuff, and looked at Pearl, and again he experienced a feeling of surprise, for she was gazing at Hugh with a puzzled frown, which held a faint touch of apprehension.

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"Then," Hanson looked from one to the other, but spoke to Pearl, "you ain't brother and sister?"

"No," said Pearl, and it disturbed Hanson more than he would have dreamed to notice the change in voice and manner. The warm, provocative, inherent coquetry was gone from both smile and eyes; instead of a soft, alluring girl ready to play with him a baffling, blood-stirring game of flirtation, she was again the sphynx of last night, whose unrevealing eyes seemed to have looked out over the desert for centuries, until its infinite heart was as an open page to her, and she repressed in the scarlet curves of her mouth its eternal, secret enigma.

"We are brother and sister." Hugh edged along the step until he could lay his head against Pearl's knee. "But we're not blood relations, if you're curious to know." The insolence of his tone was barely veiled. "My mother was a circus woman that Mrs. Gallito knew. She deserted me when I was a baby, and Mrs. Gallito has been all the mother I ever had or wanted, and Pearl the only sister. I was born blind."

"Oh, Hughie," remonstrated Pearl, "you've got no call to say that. He don't see with his eyes," she turned to Hanson, "but I never saw anybody that could see so much."

"How's that?" asked Hanson easily. He was used from long experience to the temperamental, emotional people of the stage, and he had no intention of being daunted by any moods these two might exhibit.

"Hughie, what color are Mr. Hanson's clothes?" asked Pearl.

Still with a petulant, disdainful expression, the boy leaned forward and ran his long, slender fingers with their cushioned tips over Hanson's coat. "Brown," he replied indifferently.

"He can tell you the color of every flower in the garden, just by touching them," explained Pearl. "He knows all the different kinds of birds just by the whirr of their wings. He can tell the color of every dress I wear. He—"

But Hugh had risen. "I don't like you to tell strangers about me," he cried with passionate petulance, "and you know it. I'm going to find mother."

"Well, tell her that Mr. Hanson's here," called Pearl after him, unaffected by his outburst. "He hasn't taken a shine to you," she remarked frankly to Hanson.

Again he was disturbed to notice that she seemed to give this obvious fact some weight. She had rested her chin on her hand and was gazing meditatively at the gay garden. A shadow of disappointment was on her face, and more than a touch of it in her voice.

“That don’t bother me,” affirmed Hanson confidently. “All that I’m caring about is whether some one else shares his opinion.” His bold, gay eyes looked straight into hers.

“I wonder who?” drawled Pearl. The gleam of her eyes shining through narrowed lids and black, tangled lashes flicked him like the tang of a whip. “Maybe you mean Lolita?”

The parrot, which had perched on her shoulder and was tweaking her ear, now hearing its name, looked up, fluttered its wings, and called out in a gruff, masculine voice: “Mi jasmin, Pearl. Mi corazon.”

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"He's talking for me, sure," said Hanson, who knew enough Spanish to make out.

"Oh, damn," said the parrot disgustedly; "why the hell can't you shut up?"

Hanson gave a great burst of laughter. "Lolita and Hughie are well matched when it comes to politeness."

"They got the artistic temperament, and me, too, and mom, also," said Pearl. "That's what the newspaper boys always wrote about me when I was on the road."

The manager did not miss the opening. "Look here," he said earnestly; "ain't you tired loafing around here? I guess you know what I'm in Paloma for. I've made no secret of it. Now all you got to do is to show me your contract with Sweeney and I'll double what he gave you, play you over a bigger circuit, and advertise you, so's before your contract with me's expired you'll be asked to do a few turns on the Metropolitan Opera stage of New York City, New York."

"Love me to-day," sang Lolita, meltingly, if with grating harshness.

"That's right, Lolita, sing your pretty song," coaxed Pearl. "Come on, I'll sing with you." She lifted her languorous eyes and sang softly, almost under her breath, but straight at Hanson:

"Love me to-day,
Love me an hour;
Love is a flower,
Fading away."

The blood surged to his temples at the direct challenge, he half rose and leaned toward her. Then, as she laughed at him, he sat down. "Treble Sweeney's offer, by God!" he said hoarsely. "Cash down beforehand." He brought his fist down on the arm of the chair with a crash.

"Oh, I ain't ready to make any plans yet," Pearl announced indifferently. "I want to talk things over with Pop first. He'll be down from the mines before long, maybe to-day."

She sat for a few moments in silence, her eyes fixed on the far purple hazes of the desert. "Oh, I wish there weren't so many of me," she said at last and wistfully. "After I'm 'out' a while, I'll get to longing so for the desert that I'm likely to raise any kind of a row and break any old contract just to get here. I can't breathe. I feel as if everything, buildings and people and all, were crowding me so's if I didn't have a place to stand; and then, after I'm here a while, I got to see the footlights, I got to hear them clapping, I got to dance for the big crowds. Oh, Lord! life's awful funny, always trying to chain you up to one thing or another. But I won't be tied. I got to be free, and I will be free." She threw out her arms with a passionate gesture.

“You’d be free with me,” he cried.

But, if she heard him, she gave no indication of having done so. “Can you ride?” she asked presently.

“You bet,” said Hanson eagerly. “I was born in Kaintucky. Just tell me where I can get a horse here, and—”

“I’ll lend you one of mine, and we’ll have some rides. I’ll take you out on the desert. It ain’t safe to go alone. You see those sand hills yonder? Do you think you could walk out to them and back?”

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"Sure," said Hanson confidently and looking at her in some surprise.

Pearl laughed. "Oh, Lolita!" she cried; "a tenderfoot is sure funny. The chances are, Mr. Hanson, that if you started to walk around those dunes you'd never get back. Goodness! ain't that mirage pretty?"

The desert, which had lain vast, dun-colored and unbroken before their eyes, had vanished; instead, a sapphire sea sparkled in the sunshine, its white-capped waves breaking upon the beach. Upon one side of it spread a city with white domes and fairy towers, and palm trees uplifting their graceful fronds among them.

Hanson rubbed his eyes and looked again. It was the first time that he had ever seen one of these miracles of illusion, and he became so absorbed in it that he failed to notice that some one else had entered the gate and was making a leisurely progress toward the house.

It was Bob Flick, and Rudolf Hanson could not repress a slight scowl at this unexpected appearance of one whom he was constrained to regard as more or less of an enemy, and certainly this morning as a blot upon the landscape.

Without a smile, but politely enough, Flick greeted him, after speaking to Pearl, who looked at the newcomer with a sort of resigned resentfulness. Lolita, however, made up what was lacking in cordiality. With a loud squawk of welcome she flew to Flick's shoulder, uttering guttural and incoherent expressions doubtless meant to convey endearment.

"Call Mom, Bob," commanded Pearl lazily, and Flick obediently stepped inside of the door in search of Mrs. Gallito. She must have been near at hand, for she and Flick emerged before the manager could do more than give Pearl a glance of eloquent disappointment, which she returned with teasing mockery.

Mrs. Gallito had evidently been making a toilet, and it is to be regretted for her own sake that she might not have reserved all of her appearances for the evening, for this brilliant desert sunshine was pitiless in revealing those artificial aids with which she strove to recreate and hold her vanished youth and bloom.

Bob Flick she evidently regarded as a matter of course, but at the sight of Hanson she showed unmistakable pleasure.

"Hughie told me you were here," she said, sitting down beside him and patting somewhat anxiously the mass of canary-colored puffs on the back of her head; "and I been hurrying to get out before you got away."

"I wouldn't have thought of going before you came," Hanson assured her. She smiled and bridled a little, evidently well pleased.



"Has Pearl told you that her Pop'll probably be down to-day?" she leaned across Hanson to speak to Flick.

"No, is that so?" he asked in his smooth, pleasant tones.

"Where are the mines that Mr. Gallito is interested in?" asked Hanson, determined to keep in the conversation.

"Up in Colina." It was Mrs. Gallito that spoke.

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An up-darting gleam of suddenly aroused interest and curiosity flashed for a moment in Bob Flick's eyes. Was it possible that at the mention of that name Hanson had started and that something which might have been taken for the shadow of dismay had overfallen his face?

"Fine mining camp," Flick commented. "You know it at all, Mr. Hanson?"

Hanson had scratched a match to light his cigarette, but now he lifted his eyes and looked across its tiny flare straight at Flick. "No," he said indifferently, "never was in it in my life."

His tone and manner were both open and convincing, and yet the ruddy color, as Flick noticed with merciless satisfaction, had not returned to his face.

"He's an awful queer man," confided Mrs. Gallito in a low voice to Hanson. "I suppose," with a sigh, "it's the Spanish of him. Just think," she spoke as one who has never overcome an unmitigated wonder, "born in the sawdust same as me; his folks from way back all in the business, and him with no use for it. Never rested till he got away from it. Why, he didn't even want me to train Pearl, but," and here triumph rang in her tones, "he couldn't help that. She took to it like a duck takes to water. Always ready for it, never cried or complained at the long hours."

"She's sure got cause to be grateful to you." Hanson spoke sincerely.

"I wouldn't have known what else to do with a child," said Mrs. Gallito simply. "I always saw them trained that way. But her Pop didn't stand for it."

During this conversation Pearl and Flick had risen and, with Lolita still on Flick's shoulder, had sauntered down through the garden.

Seeing this, Rudolf, with his customary philosophy, made the best of the situation. "Well," with rather vague gallantry, "I don't see how he can stay away from a home like this."

"It's the Spanish of him." This was Mrs. Gallito's explanation of all the eccentricities in which her husband might indulge. "And," with unwonted optimism, "maybe it's a blessing, too, 'cause he's awful queer. And, anyway, he's what they call a man's man. Why, you might think he lived all by himself up there in Colina; but he don't. He's got more old Spaniards around"—she raised her eyes—"and they're the awfulest! Cut-throats and pirates, I call 'em. They come up from the coast. And it's funny, too," she exclaimed in a sort of querulous wonder, "because Gallito's awful respectable himself."

"That is queer, isn't it?" His tone was politely interested, but his errant glance strayed to where Pearl and Flick stood gazing over the vast spaces of the desert, flooded with illimitable sunshine.

But Mrs. Gallito needed only a modicum of interest upon which to launch her confidences. "Yes, he certainly is queer, and Pearl's like him in lots of ways. Neither of them can stand anything holding them. They're always wanting to be free, and they both got the strongest wills."

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"And does he ever bring his cut-throat friends here?" asked Hanson.

"My, no!" cried Mrs. Gallito. "It wouldn't be safe."

"I should think it would be as safe here as in the mountains."

"He don't keep 'em there long, if they're wanted bad," whispered Mrs. Gallito. "He knows more than one secret trail over the mountains."

Hanson was beginning to show a more genuine interest now and, spurred on by this flattering appreciation of her revelations, Mrs. Gallito went on.

"If you won't ever tell," she bent toward him after glancing about her cautiously, "I'll tell you something. Of course, I'd never mention it if I didn't feel that you're as safe as a church and one of our very best friends."

"You haven't got a better in the world," he fervently assured her, his curiosity really aroused now.

"Well," glowing with the importance of her news, "did you ever hear of Crop-eared Jose?"

It was with difficulty that Hanson repressed a long, low whistle. "I should say," he answered. "He's been wanted by the police of several States for some time, and since that last big robbery they've had sheriffs and their parties scouring the mountains."

For once Mrs. Gallito really had a piece of news which was sure to command the most flattering attention.

Crop-eared Jose was a famous and slippery bandit, and his latest exploit had been the robbery of an express car and subsequent vanishing with a sum approximating thirty thousand dollars. It was supposed that he had jumped the train while it was making its slow progress across the mountains at night and had lain on the top of the car until what he regarded as the proper moment for action had arrived. He had then slipped down, forced the lock on the door, held up both messengers, making one tie and gag the other, under his direction, and then himself performed that office for the first with his own skillful hands. After that, to open the safe, take the money and drop from the train was mere child's play to so accomplished a professional as Jose.

"Gallito's got him." Mrs. Gallito enjoyed to the full the sensation she had created, and then a sudden revulsion of fright shook her. "But, for goodness' sake, Mr. Hanson, don't let on I told you. I—I wish I hadn't spoke," she whispered.

"Trust me," comfortingly. "Now don't give it another thought. I'll forget it on the spot, if you say so."

“Gallito’d kill me”—she still shook and looked at him fearfully.

“Oh, come now,” his tone was infinitely reassuring, “forget it; I have already. Such things don’t interest me.”

“Love me to-day,
Love me an hour;”

sang Lolita, and his eyes turned to the two at the gate, still chaperoned by the faithful parrot. In them was a flash like fire on steel, as they rested on Bob Flick. Then he turned again to Mrs. Gallito. “Forget it,” he said again, as he rose to take his leave; “and believe that I have, too.”

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But his musings on his way back to the hotel would certainly not have proved calming to that lady could she have but known them.

“Gosh!” he muttered, “and I thought it had broke, this blessed blind luck of mine, when I heard ’em mention Colina; but it’s holding after all, it’s holding. I guess what I know now about the whereabouts of Crop-eared Jose just about offsets anything Pop Gallito may know about me and anything that Mr. Bob Flick can discover.”

CHAPTER III

Pearl’s father came the next day, an older man than Hanson had imagined and of a different type. There was no smack of the circus ring about him, no swagger of the footlights; nor any hint of the emotional, gay temperament supposed to be the inheritance of southern blood. He was a saturnine, gnarled old Spaniard with lean jaws and beetling brows. His skin was like parchment. It clung to his bones and fell in heavy wrinkles in the hollows of his cheeks and about his mouth; and his dark eyes, fierce as a wild hawk’s, were as brilliant and piercing as in youth.

Little resemblance between him, gaunt and stark and seamed as a desert rock, and his tropical blossom of a daughter, and yet, indubitably, Pearl was the child of her father. The secretiveness, the concentrated will, the unfettered individuality of spirit, which protected its own defiant isolation at all costs, the subtlety, the ability to seek sanctuary in indefinitely maintained silence, these were their traits in common.

Hanson, Gallito met with grave and impersonal courtesy which, the former was relieved to feel, held a real indifference. There were many moths ever circling about this glowing flame of a daughter. Gallito accepted that, met them, observed them, and assumed those introspective meditations in which he seemed ever absorbed.

There was evidently an understanding between Pearl and himself, but no show of affection, and what small tenderness of nature the Spaniard possessed appeared to be bestowed upon Hugh.

Grim and silent, sipping a little cognac from a glass on a table by his side, the old man would sit on the porch for an hour at a time listening to the boy playing the piano in the room within.

Flick and himself also seemed on fair terms of friendship and would hold apparently endless discussions concerning various mining properties. It was understood that Gallito had come down now to give his opinion on some claim that Flick had recently staked, and they two, usually accompanied by Hughie, would ride off over the desert and be gone two or three days at a time.

Hanson, finding that the theatrical tie, "we be brothers of one blood," had not that potency for Mr. Gallito that it exercised for his wife, and that it was not for him as for her the open sesame to confidence and friendship, speedily ceased to strike this note and approached him on the ground of pure business. The offer he had made to Pearl he repeated to her father.

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And Gallito had gazed out over the desert and considered the matter with due deliberation. "Sweeney's been writing to me considerable," he said at last. "He's made a good deal better proposition that he did last year."

"I told your daughter I'd double any offer Sweeney made," Hanson said, and then expatiated on the advantage of the wider circuit and increased advertising that he proposed to give.

Gallito nodded without comment. Again he seemed to turn the matter over in his mind. "I'll write to Sweeney," he said finally, "and get him to give me a statement in writing of just what he proposes to do, a complete outline of his plans down."

The manager could not restrain the question which rose to his lips: "But your daughter, is she willing that you should make all these arrangements?"

Gallito looked at him sharply from under his beetling brows. There was surprise in his glance and a touch of cynical scorn: "She knows that I look out for her interests."

Another query crossed Hanson's mind, one he had no disposition to voice. Was the understanding between father and daughter, and this apparent and most uncharacteristic submission to his judgment on her part, based on a common passion, acquisitiveness? He thought of Pearl's jewels. More than once he had seen her lift her fingers and caress the gems on her hand, just as the Spaniard sat and shook his buttons and nuggets of gold together, pouring them from one palm to another, his frowning gaze fixed on the ground before him.

"Yes, I'll write to Sweeney," continued Gallito. "It'll take a few days, though, before I can get his answer." He looked at the other man questioningly. "It might be a week in all. I don't want to keep you here that time. I could write you."

"Nothing to do just now," said Rudolf easily. "Left things in good hands, business running easily. Came down here to stay a while, needed a vacation. And, Lord! This air makes a man feel like he never wanted to leave."

To this Gallito made no comment and, as there was nothing further to say, the subject was, for the time, dropped between them.

Hanson had made known his reasons, obvious reasons, for his presence in Paloma, so, as he would have expressed it, he let it go at that and left the observer to draw any conclusions he pleased as to his almost constant presence at the Gallito home, and yet, after all, his visits were only a little more frequent than those of a number of others, and no more so at all than those of Bob Flick.

There were long evenings when Hughie played the piano, and when Pearl, now and then, touched the guitar, when Mrs. Gallito indulged in her querulous monotonous

reminiscences, while Gallito and various men sat and smoked cigarettes about the card table; but always, no matter who came or went, there was Flick, silent, impassive, polite, but, as Hanson realized with growing irritation, ever watchful.

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Gallito sat down to his cards in the evening as regularly as he went to bed exactly at twelve o'clock; and not cards alone. When he came "inside" there were brought forth from various nooks of obscurity in his dwelling other gambling devices, among them a faro layout, a keno goose, and a roulette wheel.

Undoubtedly, the play ran high in the Gallito cabin, but although Hanson sometimes sat in at this or that game, more often he sat talking to Pearl in the soft shadow of the porch. To her he made no secret of his infatuation, but it seemed to him that when with her they were ever more constantly and more irritatingly interrupted. Either Mrs. Gallito, or Hughie, or some of the visitors would join them and Hanson realized that his opportunities for speech with Pearl were becoming increasingly rare.

The only times when he could really see her alone were on the occasions of some morning rides together, which they had begun to take.

As for her, she was still repelling, still alluring, still drawing him on, but how much of it was a game which she played both by nature and practice with consummate skill, or how much he might have caught her fancy or touched her heart, he had no way of determining, and this tormented him and yet daily, hourly, heightened his infatuation.

And he was still further goaded by the knowledge that he was, in a measure, under surveillance, which he was sure was instituted by Gallito and Flick and connived at by Hughie; a watchfulness so subtle that it convinced him even while he doubted. He felt often as if he were stalked by some stealthy and implacable animal. This situation, imaginary or real, began to affect his nerves and he would undoubtedly have left had it not been for his mounting passion for Pearl, a passion fanned always to a more ardent flame by her tantalizing coqueties.

Then, too, he felt that, although Bob Flick and Gallito had probably acquired some information about himself which he would gladly have withheld, still they did not hold all the winning cards. The ace of trumps, as he exultantly told himself, is bound to take any trick, and the ace of trumps he felt that he possessed in the information which Mrs. Gallito had so obligingly furnished him. In other words, his ace was Crop-eared Jose, and his ace was not destined to be unsupported by other trump cards.

Only the evening before, he and Mrs. Gallito had sat alone for a few moments on the porch gazing out over the wonder and glory of the desert flooded in moonlight, and the patient, flattering interest with which he invariably received her confidences had gained its reward, for she had leaned toward him and whispered with many cautious backward glances:

"He's up there in the mountains yet."

“Who?” asked Hanson, attempting to conceal his eagerness under an air of mystification.

“Crop-eared Jose,” she answered, “and Gallito’s going to keep him there for several months yet.”

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"Is he?" and again Hanson strove to speak with disarming indifference. "How do you know?"

"I heard him and Bob Flick planning it," she answered. "They don't think it's safe to try and get him out of the country now." Then, having delivered herself of her burden of important news, she suffered one of her quick revulsions of fright, and clapped her hand to her mouth and turned white.

"Oh, Lordy!" she cried. "Lordy! Ain't I the leaky vessel, though! Oh, say, Mr. Hanson," she clutched his arm like a terrified child, "promise me you won't give me away."

"Sure," soothingly. "Why, Mrs. Gallito, you got to believe that everything that you tell me just goes in one ear and out of the other. But look here, just to take your mind off of this, I wish you'd do me a little favor."

"Deed I will," she fervently assured him. "What is it?"

"Why, Miss Pearl and I are going riding to-morrow morning, and I particularly want to talk business to her. You know how anxious I am to get her signed up. Well, I wish you'd manage to keep Hughie from butting in as usual?"

"Is that all?" she cried. "'Course I'll keep Hughie at home. I didn't realize how he was tagging round after you and Pearl. I want him to help me, anyway. We got to patch up my chicken house and yard so's to keep the coyotes out some way or other."

True to her word, she kept Hugh so busily employed the next morning that to Hanson's infinite relief he and Pearl were able to ride off alone.

"I'm going to take you to a palm grove to-day," said Pearl, as they started off.

She was in the gayest of humors, and for a time she bantered and coquetted with him with an unrestrained and childlike enjoyment in her mood, taking his ardent lovemaking as a matter of course; but, gradually, as they rode, she became more quiet and fell into silence, the Sphinx expression appearing on her face.

Suddenly she leaned forward in her saddle and looked at him. There was a hint of laughter in her glance, and yet behind it a certain serious scrutiny.

"I'm wondering a lot about you, do you know it?" she drawled softly.

"Turn about's fair play, then, honey," he answered. "You keep me guessing all the time. But what is it now?"

She did not answer him immediately, but rode on in silence as if cogitating whether or no she would reply to his question, and in some way he received the impression that it

was not the first time she had mentally debated the matter. But finally she decided to speak, and again she turned in her saddle and regarded him with that piercing scrutiny which reminded him uncomfortably of her father.

“Say,” she began, with apparent irrelevance, “what you been doing, anyway?”

“Me!” cried Hanson. “You know. Been falling in love with you as hard as I could, and”—his voice ringing with a passionate sincerity—“that’s God’s truth, Pearl.”

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She looked up at him, her wild eyes melting, her delicately cut lips upcurling in a smile; then her head drooped, her whole body expressed a soft yielding.

Hanson grew white, almost he stretched out his arms as if to clasp her, when she threw up her head with a low laugh, a tinkle of mockery through it, like the jangled strings of her guitar.

"But I mean it," she insisted, and now he saw that she had something really on her mind, something she had determined to say to him. "Listen to me," imperiously, "and stop looking at me as if you were looking through me and still didn't see me."

"I'm seeing your eyes, Pearl," he muttered, "and they drown me. And I'm seeing your lips and they draw me like a magnet does a needle; but if they drew me through hell, I'd go."

"Listen," she spoke more imperiously than before. "Have you noticed how Pop's been watching you—looking slantwise out of the corners of his eyes whenever you come around."

"I sure have," replied Hanson, "being as I'm not blind. But what of it? I supposed he treated every one that came around you like that."

"No," she shook her head thoughtfully. "I been studying over it, but I can't quite make it out. Pop don't pay much attention to men that ain't his kind, and you're not. And Bob Flick is always jealous, of course, but he doesn't usually take it out watching folks like a ferret does a rat hole. No, it isn't that."

"Well, what do you put it down to?" Rudolf tried to speak easily.

Pearl paid no particular heed to this question. "And it's not all Hughie," she mused. "Of course," and here he saw an expression of real regret, almost worry, on her face, "of course it's bad for all of us when Hughie takes a dislike to any one."

Hanson's sense of injury was inflamed. "But why the devil," he cried, "should Hughie's unreasoning cranks count with commonsense people? I can't understand," with wondering impatience, "why you all act like you do about that boy!"

"We've all learned that Hughie knows things that we don't know."

"Umph!" the exclamation was disgustedly incredulous. "And so, simply because Hughie chooses to take a dislike to me, I'm to be watched like a criminal and treated, even by you, with suspicion."

"No," she said, "I've been studying over it, but I can't quite make it out. Pop don't pay much attention, usually. But," she spoke slowly, "I thought maybe you'd tell me this morning."

"Well, there's nothing to tell," he affirmed obstinately.

She looked out over the desert for a moment. "Bob Flick hit the trail last night," she spoke casually.

"To go where?"

"I don't know. I wish I did. But I kind of feel, I can't help but feel, that it had something to do with you, and I wanted to tell you, to let you know, so that you can clear out if you've a mind to."

"I've no cause to clear out," said Hanson. "Gee!" his bold eyes looked gaily into hers, "you all seem determined to make me out bad, don't you? But if that's your way of trying to get rid of me, it don't go. When you tell me that you won't sign up with me, and are going back to Sweeney, for just half of what I offer you, then I'll know that you want to get rid of me, and I'll clear out."

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"But I ain't told you that yet," the corners of Pearl's mouth were dimpling.

"No, and, by George, until you do I stay right here."

"Look!" she cried with a change in her voice. They had entered a canon, where palms grew and involuntarily they drew up their horses to gaze at the sight before them. The stately, exotic palms lifted their shining green fronds to the blue, intense, illimitable sky, flooded with the gold of sunshine, and beyond them was the background of the mountains, their dark wooded slopes climbing upward until they reached the white, dazzling peaks of snow.

The sharp and apparently impossible contrasts, the magic illusions of color made it a land of remote enchantment, even to the most unimaginative. And to Hanson the world outside became as unreal as a dream that is past. Here was beauty, and the wide, free spaces of nature, where every law of man seemed puny, ineffectual and void. In this unbounded, uncharted freedom the shackles of conventionality fell from him. Here was life and here was love. He was a primitive man, and here, before him in visible form, stood the world's desire. Barriers there were none. A man and woman, both as vital as the morning, and love between them. The craving heart of the eternal man rose up in Hanson, imperatively urging him to claim his own.

He drew his hand across his brow almost dazedly. "Whew!" he muttered, "I kind of remember when I was a kid that my mother used to tell me about the Garden of Eden. I thought it was a pipe dream, but, George! it's true—it's true, and I can't quite believe it."

The Pearl stood leaning against a great palm tree. She seemed hardly to hear him. Her eyes were on the waving, shimmering horizon line of the desert. Her face held a sort of wistful dreaming.

"The Garden of Eden!" she repeated. "I've heard of it, too. It was a place where you were always happy, but"—still wistfully—"I haven't found that place yet." She turned her vaguely troubled eyes on him and then sighed and drooped against the tree.

"You can have things as you please, if you'll come to me." His speech was rapid, hard-breathing; it was as if he hardly knew what he was saying, but was talking merely to relieve the tension. "I'm boss and I can manage that you shall dance when you please, and come back here for a little breathing spell whenever you want. But," with an impatient gesture, "I ain't here to talk business. That's what I came to Paloma for—business. That's all I was before I met you, just a cold, hard business proposition. I guess I was pretty hard-headed. They seemed to think so in my line, anyway. I thought I knew it all." He gave a short laugh. "I'm not so young. I thought I knew life pretty well—had kind of wore it out, in fact. I thought I'd loved more than one woman; but I know now that I've never loved, never lived before, that I've just woke up, here in this Garden of Eden."

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“Pearl,” the beads of sweat stood out on his brow, “I ain’t made you out. I know you’re one thing one hour and another the next. I’m no vain boy. I can’t tell whether you’ve been drawing me on one minute and holding me back the next just because you got to annex the scalp of every man your sweet eyes fall on. That’s all right, honey, I ain’t blaming you; but there’s been moments lately, Pearl, when I’ve thought that maybe you might care, moments when I been plumb crazy with joy. You ain’t let ’em last very long, honey,” with a strained smile, “but they most made up for the black question mark that came after ’em.” He drew out his handkerchief and wiped his wet brow with a trembling hand.

She threw back her head and smiled into his eyes through her narrowed lids. She held out her hands to him; and with one step Hanson lifted her clear off the ground, gathering her up in his arms, holding her against his heart and kissing her scarlet mouth.

And she wound her arms about his neck and returned those kisses.

“Put me down,” she said at last, and Hanson did so, although he still held her close to his heart with one arm.

“Pearl!” he cried aloud, and it was like some strong affirmation of life. He lifted his eyes, bold and unafraid, as an eagle’s, to the sun-flooded, brazen, blue heavens. Time stood still. He had drunk at a new fountain—love, and, although his thirst was still unquenched, he was eternal youth. The heart of life breathed through him. He looked upon the sky, a man unconquered, unbeaten, undaunted by life. He was its master. Did she ask the snow peaks yonder? He would gather them as footstools for her little feet. Was it gold she desired? It should be as dust for her hands to scatter to the winds. Was it name, place, state, she asked? They should be plucked forthwith from a supine world and offered her as a nosegay.

Again, confidently now, he stooped and kissed her lips. It seemed to him that roses and stars fell about them. “You love me, Pearl,” he had cried, in incredulous joy, “you love me.”

For answer she smiled sweetly, ardently into his eyes: “Love me to-day,” she sang, nestling close to his heart.

CHAPTER IV

It was almost a week before Bob Flick returned, and during that time Pearl saw Hanson almost constantly, although to do so she had continually to match her quickness and subtlety against that of her father and Hughie; but even while she and her father met each other with move and counter-move, check and checkmate, it was characteristic of

both of them that Hanson's obvious infatuation and her equally obvious return of it were never mentioned between them.

With Hughie it was different, and Pearl met his petulant remonstrance, his boyish withdrawal of the usual confiding intimacy which existed between them, with laughter and caresses. As for Mrs. Gallito, she alone was unchanged, apparently quite oblivious to storm conditions in the mental atmosphere. But this was not unusual; when matters of importance were transacted in the Gallito household Mrs. Gallito did not count.

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But these disturbing conditions could not daunt Pearl's high spirits; she was like flame, and the light of her eye, the glow on her cheek, the buoyancy of her step were not all due to the ardor of her loving and the joy of being ardently loved. There was also the zest of intrigue.

And, oh! what a mad and splendid game she and Hanson played together! He rose to her every soaring audacity; they took almost impossible chances as lightly as a hunter takes a hurdle. The lift of her eyelash, an imperceptibly significant gesture, a casual word spoken in conversation, these Hanson met with an incredible quickness of understanding. It was a game at which he was master, and which he had played many times before, but never had his intuitions been so keen, his always rapid comprehension been so stimulated.

Beneath the eye of another master of intrigue, Gallito, watchful as a spider, they met and loved until, it seemed to Hanson, that the whole, wide desert rang with their glorious laughter. And through it all Francisco Gallito sat and smoked and sipped his cognac imperturbably; apparently unruffled by defeat, a defeat—the Pearl with subtle femininity saw to that—which was not without its elements of ignominy.

But now Bob Flick had returned and had sat late with Gallito the night before, talking, although Mrs. Gallito, who tendered this information to her daughter, had not been able to overhear any part of their conversation, in spite of her truly persistent efforts to do so. These circumstances, and results which would probably ensue when a definite course of action had been decided upon, occupied the Pearl's thoughts as she stood at the gate gazing out on the gray wastes spread before her in the broad morning sunshine. Lolita was perched on the fence beside her, swaying back and forth, muttering to herself and occasionally dipping down perilously in a curious effort to see the garden upside down through the fence palings.

Pearl turned at last from her contemplation of the subject which absorbed her attention, and smiled as her glance fell upon the gaudy tail, the only part of Lolita now visible, although, even then, the horse-shoe frown, which showed faintly on her smooth forehead, a facsimile of the one graven deep on her father's wrinkled brow, did not disappear.

"They've got it in for us, Lolita—Rudolf and me." She laughed outright now. Pearl's laughter was ever a disagreeable surprise; low, harsh, unpleasantly vibrant, and in strange dissonance to her soft, contralto voice. "Lay you any odds you say, Lolita, that it's poor old Bob that's got to be the goat."

The parrot swung back to a normal position with surprising rapidity. "Bob, Bob," she croaked. "Mi jasmin, Pearl, mi corazon," and she gazed at her mistress with wrinkled, cynical eyes.

“Yes, Bob’s got to do the telling.” Pearl confided more to Lolita than she ever did in her fellow beings. “Oh, Rudolf, this is where you get knifed! They’ve been laying for you right from the first. When Bob’s got to do a thing, he never wastes any time; he’ll be along sure this morning. I guess we’ll just wait right here and catch him.”

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Lolita hopped clumsily on to Pearl's shoulder and tweaked her ear. "Hell and damnation!" she muttered, and then sang:

"Love me to-day,
Love me an hour."

Pearl shrugged impatiently. "Shut up!" she cried, and resting her chin in her cupped hands gazed over the sparkling, shimmering plain, where all unshadowed day-beams seemed to gather as pure light and then, as if fused in some magic alembic, became color. There, the ineffable command: "Let there be light!" included all. It is only in the silence and light of the desert that men may fully realize that the universe is one, that light is music and music is color and color is fragrance, undifferentiated in the eternal harmony of beauty.

Pearl's eyes drank the desert, unconsciously seeking there in its haunting enigmas and unsolved mysteries an answer to the enigma of self. Like life, like truth, like love, like all realities viewed from the angle of human vision, the desert is a paradox. Its vast emptiness is more than full; its unashamed sterility is but the simile for unmeasured fecundity.

For an hour thus she leaned and gazed, Lolita restlessly walking back and forth, singing and croaking, until, at last, as Pearl had predicted, Bob Flick appeared, a fact not unheralded by Lolita's cries; but Pearl did not alter her languid pose, nor even turn her head to greet him. She was watching a whirling column of sand, polished and white as a colossal marble pillar.

"It's kind of early for them to begin, ain't it, Bob?" she remarked casually.

"Yes." He paused by the gate, leaning one arm on it, and in the swift glance she cast at him from the corners of her eyes she could see that his expressionless face looked worn, the lines about the mouth seemed to have deepened and the eyes were heavy, as if he had not slept.

Lolita had, as usual, perched upon his shoulder, and was murmuring in his ear.

"Say, Pearl," Flick spoke again after an interval of silence, "I wish you'd take a walk with me. I—I got something on my mind that I want to talk about."

"All right," she acquiesced readily, the nicker of a smile about her lips quickly suppressed. "I'll be ready in a minute, as soon as I get my hat."

They walked through the village, the great broken wall of the mountains rising before them, deceptively near, and yet austere remote, dazzling snow domes and spires crowning the rock-buttressed slopes and appearing sometimes to float, as unsubstantial clouds, in an atmosphere of all commingling and contrasting blues and purples.



Presently they turned into a lane of mesquite trees. The growth of these trees was thick on either side and the branches arched above their heads. They had stepped in a footfall's space into a new world. It was one of those surprising, almost unbelievable contrasts in which the desert abounds.

A moment before they had gazed upon the mountains, spectacularly vivid in the clear atmosphere, white peaks and azure skies, green foothills, serrated with black shadows. Behind them the sun-flooded white glare of the great, waste place and behold! all these vanished as they set their feet in this garden inclosed, this bower as green and quiet as the lane of a distant and far softer and more fertile country.

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Pearl never made any conventional attempts at conversation, and for a time they walked in silence through those fairy aisles where the light fell golden-green and the sun only filtered in tiny broken disks through the delicate lace of the mesquite leaves. Then Flick spoke:

"Pearl, I got something to say to you, and it's about the hardest thing I ever tried to do, because I know," his mouth twisted a little, "that you're not going to like me any better for it."

"What do you do it for then, Bob?" she asked, and there was more than a half impatient mockery in her tone, there was wonder.

"I got to," he said doggedly. "I guess there's no sense in it, but, whether you like it or not, I always got to do what seems the best thing for you."

It was an inflexible attitude, an ideal of conduct unfalteringly held, and uncompromisingly adhered to, and she knew it. Therefore, she shrugged her shoulders resignedly, the faint horse-shoe frown again appearing in her forehead. "Well—go on, then," her voice as resigned as her shoulders, "and get it over."

"It's this—" he hesitated and looked down at her a moment, and the tenderness his glance expressed she did not lift her eyes to see and would not have noticed if she had; "Pearl, Hanson ain't on the level."

She laughed that slightly grating, almost unpleasant, laugh of hers. "It's no secret to me, Bob, that several of you are thinking that."

"We got cause to," he answered moodily; and then, as if struck by something in her words, he looked at her quickly. "Has your Pop told you anything?" There was surprise in both glance and voice.

"Not a thing," she assured him, scornfully amused by the question, "but there are some things that don't have to be told. Do you suppose I haven't caught on to the way you've all been acting?"

Again he looked his surprise. "We all been acting?" he repeated.

"Yes. I've seen things and I've felt them. Oh, you might just as well out with it, Bob. What is it all about?"

He stared unseeing down the sun-sifted dusk of the green lane. Here the desert silence was like a benediction of peace, broken now and then by the faint, shrill note of an insect, or the occasional soft, mournful plaint of a dove.

“Pearl, you can laugh at me if you want to, and say I’m jealous. That’s true, I am. I can’t help it; but this time it wasn’t all that. I got to size up men quick; that was my business for a good many years, and the first minute I set eyes on Hanson I knew he wasn’t straight. And then, Hughie—”

“And so you stirred up Pop to watch him?” she broke in quick as a flash.

“No,” he answered patiently, “no, but Hughie’s feelings got so strong about him that your Pop kind of woke up and got to studying him, and then he saw what—what neither of you tried to hide,” there was bitterness in his tone, “and then he kind of remembered something he’d heard up in Colina, and—”

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"And so you've been up to Colina tracking round after a woman." Her verbal strokes were swift and hard as a flail. And again Flick started in surprise. His cheeks flushed faintly, his jaw set.

"What you mean, Pearl? Has he been having me trailed? I don't believe it."

"No," she drawled, taking a malicious amusement in this unwonted perturbation on his part, "he hasn't. You slipped away so quiet and easy that you didn't stop to say good-bye, even to me. Were you afraid I'd put him on to it?"

She did not hesitate to plant her banderillos where they would sting most, and Flick winced at this imputation which struck so near home. "How did you know about the woman, then?" he asked quickly.

Pearl lifted her head and laughed aloud, and, at the unwonted sound breaking the desert silence, three pairs of brilliant eyes gazing through the screening mesquite branches vanished and the gray, shadowy figures of three coyotes disappeared as noiselessly as they had come.

"How did I know about the woman?" She repeated the question and considered it, still with amused scorn, as if debating whether she would enlighten him or not. "Well—" drawling aggravatingly, "I knew you and Pop had the knife ready for Ru—Mr. Hanson." Flick's mouth twisted again. "That wasn't very hard to see. So when you hit the trail, Bob, I gave him the chance to clear out. I did so, tipped him off, you know. Now I guess if he'd been wanted bad for anything that would—well, put him behind the bars, say, he'd have gotten out pretty quick. And, anyway, if he'd been wanted like that he wouldn't have stayed here so long, for they wouldn't have had any trouble in nailing a man as well known as him before, so, you see, I knew it wasn't any of the usual things. But," and here she stopped and, looking up into his face, spoke more emphatically, "I gave him the chance, too, to tell me all about himself and he didn't take it. Now, there isn't a man living that wouldn't have taken it—under the circumstances—" she spoke with a deliberately cruel emphasis, and Flick's shoulders contracted a little as the dart pricked him—"unless it was some mix-up about a woman."

"It's about a woman, all right," grimly.

"What about her?" Pearl's voice cut the air like the swift, downward stroke of a whip.

"She's his wife," returned Flick. "She's been living up near Colina. She owns a part of a mine there and has been managing it."

Pearl took this in silence; and they had walked a dozen yards or so before they spoke again.

"Well, what of it?" she said at last, carelessly, almost gaily. "Divorces are easy."

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His expressionless face showed a cynical amusement, with just a hint of triumph in the lighting of his eye. He shook his head. "I talked to her," he said. "She's a good, decent woman, but she ain't quite straight in her head when it comes to Hanson. He lied to her right along about the others, even from the first; played fast and loose with her, and finally eloped with one of his burlesque head-liners. She took it. What else was there for her to do? But she spends about all of her time watching her fences to see that there's no divorce in question. He's done everything, tried to buy her off more than once, but it's no good. Every place he goes she follows him up sooner or later, and she writes him letters, too, every once in so often, offering to come back to him. And he can't get anything on her, for she lives as straight as a string. Oh, no, Pearl, Mr. Rudolf Hanson'll never marry again as long as that lady's living, or I miss my guess."

It was evidently with difficulty that Pearl had controlled herself, her brow had darkened and her upper lip had curled back from her white teeth in a particularly unpleasant and disfiguring fashion. Again they walked in one of those silences in which she was wont to entrench herself, and then she looked up at him with a faintly scornful smile. "Well, you've sure done your duty, Bob, and I guess you've got just about as much thanks as folks usually do for that."

He drew his hand across his brow and looked before him a little drearily. "I didn't expect anything else," he said simply. "I knew what I'd get. But whether you like it or not," and here he caught her shoulder, his eyes holding hers, "as I told you before, I always got to do what seems the best for you, no matter what's the cost."

Her face did not soften. She merely accepted this as she did all else that he had to give her, himself included.

They had reached the end of a long alley, and now they turned and retraced their steps, but they had traversed almost half of the distance they had come before Pearl spoke again. "Well, now you've told me, what else are you and Pop planning to do?"

He weighed his answer for a few moments. "I guess nothing," he said at last. "I guess we'll leave it to you to send him about his business."

She stopped in the path and looked at him; her blue cotton gown fell in long lines of grace about her slender figure. "If you and Pop want to know what I'm going to do," she said, "I'll tell you. I'm going to accept Rudolf's offer and go out on the road, that's what. You know by this time that I can take care of myself."

He pondered this seriously, but without a change in the expression of his face. "Would you go with him," he asked, "if Sweeney offers you as much or more money?"

“Sweeney won’t offer me more money. I know Sweeney and his limits,” significantly, “and you won’t make up the balance of what Sweeney lacks, either, do you hear? Now you, and Pop, too, can just keep your hands off. I manage this affair myself.”

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Flick merely shrugged his shoulders, and they walked on without further speech on the matter. Presently Bob's keen eyes descried some one walking down the mesquite avenue toward them. "Why, it's Hughie!" he exclaimed.

Even as he spoke the boy stopped and listened intently. He stood motionless, waiting until they drew nearer, and then he lifted his head, which he had bent sidewise the better to hear their almost soundless footsteps.

Pearl, seeing that her interview with Flick was soon to be interrupted, stopped short in the path and laid one hand detainingly upon his arm. "Bob," she said, in her softest tone, "Bob, you and I have been pals for a good while; you aren't going against me now?"

He stopped, obedient to her touch, and looked at her unwillingly. He could always hold to his resolution in the face of her anger, but to withstand her when she chose to coax! That was another and more difficult matter. But if he met her gaze reluctantly there was no wavering in either his glance or his voice.

"I'm going to save you from Hanson, Pearl," he paused for the fraction of a second, "by any means I got to use."

She flashed one swift, violent glance of resentment, and then immediately controlled herself, as she could always do when she chose and when she was playing to win; so now she cast down her eyes and sighed.

The motes of the glancing sunbeams fell over her like a shower of gold, spangling the blue cotton frock until it appeared a more regal vesture than purple and ermine; her head was bent, her body drooped like a lily in the noonday heat, her whole attitude was soft, and forlorn and appealing, as if she, this wilful, untamed creature, subdued herself to accept a wounding decree, and bore it with all the pathos of un murmuring resignation.

Flick's heart smote him, he longed to clasp her to his breast and give her everything she impossibly craved. And now it was he who sighed, and then clinched his hands as if to steel his resolution.

She heard the sigh: she saw from the quick movement of his hands, the sudden, involuntary straightening of the shoulders that the struggle was on, so she lifted her eyes half wistfully, half doubtingly to his and thus gazed a moment and then smiled her faintly crooked heart-shattering smile:

"You and I have been friends too long for us to begin to quarrel now, isn't that so, Bob?" Again she laid her hand on his arm.

He caught it in both of his and pressed it hard. "I guess you know we'll never quarrel, Pearl. I guess you know that, no matter what you say or do, it'll never make any difference to me."

"Course I know it. And you're not going against me now, Bob, either, are you?" She lifted his hand, and with one of her rare, caressing gestures laid it against her cheek for a moment and, turning her face a little, lightly brushed his palm with her lips.

He shivered and quickly drew his hand away. There was silence between them for a few moments and then he sighed again and more heavily than ever. "Oh, Pearl," he cried, "what do you want to make things so hard for? Let that dog—" he checked himself hastily, seeing her expression. "I beg your pardon, you don't look at him that way. Let Hanson go. I know you about as well as anybody in the world, don't I?"

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"Better," she nodded her head affirmatively, answering without hesitation.

"Well, won't you believe me when I tell you that you couldn't be happy with him. Won't you listen to me, Pearl?"

She looked at him a little slyly out of the corners of her eyes, a little one-sided, cynical smile on her lips. "We're always so dead sure what's going to make other people happy, ain't we, Bob? Always can see what's good for them so much better than they ever can see for themselves."

Flick looked away from her, down the long, shaded alley; once or twice he swallowed hard. "It ain't easy to say what I got to," a faint flush on his cheek, "'cause I hate to talk that-a-way to a lady, especially to you, Pearl; but I know you; and you can't be happy, you just naturally can't, with a man that's married for keeps to one woman, and that'll—God, Pearl! It hurts me to talk like this to you—that'll throw you over when he's tired of you just like he's thrown over several others."

She caught his arm and shook it violently, as if she scarcely knew what she did. "Throw me over! Me! the Black Pearl!" she cried hoarsely, and broke into a torrent of Spanish oaths. "Dios!" she paused at last, panting for breath, "you must be crazy to talk to me like that, Bob Flick."

"I told you how I hated it," he answered, with that sad, unaltered patience with which he always took her unsparing blame, "but I had to do it. You got to know these things, Pearl, and it's better for me to tell you than for your Pop to try."

"He wouldn't have gotten very far," she muttered.

"That's just it. You'd both have got to scrapping and screaming at each other and nothing told."

"Better nothing told, as far as you are concerned," she flashed at him fiercely, and then lapsed into sullen silence.

"Hello! Hello!" Hughie's voice came to them from a side avenue or narrower path down which he had wandered.

"Hello, yourself," Flick answered. "We'll wait for you right here."

"Bob." Pearl's soft voice held no evidence of rancor. "Tell me something quick, before he reaches us. Tell me true, and I'll be good friends, honest, I will."

"You know I'll tell you anything I can."

"Then—then—is she—that woman in Colina—pretty? As pretty as I am?"

He smiled bitterly. “No one’s as pretty as you, Pearl. No, she ain’t pretty.”

“Well, what does she look like?” impatiently.

“Nothing much. Why, I don’t know, just looks like most every other woman you see.”

“Oh, Bob, quick! Is she little or big? Is she kind of saucy and quick, or is she quiet and slow? Quick, now, Hughie’s almost here.”

“Why—why,” he rubbed his hand across his brow, “she’s kind of—kind of motherly.”

Pearl threw back her head and laughed, then she took a few dancing steps up and down the road.

“It’s Pearl and Bob,” called Hughie. “I knew it a while back when I stopped to listen, and then I heard a bird note down yonder,” with a wave of his hand toward the direction in which he had come, “and I wanted to hear it closer, so I didn’t wait for you. I can always tell you two by the sound of your footsteps. Pearl walks in better rhythm than you do, Bob.”

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"Of course. What do you expect?" It was Flick who spoke. "What are you doing so far away from home, anyway, Hughie?"

The boy's wistful, delicate face clouded. "I had to go somewhere," he said. "That Hanson has been there all morning, and mother has been sitting with her head so close to his, talking, talking."

Pearl laughed a single note, like her father's. "Poor Rudolf!" she muttered, "the men are all jealous of him, even Hugh."

Fortunately, the boy did not hear her, although Bob Flick did, as she intended he should.

"I do love mother," Hugh added plaintively, "but I can't love the people she mostly likes, so I came as far away as I could, and here," his face was irradiated in one of its quick changes, "I've been walking up and down and hearing and seeing things; listening to the quail and the doves; and a while ago there was a humming-bird; and did you ever smell the desert as sweet as it is this morning?" He lifted his head and sniffed ecstatically. "I've been turning the whole morning into music. It's all gold and green and gay with little silver trumpets through it, and now and again the moan of the doves. I'm going to work it out as soon as we get home. That is," he shrugged his shoulders impatiently, "if that Hanson has gone. He stops all the music and the color." This was Hugh's invariable plaint when any one was about whom he disliked.

"Oh, forget him," cried Pearl. "Don't be a cross, Hughie." She spoke with a half impatient, half teasing tenderness. It was remarkable that she showed no resentment toward the boy for the difficulties in which she found herself entangled, although his intuitions and the almost superstitious respect which they were accorded in the Gallito household might be said to have caused the disturbing investigations into Hanson's past. That Pearl herself disregarded these intuitions in this case was to those about her the strongest proof of her infatuation; but she never dreamed of blaming the boy or harboring rancor against him for this mischief he had done. On the contrary, she accepted it fatalistically. He never could account himself for these instinctive likes and dislikes of his; therefore, they were to be accepted and borne with as something of him, and yet apart from him; and that was all there was to it.

"I'll tell you what to do, Hugh. You help me work out some new dances," she cried. "A lot has been coming to me. One shall be 'Night on the Desert.' We can get some great effects. Something really artistic for the big cities, not the old waltz things we have to do for the desert and mountain villages. We might try that 'Desert Morning' that you've just been planning to compose, and I've been thinking of another one—a Cactus Blossom Dance. Something like this." She began to dance.

"Tell me the steps, Pearl; tell me the steps," called the boy impatiently. "Oh, that's a great idea!" His face was flushed; and then suddenly it fell. "Oh!" he cried despairingly

to Flick, “she always gets all sorts of ideas for new dances when she’s in love—always. I never knew it fail.”

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He flung himself away pettishly, and started off alone. Hugh never had any difficulty about direction. In a locality with which he was familiar he would walk about with the utmost confidence. Occasionally he would stop, rap his leg sharply with one hand, listen a moment, and then, apparently satisfied, walk on. Those who pressed him for an explanation of this merely received the vague and unilluminating reply that he could feel the earth that way and tell from the sound of it, probably meaning the vibration, just where he was.

Pearl and Flick followed him in a more leisurely way, although no word was spoken between them until they reached home. Pearl's eyes scanned the house, but it was evident that Hanson had gone, for her mother sat in a rocking-chair before the window, her head tilted back, fast asleep.

"What do you suppose your Pop'll say to your signing up with Hanson?" asked Flick, as they passed through the gate.

"I suppose we'll have a row that'll make the house rock," she answered indifferently, dismissing him with a nod.

CHAPTER V

Hanson had learned of Flick's return to Paloma almost as soon as the Pearl, although from a different source; Jimmy, the bar-keeper, having informed him of the fact. He had sauntered into Chickasaw Pete's place as was his wont, soon after breakfast on the same morning that Pearl had walked in the mesquite alleys with Flick. This he selected as the most agreeable place in which he could while away the time until a suitable hour for either seeking Pearl, or else hastening to keep an appointment with her. And Jimmy, with the same instinct that a squirrel hides nuts, hoarded such chance bits of gossip as came his way and brought them out one by one for the delectation of those with whom he conversed.

"Hello, Paloma Morning Journal!" called Hanson as he entered the door, his large, genial presence radiating optimism and good cheer. "How many big black headlines this morning?"

Jimmy's smile made creases in his round, red cheeks above his white linen jacket. "Pretty shy of headlines," he chuckled. "Nothing but a few personals."

"No murders, no lynchings, nor merry cowboys on bucking broncos shooting up the town?" exclaimed Hanson, in affected dismay. "My! My! What is the West coming to? I'm afraid you ain't serving them the right kind of poison, Jimmy."

"It's so bad I won't touch it myself." Jimmy defended himself with professional pride. "Have some?"

“Not I. I got to be going, anyway.”

Seeing that Hanson was about to follow this intention, Jimmy drew forth his first nut. “Bob Flick got back last night,” he said, and then, abashed by the meagerness of this bit of information, attempted to enhance its value. “I’d like to know,” leaning his elbow on the bar and his chin in his hand, “I’d like to know where he went and what he went for.”

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Hanson did not alter his lounging pose and yet, indefinably, his attitude became more tense, as if, in a quick riveting of attention, every sense had become alert. "He's doing a good mining business, ain't he?" he spoke carelessly. "I should think there would be a good many things that would take him out of Paloma."

"Oh, 'course," conceded Jimmy, "but don't you know how you kind of feel things sometimes. Well, you listen to me, there's something queer about this trip." He half closed his eyes and shook his head mysteriously.

"Come, now, Jimmy," Hanson's tone was bantering; he rapped on the bar in playful emphasis, but there was anxiety in his glance. "You're just trying to work up a little excitement. A show down now, a show down."

"Kid me all you please," chuckled Jimmy, with imperturbable good humor, "but, take it from me, something special's been doing. Bob's not one to talk about his or any one's else business, but if he's going off on any little trip he's likely to mention it. And, when he comes back, he'll tell you this or that he's seen or heard, just like other folks. But this time, not a word. Glum as an oyster. You just bet," Jimmy emphasized the statement with a series of nods, "that somethin's going on. Him and Gallito have had their heads too close. And that old fox is usually up to some mischief."

"What kind?" asked Hanson quickly.

"I don't know," answered Jimmy, and Hanson saw to his relief that the bar-keeper was sincere, and that he was to his own manifest regret as ignorant as he appeared. "But," he added shrewdly, "you been taking up a good deal of the Pearl's time and attention, and Bob ain't going to stand that from anybody very long."

"He ain't, ain't he?" the insolence of Hanson's tone was touched with triumph.

"No," said Jimmy simply, "he ain't; and so I kind of feel that this trip of his had something to do with you. And, say, Mr. Hanson," there was a touch of embarrassment in his voice, "you and me's been pretty good friends since you been here, and I thought I'd just give you the tip."

Hanson did not answer for a second, and then he looked up with one of his most open and genial smiles. "Thanks, Jimmy," he said heartily. "Always glad to get the straight tip. I've been so anxious since I've been here to sign up with the Black Pearl that maybe, considering Mr. Bob Flick, I haven't been very discreet in the way I've been chasing there." He leaned his elbow on the bar and assumed a more confidential manner. "But, say, it's funny the way every one speaks the same about Gallito. Hints everywhere, but no facts. What is it about him, anyway?" He either could not or did not conceal that he awaited a reply with eagerness.

“I wish I knew.” Jimmy spoke with the utmost sincerity. “Folks whisper and shake their heads, but there’s nothing to lay a finger on. I’ve tried to pump Mrs. Gallito more than once, but if she knows anything she keeps it dark. She’s afraid of me, anyway. She always says: ‘Oh, Jimmy, you’re such a gossip!’ Me!” He was really injured. “I guess if everybody did as little gossiping as I do this world would be a heap sight better place.”

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"Sure," agreed Hanson cordially; and this time his smile was genuinely expressive of his thankful and undisguised relief. By what seemed to him an almost incredible piece of good luck, considering the mutual predilection of Mrs. Gallito and Jimmy for gossip, his secret was still intact.

He straightened up involuntarily, and stood a moment deep in thought, his unseeing gaze fixed on a row of bottles on a shelf behind Jimmy. He picked up an apple which Jimmy had left on the bar and turned it around in his hands, apparently considering the effect of its scarlet stripes on a green surface. Then he threw back his shoulders and laughed aloud. "Bill Jones left a peckful of luscious apples in ye editorial sanctum to-day," he said gaily. "Come again, Bill," and laying the fruit down, turned away, Jimmy's delighted chuckles following him to the door and beyond.

Outside, he hesitated a moment, and then turned in the direction of the little railroad station. Seeing him, the weedy youth who acted as agent brought his chair, tilted back at an almost impossible angle, to the earth, took his feet down from a table, laid aside an old and battered magazine and expressed devout gratitude to heaven that any one should relieve what he was pleased to term his solitary confinement.

Hanson took the chair pushed toward him and for nearly an hour discussed events in the outside world, and the various phases of his profession in what the agent found a most entertaining manner. Finally he looked at his watch, murmured something about an engagement and rose to go. "Well," he said at parting, "I expect the next time I see you I'll be buying a ticket."

"Going to leave us soon?" asked the youth regretfully.

"Not to-day," smiled the manager, "but soon. Oh, by the way, now I think of it—is there a train goes straight from here to Colina?"

"Not straight. You got to change twice; once at the junction and once at the branch."

"And what kind of a place is there to stay at? Any hotel?"

"I don't know. Not much of one, I guess. Gallito would know. But he's got his own cabin, ain't he? That's so. Why don't you ask Bob Flick? He's just been up there. I sold him a ticket the other day, and he got back on the train yesterday evening. Thanks," taking the cigar Hanson offered. "So long."

With his suspicions thus definitely confirmed, Hanson wasted no time in following his inclinations and seeking the Pearl in her own home, but his delay had cost him a word with her, and he did not arrive at the Gallito house until after she and Bob Flick had left. This was the first untoward event in a successful morning, but he concealed his chagrin

and, with his usual adaptability to circumstances, exerted himself to be agreeable to Mrs. Gallito, not without hope of gaining more or less valuable information.

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Mrs. Gallito was in one of her sighing moods. In spite of all the methods of protection which she and Hughie had utilized the coyotes still continued to commit their depredations upon her chicken yard and daily to make way with her choicest “broilers” and “fryers.” Also she had shipped several large consignments of sweet potatoes to the eastern markets and, instead of their being, as usual, snapped up by epicures at enormous prices, they had fallen, through competition with other shippers, almost to the price of the ordinary variety—desert sweet potatoes, too.

Life, she averred, was hard, almost a failure. Sometimes things went sort of smooth and you thought it wasn’t so bad, and then everything went wrong.

“Oh, not everything,” said Hanson, with a rather perfunctory attempt at consolation.

“Yes, sir, everything”—dolefully she creaked back and forth in her rocking-chair—“everything. Here’s Gallito, the luckiest man at cards ever was, and he’s been losing steady for three nights, and he’s getting blacker and sourer and stiller every minute. Oh, if him and Pearl would only talk when things go wrong with ’em. It would seem so natural and—and—humanlike.”

“Back in the old sawdust days,” she continued reminiscently, “when things went wrong in the circus, everybody’d be screaming at each other, calling names and threatening, and often as not throwing anything that came handy. They’d get it all out of their systems that way, and there was nothing left to curdle. But to sit and glower and think and think! Oh, it’s awful! Why, even Hughie, he’ll talk and pound the piano like he was going to break the poor thing to pieces; but this Spanish way of Pearl and her father! Oh, my!” Mrs. Gallito shook her head and carefully wiped a tear from her eye, before it could make a disfiguring rivulet down the paint and powder on her cheek.

“It can’t be so much fun, all things considered,” conceded Hanson.

“Fun!” Mrs. Gallito merely looked at him. “When I think of what life used to be! Lots of work, but just as much excitement. Why, I was awful pretty, Mr. Hanson,” a real flush rose on her faded cheek, “and I had lots of admiration, ’deed I did.”

“You don’t need to tell me that,” said Hanson. “I guess I got eyes.”

“And when I married Gallito,” she went on, “I was awful happy. I guess I was soft, but I always wanted to love some one and be loved a whole lot, and I thought that was what was going to happen, but it didn’t. I often wonder what he married me for. But,” her voice was poignant with wistfulness, “I would have liked to have been loved, I would.”

Hanson nodded understandingly and without speaking, this time, an expression of real sympathy in his eyes. She was weak and silly. She was dyed and painted and

powdered almost to the point of being grotesque, and yet, in voicing the universal longing, she became real, and human, and touching.

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They sat in silence for a few moments, Hanson giving Mrs. Gallito an opportunity to recover her self-control, while he devoted his attention to Lolita, who had sidled up to him and was gazing at him evilly, ready to nip him malevolently should he attempt the familiarity of scratching her head.

Mrs. Gallito, alive to the courtesies of the occasion, had succeeded in choking back her sobs, and now she endeavored to turn the conversation into less personal channels. "Bob Flick got back yesterday."

"Where's he been traveling?" asked the manager easily. "He can't have gone so very far, hasn't been gone long enough."

Mrs. Gallito leaned forward carefully. "He's been to Colina and, Mr. Hanson, I think his trip had something to do with you. Him and Gallito talked late last night. I tried my best to hear what they were saying," naively, "but I couldn't for a long while, and then Gallito said out loud: 'Who's going to tell her, you or me?'"

"And Bob kind of waited a minute and then he said: 'Me. You'd only stir her up and make her obstinate. But, God!' he said, sighing awful heavy, 'I wish I didn't have to.'"

"I'll bet he does," muttered Hanson, and throwing back his head laughed aloud.

She looked at him doubtfully, as if surprised at his manner of receiving her information. "Is it funny?" she asked.

"Not for Bob," still vindictively amused.

"I suppose something's gone wrong with her contract with Sweeney, and he can hold her to it, or else have the law on her," ventured Mrs. Gallito. "That's all I can think of to stir them up so."

"I guess that must be it," agreed Hanson. "Eh, Lolita?"

"Here comes Gallito now." She leaned forward suddenly, shielding her eyes with her hand. "Yes, it's him, sure. Why, I thought he'd gone to the mines and wouldn't be back to-day."

Gallito was riding slowly toward the house, his head bent, his frowning gaze fixed before him. Nevertheless, he had seen his wife's guest, and, after taking his horse back to the stable, he made his appearance on the porch. He shook hands with Hanson with his usual punctilious courtesy, and then, turning to Mrs. Gallito, remarked without ceremony:

"Mr. Hanson and I have business matters to discuss and you have duties within; but first bring the small table, the cognac and some glasses."

His wife wasted no time in doing his bidding, setting forth the articles required with a timid and practiced celerity. But even after the brandy had been tasted and praised by Hanson, and his appreciation of it accepted with a grave Spanish bow by Gallito, the latter had made no move to open the conversation, but had insisted upon his guest trying his cigarettes and giving an opinion upon their merits.

Again Hanson was complaisant, extolling them as worthy to accompany the cognac, and after that a silence fell between them. Gallito sat puffing his cigarette, watching with half closed eyes the smoke wreaths curl upward, while Hanson waited patiently, smoking his cigarette in turn with an admirable show of indifference.

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"The old fox!" thought he scornfully. "Does he hope to bluff me into giving myself away?"

Finally Gallito spoke, directly and to the point, surprising the other man, in spite of himself, by a most unexpected lack of diplomatic subterfuge and subtlety.

"I received a letter from Sweeney yesterday," he drew it slowly from his pocket, "and he doubles his offer to my daughter, making her salary, practically, what you are willing to pay her. Now, Mr. Hanson, your offer is very fine. I appreciate it; my daughter appreciates it; but she cannot accept it. She treated Sweeney badly, very badly. She is an untaught child, headstrong, wilful," his brow darkened, "but she must learn that a contract is a contract." He took another sip of cognac. "She will go back to Sweeney."

He slightly shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands as if to say: "I deprecate this for your sake, but the question is definitely settled; I beg you, therefore, to advance no useless counter-arguments."

But Hanson ignored this unspoken request. "I'm sorry you feel that way about it," he said, "but your daughter is of age. I guess I'll wait and see what she has to say about this." He spoke pleasantly, almost carelessly, no hint of a threat in his tone, at least.

Gallito looked at him from under his brows in surprise, then he laughed, one single, menacing note. "My daughter will say what I have said."

"I'm not so sure," returned Hanson, and had some difficulty in restraining himself from speaking violently. Then he forced the issue.

"Look here, Gallito," he cried, "what's all this about, anyway? I came down here to the desert anxious to secure the Black Pearl as a new attraction for my vaudeville houses. I see her and I know that she's all to the good. So, banking on my own judgment, I make her an offer that's more than generous, just because I've the courage of my convictions and am willing to back my enthusiasms. Sometimes I win, sometimes I lose," he snapped his fingers lightly, "but I'm always ready to take the chances.

"Well—what happens? In the first place, instead of jumping at my offer, like any sensible man would—I'm talking plain now, Gallito—you got to drag Sweeney into the game, which, look at it any way you please, wasn't particularly square. Pah!" scornfully, pitching his cigarette with a single muscular sweep of the arm into the heart of the garden, "you don't know it or you wouldn't have been talking to me like you have, but I've got Sweeney pigeon-holed, know all his resources, and know positively that he can't come up to my offer. I tell you what, Gallito, it's cards on the table now, and," he tapped the table between them with his knuckles, "I'm politely requesting you to draw your nigger from the woodpile."

Gallito's glance was like the stab of a poignard. "But this is strange talk." He drew back haughtily. "I do not have to make explanations. I have my daughter's interests at heart."

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"Yes, I know," interrupted Hanson, "but the black man, the black man. Out with him."

Gallito's face had grown livid, his mouth had tightened until it was drawn and pinched. "Have it, then," he growled. "Sweeney's straight. Sweeney hasn't left one wife in Colina while he eloped with one of his head-liners. He's not in one scrape after another with a woman, until he's a joke in the coast newspapers, and every woman he features in his shows has got a black smirch on her—"

"By God, you've got your nerve," cried Hanson violently, interrupting him.

Gallito made a deprecating motion with his hands, as if to say: "Don't mention it, I beg of you," and then carefully selected another cigarette from the box between them. "My nerve is something that rarely deserts me, Mr. Hanson," he replied, "but I wish to finish what I was saying. My daughter has a future. She will not only be a great dancer, but she has the making of a great actress in her, too. And Dios!" he still maintained his cold restraint, but now, in spite of himself, his tones vibrated with passion, "just at the beginning of her career, to be made cheap by you, or any like you—"

He lifted his hooded hawk's eyes and looked at Hanson, who in turn looked boldly back at him with something indefinable yet unmistakable, something that was not only defiance, but also a threat in the blaze of his angry eyes.

And Gallito caught it and raised his brows ever so slightly, pondering surprisedly for a moment, and then resolutely putting the matter aside for the present. But Hanson continued to gaze across the table at him.

"Read me my pedigree, ain't you?" he snarled. "All right. Now just let me tell you something, Gallito. I take my answer from your daughter, and from no one else. Understand?"

"No," returned Gallito, "I do not understand."

Hanson controlled himself with difficulty. For a moment it was on the tip of his tongue to tell Gallito that the latter's connivance in the escape of the notorious Crop-eared Jose was known to him; also, he was perfectly cognizant of the present whereabouts of that much-desired person, and that he, Hanson, had but to step to the telegraph office and send a wire to Los Angeles, and not only Jose, but Gallito would be in custody before night. An admirable method for securing Gallito's consent to his daughter's acceptance of this professional engagement which Hanson offered. But, carefully considered, it had its flaws, and Hanson was not the man to overlook them. Indeed, he sat there in a baffled and furious silence, going over them mentally and viewing them from every possible angle.

In the first place, it was extremely doubtful if, after communicating his knowledge to Gallito, he would ever be permitted to reach the telegraph station, and, in the second place, he would, he was convinced, have not only Gallito, but the, to him, more formidable Bob Flick to deal with. Therefore, and most reluctantly, he decided to keep his information and his threats to himself for the present and, certainly, until he was better able to enforce the latter.

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But, as he told himself, twisting his shoulders irritably, there was something about this old Spaniard which got on his nerves. A quality of composed patience, as if he, at least, never doubted the successful outcome of his plans; a rock-like imperturbability against which violence or vituperation shattered itself and fell harmless.

"Look here, Gallito," again he adopted a conciliatory manner, leaning his elbows on the table, as if prepared for a long discussion, after first helping himself to another glass of cognac and a fresh cigarette, "what's the use of a row, anyway? Now, why can't we come to some agreement. What you say about your daughter's abilities is all true, every word of it. That's the reason I'm so keen to get her. I know, and I'm frank enough to confess it, that out here in the desert, with not much to think about, on a vacation, and all, why—I kind of lost my head about her. She's a beautiful woman, Gallito, no need to tell you that. But you know, and I know, that a man can always shut down on that sort of thing if he's got to. My reputation ain't what it ought to be, no one knows that better than I, or feels it more; but, honest to God, Gallito, I ain't as black as I've been painted. No man is, probably. Now, what I got to say is this—"

"No need to say it, Mr. Hanson," interrupted Gallito, who had been twisting his mouth wryly during these remarks.

Again Hanson concealed his rising anger, although the color rose in his cheeks. "Now just let me talk a minute, Gallito." He spread out his hands placatingly. "The proposition I'm going to make you is this: Miss Gallito tells me that her mother traveled with her when she was younger, and even now, when she can spare the time from her farming, she goes out on the road with the young lady. Now, why not have a purely business arrangement. Let Miss Pearl sign up with me, and then we'll coax her mother to go with her. I should think that would satisfy you. It ought to satisfy any one, for a girl's mother to go with her."

"Of course," the Spaniard bowed with stately courtesy, but not before had his smile been so sardonic. "As you say, every one should be satisfied with such an arrangement and, let me say, it is one that would greatly please me, but as I told you before, Mr. Hanson, it cannot be. My daughter must keep her contract with Sweeney."

At white heat, Hanson rose and pushed back his chair. "Hell!" he cried. "What am I up against, anyway! Give some people the earth and it wouldn't suit 'em. But you can take this from me, Gallito," he leaned forward and pounded his fist on the table, "I don't take my answer from you. We'll see what the Black Pearl has got to say. The Black Pearl smirched by going out with me!" He laughed aloud.

He fell back frightened as Gallito half rose from his chair, and then, to his unbounded surprise, the Spaniard sat down again and softly rubbed his hands together. Hanson had a fleeting and most disturbing impression of the old man gloating over some secret and pleasant prospect.

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Lolita had balanced herself on the edge of the table and Gallito bent forward and scratched her head, making little clucking noises in his throat the while: "Our guest is a great poker player, Lolita, he understands how to make a bluff, but," again that single grating note of a laugh, "assure him, my Lolita, that he will be cold-decked."

Again Hanson was almost betrayed into making his threat then and there. He leaned forward and shook his forefinger under the Spaniard's eyes, his face was purple, but just in time he remembered himself, closed his mouth and drew back.

"Bob, Bob," croaked Lolita, "mi jasmin Pearl, mi corazon."

"A most intelligent bird, you see, Mr. Hanson," observed Gallito, with saturnine politeness.

Hanson turned away impatiently. "I will see your daughter this afternoon," he said.

Gallito had begun to roll a fresh cigarette, but now, checking himself abruptly, he threw a long comprehensive glance at the cloudless brazen sky, and then, squinting his eyes, studied for a second or two the equally brazen desert.

"I think not, Mr. Hanson," he said, with assured finality in his voice. "I do not think you will see my daughter to-day. What? Going so soon? Another glass of cognac? No. Adios, then. Adios."

CHAPTER VI

Hanson walked away, more disturbed in mind by his interview with Gallito than he would have thought possible an hour or two earlier. Something in the finality of the Spaniard's voice when making those last predictions, his evidently sincere belief that his daughter would not appear under Hanson's management, had impressed the latter in spite of himself, causing him seriously to question the extent of his influence over Pearl, a weakness which he had not previously permitted himself.

He strove with all the force of his optimistic will to throw off the depression which deepened with each moment, assuring himself that he was tired, that all morning he had played a part, every faculty on the alert; and that this growing dissatisfaction and unrest were only the evidence of a natural reaction.

He attempted to buttress his hope with mental argument, logical, even final, but singularly unconvincing where Pearl was concerned, as anything logical and final must ever be. He tried to recall in detail stories he had heard of her avarice and her coquetries; he thought of her jewels, her name, her wiles. Who was she to object to past peccadillos on his part? Then, uncomfited, he sought to reassure himself with the remembrance of her love for him, ardent and beautiful as the sun on the desert, but her

image rose on the dark of his mind like a flame, veering and capricious, or as the wind, lingering, caressing, yet ever fleeing.

He was tormented by the remembrance also of strange phases of her which he divined but could not analyze. Again, he would in fancy look deep into her dark eyes, demanding that his imagination revive for him those moments when his heart had thrilled to the liquid languor of her gaze, and instead he saw only the world-weariness of that sphynx glance which seemed to brood on uncounted centuries, and far back in her eyes, illusive and brief as the faint, half seen shadow on a mirror, he discerned mockery and disdain.

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He took off his hat, baring his brow to the air, and drew long breaths, unpleasantly conscious of an increasing heaviness and sultriness in the air, according well with the oppression of his thoughts. When he arrived at the San Gorgonio, he was glad to take refuge in his room and there, to relieve the tension of nerves strung almost unbearably high, he walked back and forth and, after his fashion, swore volubly and unintermittently.

At last, having exhausted his vocabulary as well as his breath, he turned to the window, struck by some impending change in the atmosphere which had now revealed itself by a slight obscuring of the light in the room. He looked out curiously, half fearfully, dimly but rebelliously aware that the world, his human world of personal desires and activities, as well as all external nature was threatened by vast, unseen, menacing forces. The great, gray desert lay in crouching stillness, a silence which filled the soul of man with horror. The sun, crimson as blood, hung in a sky over which seemed to have been drawn a veil of golden mist.

"Must be something doing," muttered Hanson, and even as he spoke his eye was taken by a movement on the horizon line, a billowing as if the desert were rising like the sea. And truly it did. It lifted in waves that mounted almost to the sky and swept forward with a savage eagerness as if to bear down upon and engulf and obliterate the little oasis of a village with its green productive fields, and reduce it again to the wastes of desolation from which it had been so painfully redeemed by man.

For nearly three days the storm lasted, raging by day and by night. The trees bowed to earth and lifted themselves to bow again with the sound of many waters in their leaves; and in the voice of the wind every savage, primeval menace alternated with every wail of human grief and anguish which has echoed through the ages. All desolation in the heart of man, "I am without refuge!" shrieked in its high cries, and, as if failing to find adequate expression in these, it summoned its chorus of demons and rang with the despairing fury of all damned and discordant things, until one bowed and covered the ears and muttered a prayer.

And the sand! It sifted constantly through doors and windows, and seemed to fall in a fine continuous shower from the very roof. It covered everything with a white rime; it sifted into the hair, the eyes; breathing was difficult, the air was so chokingly full of it.

The rooms, too, were ever paced by the restless feet of the wind, curtains swayed as if shaken by ghostly fingers; rugs and carpets rose and fell upon the floor, and, whether one sat alone or with others, the air seemed full of stealing presences, sad, and sometimes terrible; and of immemorial whispers that would not be stilled.

The desert knows no time, its past and present are one, a thousand years is as a single day, and when it chooses to find its voice all yesterdays and all to-morrows blend.

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Some day, when grief and horror shall be abandoned by man as utterly as his dreams of cave-life; when his remembrances of wrestling with the forces of nature or commerce shall seem as remote as his warfare with beasts, and tribes as savage as beasts; when he lifts his dull eyes and dares to dream only joy and beauty, then he will know that the gray cries of the wind are but the emphasis to the singing of the sunlight, that the black storm-clouds are but the contrast Beauty offers to deepen and heighten the effect of her more ethereal hues, blue and rose and pearl.

Hanson had stood the storm badly; inactivity was always a hardship to him, also he was unused to such discomfort as he had to endure; and his depression and unrest induced by the suspense he suffered in continually wondering how Pearl would take Bob Flick's news were greatly increased by the fact that he could get no word to her, nor receive any from her.

But on the third night the storm stilled and in the morning the desert showed herself sparkling like an enchantress, exhibiting all of her marvelous illusions of color and wrapped in a golden garment of sunshine. She smiled with all the allurements of a radiant and beautiful woman.

Early in the morning, just as Hanson was preparing to send a note to Pearl, he received one from her, asking him to meet her again within an hour or two, amid the palms. She did not suggest his riding thither with her. The note was brief, a mere line, and, study it as he would, he found nothing in it to indicate what her attitude was toward him, therefore it did not allay his nervousness in the least as to how she would meet him. But with the passage of the storm his nerves had recovered their normal tone, and with the brilliance and freshness of the morning much of his optimism had returned.

He reached the approach to the foothills where the palms lifted their stately and magnificent height, long before Pearl, and there, walking restlessly back and forth, he watched the road with straining eyes. And then he saw her, at first a mere speck in the distance; then she became more and more distinct, for she rode fast. She waved her hand to him as she came nearer and his heart rose in a great bound. Slackening the speed of her horse, she leaped from the saddle while it was still going, ran by its side, throwing the bridle over her arm, stopped, laughing and breathless, and cast herself into Hanson's waiting arms.

"Pearl, Pearl," he cried, in a low voice, holding her close against him and kissing her upturned face again and again. "Oh, Pearl, it's been a thousand years in hell since I saw you last."

She laughed and, gazing eagerly into her care-free eyes and unrepentant face, his heart rose again in a great sigh of relief. "That's the way a tenderfoot always feels about a sand-storm," she said. "Well, we sure gave you some nice theatrical effects, didn't we? It's the biggest I've seen for many a long day. But you were bound to see

something like that before you went away.” She spoke with a fatalism approaching Bob Flick’s. “The desert never lets you go and forget her.” Her eyes dreamed a moment.

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"She's like you in that, Pearl. My heavens! I wish you could see yourself this morning. Beautiful ain't the word."

"Am I beautiful, Rudolf?" She lifted her head from his shoulder and looked at him with a soft, childlike expression, as if longing for his praise.

"I guess you know it," he said adoringly, stroking her shining black hair, "but if you weren't, if you were as ugly as sin, it wouldn't make any difference, you'd get us all just the same. All women like you got to do is to look at a man and he'll follow you like a sheep. I don't know what it is, magnetism or something."

"But I'm glad I'm not as ugly as sin," she murmured, in smiling content. "And I'm glad you're not, too." She reached up her arm and touched his hair caressingly. "I love that little touch of reddish gold in your hair, and, yes, just that sprinkling of gray, and I love your blue eyes. I can't bear dark men. I am so dark myself."

"You sure are, Pearl, thank the Lord! I never was very poetic, but I never see one of these desert nights sparkling with their big stars, twice as big as natural, that I don't think of you."

She smiled, delighted at his praise.

"But, goodness!" he went on, "when ain't I thinking of you? I tell you, you been on my mind steady these last few days. Your Pop was so dead sure when I talked to him that you'd have nothing more to do with me that it got to worrying me, and I thought maybe you'd hold it against me that I hadn't told you about—about my being already tied up." He scanned her face as if fearful of seeing it cloud and change.

It did. The laughter faded from her eyes, her brow darkened. "I wish you had told me," she said, "then I'd been a little better prepared for Pop and Bob; but I guess they got as good as they gave."

"I know I ought to have told you, Pearl," he said miserably, "and I meant to, honey, but"—gathering her more closely in his arms—"I just couldn't spoil those first few days; and, anyway, you drove everything but you out of my head. I just determined every time it came into my mind to tell you, that I wasn't going to spoil Paradise with any recollections of hell. Maybe I was all wrong, but that was the way I felt."

"No, you were all right, Rudolf," she wound her arms about his neck. "When the storm came it broke swift and sudden like the sand storm, and we didn't live it all over beforehand, getting ready for it, and deciding how we'd meet it when it came, and all that. We just enjoyed ourselves. Lived and loved up to the moment when it broke, and that was the best way."

“Gee! was there ever a woman like you!” lifting his glad, gay gaze to the sky. “Why, Pearl, it most frightens me when I think how happy me and you are going to be together.”

“Are we?” nestling closer to him. “How?”

“How?” he repeated. “Why, we’re going to be together first and last; ain’t that enough? It is for me. But”—with drooping head and affectedly humble and dejected mien—“it couldn’t be expected to be enough for you, could it?”

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"Hardly," she looked up at him through her long lashes.

"Well, since that ain't enough for you," still with affected resignation, "let me tell you this: You're going to dance to bigger crowds and higher class ones than you ever saw before, because you're going to be advertised proper, see?" And then, sketching out plans with his former bold, optimistic confidence, "We're going to travel on the other side and travel in style, too, a big touring automobile. I guess you can show those foreign managers something new in the dancing line. How would you like to see your name all over London and Paris? The Black Pearl! Eh?"

She slipped away from him and took a few buoyant dancing steps. "Fine!" she laughed. "It sure sounds good to me." Floating nearer to him, she pinched his arm. "Ain't you the spellbinder!"

He caught her with one arm. "Oh, Pearl," his voice falling to seriousness, "you don't know how happy you make me. Honest, I've been so plum scared these last few days, I been almost crazy. I didn't know, you see, just how much influence your Pop and Flick might have over you, and I got locoed for fear you wouldn't see me and give me a chance to explain."

"Pop and Bob Flick kindly took the bother of explaining things off your shoulders, didn't they?" with a short, vindictive laugh.

"Darn 'em," bitterly. "I don't want to say anything about your Pop, but Flick's a sneaking coyote, and sooner or later he'll pay for snooping into my business. Oh, I've cursed myself more than once for letting him tell you, but I never loved a woman before, Pearl, and I couldn't take the chances, honest I couldn't. I hadn't the nerve." There was a passionate sincerity in his voice.

"They've been telling me you've loved many a woman." Her eyes gloomed and she slashed her skirt savagely with the riding crop she held.

"You know," he whispered, "you know. I've been a fool. There have been many others, Pearl, I ain't going to deceive you, but—there's never been but one."

She softened and smiled at him, then her face darkened again. "But there's one that stands in the way—yet," she said gloomily.

"In the way? What do you mean?" uncomprehendingly.

"Why, that woman up in Colina? Don't she stand between you and me, now, for a while?"

"Not much, she don't," emphatically, "not her!"

A light flared in Pearl's eyes. "I knew Pop and Bob were up to some of their tricks! They been doing their best to ram it home that she'll die before she lets you get a divorce."

"You bet she will," muttered Hanson, with concentrated bitterness, and stifled some maledictions under his breath. "I've tried every way, turned every trick known to sharp lawyers for the last six years, trying to get free; but she's got money, you see, and she can keep her eye on me, so, in one way or another, she's balked me every time."

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Pearl threw herself from him and looked at him with wild eyes. “Then how are you going to get free now?” she cried. “What are your plans? Why is she going to come around now, if she never has before?”

“She ain’t, honey, the devil take her!” He caught her back in his arms and held her as if he would never release her. “But what difference does that make to us?” he pleaded ardently. “We’re going to let the whole lot of them go hang and live our lives as we choose.”

“Then Pop and Bob were right; and I never believed them, not for a moment. I thought you were too smart to stay caught in a trap like that. I thought you were so quick and keen to plan and were so full of ideas that you could get around any situation.” Again she flung herself away from him and, with her face turned from him, stood looking out over the desert.

He bent toward her and, throwing his arms about her, again endeavored to draw her back into his embrace, but she resisted.

“Pearl,” he cried roughly, “what do you mean? You don’t mean to say that you got any foolish ideas about it making any difference whether a preacher says a few words over us or not? Why, you can’t feel that way. You’ve seen too much of life, and your folks have always been show people. They didn’t hold any such ideas. Anyway, you got brains to think for yourself. What joke you playing on me, honey? Oh, don’t hold me off like that, lift your head and look at me. I know you’re going to laugh in about a minute and then I’ll know it’s all a joke.” Again he tried to put his arm about her and again she threw him off.

“Let me alone,” she cried harshly. “I’m thinking. Let me alone.”

“Pearl,” he besought wildly; his face had suddenly grown flabby and white, his voice was broken with his desperate pleading. “Honey, you don’t want time to think. Why, there’s nothing to think about. We’re going off on the train this afternoon to be happy together, and we don’t give a cent for anything else. We’d be married if we could. My Lord! I should say so! But since we can’t, we’ll make the best of it.”

He paused and looked at her, but there was something inflexible in her attitude, some almost threatening aloofness that made him hesitate to clasp her as he longed to do for fear he should meet another and final rebuff. He waited a moment or two, but, as she did not speak, he began again.

“I know you’re joking, Pearl, but it’s awful hard on me”—he wiped the sweat from his brow. “You haven’t got any such fool ideas. Of course you haven’t. They’re for dead ones, old maid country school teachers, and preachers and things like that, hypocrites that have got to make their living by playing the respectable game. But we’re not that

kind, Pearl, we're alive, and we're not afraid. We're going to be happier than two people ever were in this world. Pearl, speak to me. I don't wonder that your mother complains about the way you shut yourself up and never say a word. Speak to me. Tell me what you're thinking."

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"I'm thinking a lot of things," she answered, but without turning her head to look at him, "and I ain't through yet. Now I've got to studying on this matter, I'm a-going to think it out here and now."

"But what is there to think about?" in a sort of exasperated despair. "Oh, Pearl, how can you be so cruel! I know you ain't got any of the fool ideas of the dead ones I was talking about. You couldn't have; not with Isobel Montmorenci for a grandmother, and Queenie Madrew for a mother, and the same kind on your Pop's side of the house. You didn't have any Sunday-school bringing up and I know it. Then what you playing with me like a cat does with a mouse for? It ain't fair, Pearl, it ain't fair."

She turned and faced him now with an impatient gesture of the hands. Some expression on her face, the set of her mouth, the horse-shoe frown on her forehead gave her a fleeting resemblance to her father, a resemblance that momentarily chilled his blood.

"For goodness' sake keep quiet a minute," she cried irritably. "You gave me a jolt a while ago, telling me you couldn't get free, and I want a minute or two to take it in."

"But you don't think hard of me for that," he implored. "Oh, Pearl—" but she had again turned to her contemplation of the desert, and realizing that further speech might bring her swift anger upon him he walked hastily away.

Several yards from her he paused and again wiped his brow. "Oh, God!" he muttered, lifting his face to the sky, "what does a man know about women, anyway?"

As for Pearl, she scarcely knew that he had ceased to speak to her. She had been thinking, as she averred, thinking back over the years. She had been dancing professionally ever since she had been a child. As a slim, tall, young girl, still in skirts to her shoe tops, her mother had traveled with her, and, although this evidence of chaperonage irked her, she had with her quick intelligence early seen its value. All about her she saw the struggling flotsam of feminine youth, living easily, luxuriously to-day, careless of any less prosperous morrows, and, when those swift, inevitable morrows came, she had seen the girlish, exotic queens of an hour, haggard, stripped of their transient splendor, uncomprehending, almost helpless.

She saw readily enough that it was not only her superior talents and training, the hard work and hard study which she gave to her profession which set her above the butterflies and apart from them, but her mother's constant presence during those early years was of almost equal value.

All this she realized at an age when strong impressions are indelibly retained. Her value, the tremendous value of an unsmirched virtue, a woman's greatest asset in a world of desire and barter, became to her a possession she cherished above her jewels,

above the money she could earn and save and the greater sums she dreamed of earning or winning by any means—all means but one.

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Her observations of the women about her who gave all for so little, her meditations upon them, and the conclusions she drew from their maimed lives only emphasized the resisting force of her nature. She was not born to be a leaf in the current, whirled by the force of waters into a safe haven or an engulfing whirlpool as chance might decide; she must dominate the currents.

And with the temptations of her youth, and her ardent emotional temperament, would also come the remembrance of those haggard girls with their pinched blue lips, the suffering in their eyes, their delicate faces aged and yellowed and lined and spoiled, weeping with shaking sobs, telling her pitiful stories, and begging her for money, for a word with the management. And, when they had gone, she had turned to her looking-glass and gazed at herself with conscious pride and delight. Contempt, not pity, stirred her heart for the draggled butterflies whose gauzy iridescence was but for a moment; and before her mirror she constantly renewed her vows that never would she barter her bloom, her freshness, her exquisite grace for what those girls had to show.

She had seen a great French actress roll across the desert in her private car, to meet in every city the adulation of thousands and it had stimulated her ambition enormously. She was by nature as insatiable as the horse-leech's daughter; she would take all—love, money, jewels in return for her barren coqueties. The fact that she was "straight," as she phrased it, gave her sufficient excuse for her arrogant domination.

Unfortunately for Hanson, there was no particular temptation in what he could offer in the way of professional advancement. She was perfectly cognizant of her own ability, aware that its resources were scarcely developed. Already her field widened continually. She was in perpetual demand with her public, and therefore with her managers.

But she loved Hanson. In all of the love affairs in which she had been involved she had never really cared before, and now only her strong will kept this attraction from proving overmastering. And here came the struggle. The right or the wrong of the matter, the morals of it, did not touch her. It was the clash of differing desires, a clash between passion and this secret, long-cherished pride of virtue.

"Honey, honey," he was back at her side again; his voice was hoarse and ragged, but for that very reason it moved her. All at once the primitive woman, loving, yielding, glad and proud to yield, stirred in her, rose and dominated her hard ambition. She lifted her head a little and, still with it turned from him, looked at the pagan glory of the day. Her eyes closed with the delight of that moment. She felt her resistance breaking down, the weakening and softening of her resolutions. Was she at last to know the splendor of loving and giving?

"Ain't you played with me long enough, Pearl?" his voice was in her ear, a broken, husky whisper. "What's the use? Why, of course," grasping at his usual self-confidence, "I'm a

fool to get scared this way. You've showed me that you care, you have, honey; and I guess," with a nervous laugh, "the Black Pearl hasn't got any damn fool scruples such as I've been frightening myself out of my skin by attributing to her."

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Imperceptibly, almost, her whole body stiffened. Her soft, relaxed, yielding attitude was gone. But she remained silent, the same ominous, brooding silence that the desert had held before the storm, had Hanson but noticed. He did not. He was still pleading: “Why all the time you been keeping me on the anxious seat, I been telling myself that the Black Pearl—”

“Yes, the Black Pearl,” she interrupted him with her low, unpleasant laugh. “Don’t you care a little that I got that name, Rudolf?”

“Care!” He wound his arms about her now and buried his face in the great waves of her inky, shining hair, wildly kissing the nape of her neck; but with a deft twist of her lithe body she slipped almost away from him, although his arms still held her. “Care? Of course I care. But what’s that got to do with it when I love you like I do? Pearl, if you were a good deal blacker than you’re painted it wouldn’t make any difference to me.”

He strove to draw her nearer to him, but again she slipped away, this time escaping the circle of his eager arms. For the first time her face was turned toward him, but her eyes were cast down, her long lashes sweeping her cheeks. “But I must be pretty bad to get called the Black Pearl,” she said in that same low voice; all of its sliding, drawling inflections were gone; it was strangely tense.

“I guess so, damn it!” he cried; “but I’m past caring, Pearl. I got a hunger and thirst for you, honey, such as men die of out there in the desert. Before God, I don’t care anything about your past or your present, if you’ll only love me for a while.”

With that low, harsh laugh of hers that sounded in his ears afterward like the first muttering menace of the sand wind over the desert, the storm broke. Her eyes had an odd green glitter, her face was white, a dusky white, and her upper lip was drawn back from her teeth at each corner of the mouth.

“You fool!” Her voice was a muffled scream. “Oh, you fool! Sweeney could have told you better, any man on the desert could have told you better. The Black Pearl! Why, I’ve been called the Black Pearl since I was a baby, almost. It’s my hair and my skin and my eyes.”

[Illustration: “I’ll show you what I’ll do.”]

He didn’t believe her, but he saw his blunder at once; cursed himself for it, and, mad to retrieve himself, began incoherent explanations and excuses. “Of course,” he stammered, “of course, I—I—was just fooling, you know. But, well, what does it matter, anyway? Oh, Pearl, girl! Don’t look at me like that. Don’t!”

“I’ll do worse than look at you, if you come any nearer me,” she threatened. “Do you think I ride all over the desert where I’ve a mind to without protection? I guess not.”

She lifted her skirt with a quick movement and drew a long knife, keen as a stiletto, from her boot.

Hanson went a little whiter, but he was no coward. "Come on then, finish it for me," he said. "Your eyes are doing it anyway. Oh, Pearl!" he fell again to desperate pleading, "you won't turn me down just for a mistake?"

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"Me, the Black Pearl, held cheap!" she muttered and raised her stag-like head superbly, "and by you! You that pick up women and drop them when you're tired of them. Me, the Black Pearl." She turned quickly and ran to her waiting horse, loosening the tether with quick, nervous fingers. Hanson followed her.

"Pearl, you ain't going to leave me?"

But she was already in the saddle.

He caught at her bridle and held her so. "Pearl, I made a mistake"—he was talking wildly, rapidly—"but you ain't going to throw me down just for that—you can't. Think how happy we've been this last week—think how we've loved each other. Why, you can't turn me down, just for one break, you can't."

"Can't I?" she said, her teeth still showing in that unpleasant way. "Can't I? Well—if you don't get out of my way I'll show you what I'll do. Slash you across your lying face." Her arm was already uplifted, riding crop in hand. "Let me go!" Her voice was so low that he hardly heard it, but full of a thousand threats. Then, swerving her horse quickly to one side, she jerked the bridle from his slack fingers and was off across the desert.

CHAPTER VII

It was about an hour after Pearl had ridden away to meet Hanson among the palms that Bob Flick joined Mr. Gallito, who sat, as usual, upon the porch of his home, smoking innumerable cigarettes. He was his composed and imperturbable self, exhibiting outwardly, at least, no trace of anxiety, but Flick looked worn, almost haggard.

Gallito had just told him of Pearl's early departure and also of the fact that she had left no word intimating when she might return or in what direction she was riding; but when Flick expressed regret that this had been permitted, he merely lifted his shaggy brows. "What is done is done," he said. "She slipped away before either Hugh or myself knew that she was gone, and what could we or you, for that matter, have done to prevent her?"

"I wish I'd been here," muttered Flick uneasily. "I'd have done something." But his tone did not bear out the confidence of his words.

"I am too old and, I hope, too wise," returned the Spaniard, "to attempt to tame the whirlwind. But cheer up, my friend. Although she rode off to meet this Hanson, without a doubt, still, the day is not over."

"You know what she is when her head is set," murmured Flick.



"I! Have I not cause?" exclaimed Gallito, a depth of meaning in his tone. "Who so much? But, nevertheless, she has not gone for good. She would not leave without some of her clothes, especially her dancing dresses and slippers, if she went with him. And her jewels, oh, certainly, not without her jewels!" he smiled wisely. "There are, as you know, certain ornaments about which she has her superstitions; she will not dance without her emeralds. Oh, no, console yourself, as I do. She has not gone for good."

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But Flick was not so easily reassured. "I almost wish she had," he said gloomily. "If she don't go to-day, she will to-morrow or next day."

"In that case they will not go far," returned Gallito and rubbed his hands. His reply had been quick and sharp as the beat of a hammer on an anvil; but now he spoke more softly: "But will she go at all, my friend? You, like myself, have ever played for high stakes. Then you know and I know that this is a world where a man may never look ahead and calculate and say, 'because there is this combination of circumstances, these results will certainly follow,'" he emphasized his words by tapping on the table with his long, gnarled forefinger. "The wise man never predicts, because he is always aware of that interfering something which we call the unexpected." He blew great wreaths of smoke from his mouth and watched them float out on the sun-gilded air. "We know that my daughter is as obstinate as a pig and as wilful as a burro, therefore we conclude that she will follow her mad heart and go with this fellow. But there we take no account of the unexpected, eh, Lolita!" welcoming the parrot who waddled out of the open door and came clucking and muttering across the porch toward the two men.

Flick stirred uneasily. He was in no mood to stand Gallito's philosophizing, and the Spaniard, seeing it, smiled as he scratched Lolita's head. "Two people can not be thrown much together and not show to each other what is in them," he continued. "You know that my daughter is proud," he lifted his own head haughtily here, "and you know that above everything her pride lies in the fact that no man can scorn her. But this that Hanson does not believe."

This roused Flick to a sudden interest, some light came into his heavy eyes, a dull flush rose on his cheek. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"This: Yesterday morning when that hound sat there and talked to me there was something I said which made him forget himself in anger, and he said: 'Me! The Black Pearl smirked by me!'"

"He said that?" Flick's tones had never been more drawlingly soft, but there was a quality in them, an electric and ominous vibration, which boded ill for Hanson.

Gallito nodded. "It is in his mind. It is his thought about her. If he said it to me when he forgot himself he will surely say it to her."

"And you let him say it, Gallito? You let him go away safe after saying it?" Flick looked at him amazed.

"I think far ahead," replied the older man. "It is the custom of a lifetime. To act on the moment is to continually regret. Do you think I want my daughter's tears and reproaches for the rest of my life? No, I wish to spend my old age free of women and

their mischief. This Hanson must talk, talk, talk. Therefore, if you give him rope enough he will hang himself before any woman's eyes."

"But when?" asked Flick, and that vibration still lingered in his voice. "I am not so patient as you, Gallito."

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The Spaniard made no reply to this and silence fell between them for a few minutes.

"Oh!" said Flick, as if suddenly remembering something, something in which he was not particularly interested, but which would serve as a topic of conversation during these tense moments of waiting; "Nitschkan is up at Colina, and Mrs. Thomas."

"Nitschkan!" A faintly humorous smile crept from Gallito's mouth up to his eyes.

He was genuinely interested if Flick was not. "What is she doing there?"

"She came up to look after those prospects of hers, nurse them along a little, I guess, and to hunt and fish some, I guess, particularly hunt and fish. She says she's going to take a bear-skin or so back with her."

"She sure will, if she says so," returned Gallito confidently.

"Of course, she got wise to Jose right away." Flick spoke rather anxiously.

"Of course, being Nitschkan." Gallito's tone was quite composed and equable. "Well, she's safe, and she'll keep him in order if anybody can." Again that grimly humorous smile played about his mouth. "Why did she bring Mrs. Thomas?"

Flick laughed. "To keep her in order, too. Mrs. Thomas is big and pretty, with no mind of her own, and she got tangled up in some fool love affair that her friends didn't approve of, so when Nitschkan started off on this last gipsy expedition of hers they sent Mrs. Thomas with her."

Gallito was about to answer and then, suddenly, he seemed to stiffen, his hand, which was conveying a match to his cigarette, remained motionless, the flame of the match flared up and then went out in a gust of wind. "Look, Bob, look," he said, in a low voice. "What do you see out there?"

Flick's eyes, keener even than his, swept the desert. "By George!" he whispered huskily; "it's her, her alone, and coming like the wind."

"I hope," cried Gallito and gnawed his lip, "that she has done nothing that will get us into trouble."

"I hope to God she has," said Flick. "The desert'll take care that she gets into no trouble. It'll be as silent as the grave. Just another case of a reckless tenderfoot getting lost out there in the sand, that's all."

It was indeed Pearl, and, as Flick had said, coming like the wind. She pulled her horse up as she neared the gate and, when she reached it, stopped him abruptly, slipped down from the saddle, threw the bridle over the fence paling and ran toward the two

men on the porch. Her face had changed but little since she had left Hanson among the palms. Even her wild ride had failed to bring back its color, and the curl of her upper lip still revealed her teeth.

She stood for a moment before them, slashing her skirt with her riding crop, then she cast it from her and sank down on the porch as if suddenly exhausted. Bob Flick quickly poured out a glass of her father's cognac and held it to her lips. She took a sip of it and it seemed to revive her.

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"He thought that I," her voice was hoarse and labored, "he thought that I was like those other women that he has picked up and got tired of and left, Selma Le Grand, and Fanny Estrel, and others. I wonder where he thinks that I've been living that I wouldn't know about them. Fanny Estrel! I went to see her once in vaudeville, and, before I'd hardly got my seat, someone next me began to whisper that she used to be one of Hanson's head-liners and that he was crazy about her once. And there she was, old, and fat and tired, playing in an ingenue sketch in a cheap house!" She laughed harshly. "That's what he was offering me," with a flare of passion, "and I was too green to know it!"

"And he, where is he?" asked her father, speaking more quickly than was his wont and eyeing her closely.

"Out there, I suppose, I don't care. Oh, no," meeting his eye and catching his unspoken question. "He's safe enough; don't worry."

"Shall I make him shoot, Pearl?" asked Flick softly. "He won't have much chance with me, you know. I'll get him in Pete's place and pick a quarrel. He'll understand. You won't be in it."

"No, you won't, Bob, although I can see how you're wanting to," she said decisively. "The Black Pearl!" she broke out presently. "My name's an awful good advertisement. It gives me a reputation for being worse than I am." She laughed cynically. "But he believed it." Her whole face darkened again.

"He needn't go away believing it, Pearl." Once more Flick spoke softly, persuasively, and once more her father looked at her hopefully.

She looked quickly from one to the other as if about to accede, and then, dropping her head on her arms crossed on her knees, she fell into wild and tempestuous weeping. "No," she cried, "no, promise me you won't, Bob. Oh, Oh, Oh!" she wailed and rocked back and forth. "What shall I do? What shall I do?"

At last she lifted her heavy eyes and looked at the two men. "I want to go away from here, quick," she said, "quick."

"With Sweeney," said her father, well pleased.

"No." She threw out her hands as if putting the thought from her with abhorrence. "No, I can't dance and I won't. I never want to dance again. I never will dance again," passionately.

"But that is a feeling which will soon pass away, my daughter," urged her father.

"No, no," she wailed. "And anyway, I would never be safe from Ru—from him, that way. He would follow me about and try to meet me. He would. I know he would."

Gallito drew back and looked at her with uplifted head. "Afraid! You?" he asked in surprise.

"No," she flashed at him scornfully, lifting her head, but again she dropped it brokenly on her arms. "I'm afraid of myself," she cried, suffering causing her to break down those barriers of self-repression which she usually erected between herself and everyone about her. "I'm afraid of myself, because I love him. Yes, I do. I love him just as much as ever—and I hate him, hate him, hate him." She hissed the words. Once more she sobbed wildly and then she broke into speech again. "Oh, I want to go somewhere and hide; somewhere where he'll never find me, where I'll be safe from him."

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"What's the matter with Colina?" said Bob Flick suddenly. "He'll never come there. A good reason why!"

Pearl became perfectly still. It was evident that the suggestion had reached her, and that she was thinking it over. Her father, too, considered the matter. "Excellent," he cried; "excellent."

And Pearl looked up eagerly. "But when can we go, when?" she cried and stretched out an imploring hand to touch his knee. "To-morrow? No, to-day. You said yesterday, father, that you would be going back at once. Oh, to-day! The afternoon train—" She looked eagerly from one man to another.

"Yes, to-day," agreed Bob Flick. "You can go as well to-day as to-morrow, Gallito."

The Spaniard had been thinking with thrust-out jaw and narrowed eyes, now he threw out his hands and lifted his brows. "Have it so, then," he said. "The train leaves this afternoon. Go, Pearl, and pack your things. I promised Hughie that he should go back with me, but he had better wait a few days until his mother can get her sister to stay with her. You had better tell him, Pearl."

After she had gone into the house the two men sat in silence for a few minutes and then Flick lifted his relieved face to the sky. "If there's any God up there," he said, "I'm thanking him for that unexpected you were talking about, Gallito."

"Ah, that unexpected!" returned Gallito. "It is more comforting than many religions. More than once when I have been in a tight place I have relied on it and not vainly. You will go with us this afternoon, Bob?"

Flick hesitated a moment. "I can't," he said. "I've got a lot to do at the mines here, but I can come up soon if you think it will be all right."

The old man smiled in his most saturnine fashion and sighed dismally. "I will make a special offering to the church if you come often," he said. "I can see black days ahead of us. She does not like the mountains."

"Oh, she'll not stay long," Flick consoled him. "The summer, perhaps; but she will be ready to sign up with Sweeney before fall. She can't stay off the stage longer than that. You'll see."

Gallito sighed again and pessimistically shook his head. He was far from anxious to assume the responsibility of restoring his daughter's spirits, and had hoped that Flick would relieve him of that duty, but, since that was not to be, he accepted the situation with what philosophy and fortitude he could muster and hurried the feminine preparations for departure so successfully that he and Pearl actually got away on the afternoon train.

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This fact was communicated to Hanson by Jimmy early that evening. Hanson had returned to the San Gorgonio before noon and had remained in his room until nightfall. As the day wore on and he recovered in some measure his self-control, he began to view the situation in a different light from that in which it had first appeared to him, although, in strict adherence to fact, he could not be said to have viewed it in any light at all in that first hour or two. It was all dense darkness to him, a black despair not unmingled with anger and a sense of injury. But as he sat alone in his room with its windows looking out over the desert, his naturally confident and optimistic spirit gradually asserted itself. Again and again, and each time more positively, he assured himself that all was not lost yet by any means. He had been unfortunate enough, yes, and fool enough, to make a bad break; a break that he, with all of his experience, should have known better than to make to any woman. Yet he felt that, even admitting that, he could not justly blame himself. The Pearl had not only surprised but frightened him by the way she had taken a fact which he thought she fully understood—that marriage was out of the question for him. He was so crazy about her that he had lost his head, that was the long and short of the matter, and had made a fool of himself and hash of the situation; but temporarily, only temporarily. For, and to this belief he clung more and more hopefully, the Pearl was too deeply in love with him definitely to close the affair between them for just one break. He would not, could not believe that. It was true enough that he had aroused her passionate and violent anger, but the more violent the anger the sooner it will evaporate, and strange and complex as the Pearl was, she was yet a woman; and no woman on earth could long hold resentment against the man she loved. She had, he was able to convince himself, regretted her mad action in first threatening and then riding away from him long before she had reached home; and, without doubt, it was only that high and haughty pride of hers which kept her from returning to him before she had traversed half the distance. But the course of action he had decided upon was sure to win. He would give her a few hours to get over her anger, to regret it and to reproach herself for causing him pain, and then he would give her a little more time to long and ache for him to return to her. He would wait until evening, and then he would go boldly to the Gallito house and, no matter what efforts were made to frustrate their meeting, he would see her alone. Ah, and she would fly to him, if he knew her aright. All the opposition in the world could not keep them apart, it would only strengthen her determination. And then, how he would beg her forgiveness, how he would plead his love, with passionate and irresistible eloquence; and, if he knew the heart of woman, she would yield.

But when the moment came for acting upon this decision he found that it took a certain amount of courage, considerable, in fact, to face not only a woman who had left him in hot anger that morning, but a gnarled and thorny father and also the soft-spoken Bob Flick; and he decided to stop at Pete's place and brace up his courage with a drink.

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Jimmy could hardly wait to serve him. He was like a busy and important bird, hopping about on a bough and, literally, he twittered with excitement.

"Well," he exclaimed, "where you been keeping yourself, and why wasn't you down to see 'em off?"

A cold chill ran over Hanson. His impulse was to cry, "Who? What do you mean?" But with an effort he resisted the inclination. Resolutely, he held himself in check, and, although the hand with which he lifted the glass to his lips trembled a little, he drank off the whisky before he spoke.

"Couldn't make it," he said. "Who went beside—" he paused inviting Jimmy's further confidence.

"Just Pearl and her father," returned Jimmy volubly. "I guess that was the reason Bob went to Colina last week to kind of arrange for Pearl going up to make a visit to the old man. But shucks!" he broke off, "what am I telling you this for, when you know more than I do?" His bright, beady eyes rested on Hanson's with pleased and eager anticipation as he awaited further revelations.

"Nothing more to tell," replied the other disappointedly. "It's all just as you say. Well, I got to go up and see Mrs. Gallito. I'm off myself early to-morrow morning. See you before that though. So long."

He walked away, feeling dazed for the moment and beaten. Not at once did he turn his steps in the direction of the Gallito home, but continued to tramp up and down the road, and presently, as the cool, fresh air restored his spirit, he was able to think clearly again. His world was in chaos, but, even so, he still held some winning cards. He had no intention, he gritted his teeth as he made this vow, of dropping out of the game. He meant to play it to a finish. Those cards! He ran over his hand mentally. There was that commanding trump—his knowledge, his unsuspected knowledge of the whereabouts of Crop-eared Jose. Then his next biggest trump—and here his heart lifted with a thrill—was the fact that Pearl loved him. Yes, in spite of her anger, in spite of the fact that she had rushed off to Colina, where she knew he could not follow her, she loved him; and his desire for her was but increased by the dangers and difficulties with which she surrounded herself. But he must keep in touch with her, and the question as to how this might best be accomplished rose in his mind. Mrs. Gallito was the almost immediate answer, and he determined, no matter what objections might be raised, to communicate with Pearl through that available source. Of one thing was he convinced and that was that not for long would Pearl linger in the gloomy mountains which he knew she abhorred. She belonged to the desert or to the world of men and admiration, the world of light and color and music. He couldn't see her in the mountains, he shivered a little at the thought of her among them; the cold, silent, austere mountains, so alien to this flower of the cactus.

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His first poignant disappointment over, and his plan of action decided upon, he wasted no time in seeking Mrs. Gallito. He found her, to his satisfaction, quite alone, Hughie having, as she told him, gone to spend the evening with some friends. She had, before his arrival, been reading the Sunday supplement of an eastern newspaper, gazing with longing eyes at the portraits of the daughters of fashion and intently studying some of the elaborate and intricate coiffures presented, in the hope that she might achieve the same effects.

"Why, Mr. Hanson!" she cried in surprise at the sight of him. "I thought you'd gone sure, and Oh, mercy!" putting her hands to her head, "I ain't on my puffs."

"I wouldn't ever have known it," said Hanson truthfully. "The fact is I'm not noticing anything much, Mrs. Gallito, I got a lot on my mind." He sighed unfeignedly and she noticed that he looked both tired and worried. "And say, I wish you'd sit down and talk to me a little."

She still stood looking at him hesitatingly, a distressed expression on her face. "I—I don't know as I'd better," she faltered. "Gallito, he said, the very last thing he said, was that if you come around—Oh, Mr. Hanson," she sat down weakly in her chair and began to cry. "I thought you was just about the nicest man I'd met for many a day, and here I find you're a dreadful scamp. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! I guess all men are alike!"

Hanson bent forward earnestly. He had an end to gain and he meant to gain it. "Now look here, Mrs. Gallito," he said. "You don't want to condemn me unheard. You're not that kind of a lady. I knew that the first minute I set eyes on you. Now understand I'm not trying to persuade you that I'm any better than I am, but I just want you to believe that I'm not quite so black as I'm painted, not as black as your husband and Bob Flick want to paint me, anyway."

She twisted a fold of her dress, already half-persuaded and yet still a little doubtful. "But you never gave us a hint that you were married," she ventured timidly.

"Honest to God, I forget it myself," he asserted devoutly. "How can a man be always thinking to tell everyone he meets that he's still in a legal tie-up, when the only way he can remember it himself is by coming across his marriage certificate, now and then? Why, it's a good ten years since me and that woman parted. You don't call that married?"

His positive personality exerted its usual influence over Mrs. Gallito. "Course not," she agreed, although she still sat with downcast eyes and pleated her dress.

"I'm a pretty lonely man," pathos in his voice, "and I'd kind of gotten into the way of putting home and happiness and all like that away from me; and then I came here and saw Pearl," he was sincere enough now, "and honest, Mrs. Gallito, it was all up with me

then, right from the first minute, and I was so plumb crazy about her that I guess I lost my head. I knew all the time that I ought to tell you and her just how I was fixed, I knew it, but, someways, try as I would, I couldn't. I didn't have the nerve, so I just waited and let the cards fall as they would. Maybe I was a fool and a coward. The way things have turned out, it sure looks like I was, but I just couldn't help it."

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"I guess you ain't any different from most men," she answered, weakly sympathetic, "but you see Pearl has her notions, and they're mighty strong ones. It's the way she's been brought up," this with some pride. "You see, me and her pop started out with the idea that we wasn't going to have the Pearl live one of those hand to mouth lives that we'd seen girls in the circus that didn't have much training or much ability live. We saw right from the first that she was awful smart and awful pretty, and her Pop he had the knack of making money and holding on to it. Well, when he saw that she had her head set on the stage and we couldn't keep her off it, it's in her blood, you see, why her Pop says: 'Well, there's one thing, till she's of age, legal, on or off the stage, she's going to have a mother's care and a father showing up every now and then unexpected.' He's got awful Spanish ideas, you know. 'I don't want her kept innocent,' he says. 'My Lord, no. It's the innocent ones that have got to pay, and pay big in a world of bad knowledge where ignorance is not forgave and is punished worse than any crime. Let her see the seamy side,' he says, 'she's no fool. Let her see what those who thinks to live easy and gives themselves away easy gets.'

"And Pearl saw right off. You see, she ain't so soft-hearted like me," again she wiped the furtive tear from her eye. "Pearl's hard. She ain't no conscience about some things. She'll lead a man on and on, when she don't care beans for him, and take all he'll give her, not money, you know, but awful handsome presents. I've seen her let some poor boy that was crazy about her blow in all the dust that he'd saved for a year. Oh, yes, she's like her father in more'n one way, both awful ambitious and terrible fond of making money. Why," she added naively, "I've seen Pearl look at a bank note like I never saw her look at a love letter."

"Well, she won't make much money up in those mountains, not dancing, anyway," he laughed briefly and unmirthfully.

"It surprised me a lot, her going," admitted Mrs. Gallito; "she hates the mountains."

"Then she won't stay long," put in Hanson quickly.

Mrs. Gallito was uncertain about this. "But," she confided presently, "she took on awful to her father and Bob Flick. I didn't dare come out, but I heard her through the door there. 'Where can I go,' she cried, 'where he won't come?' And she kept on saying she'd got to go somewhere where you would never find her, because she didn't dare trust herself, and she cried right out: 'I love him, I love him.'"

With these words, the confirmation of his hope, Hanson's blithe self-confidence returned. He threw back his head and straightened his shoulders, the light of an exultant purpose flashing in the steel of his eye. "Pleasant for Bob!" he remarked in vindictive satisfaction; but as he had still an end to gain, he did not permit his mind to gloat long upon the agreeable picture Mrs. Gallito's words had suggested.

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"Now, just let me talk a minute, Mrs. Gallito," leaning forward and speaking in his most persuasive manner. "This whole thing is a misunderstanding, that's all. Pearl didn't understand what I was trying to say to her, and she lost her temper and wouldn't let me finish. Now taking all the blame to myself for everything, admitting that I haven't acted right in any particular, still I haven't had a square deal. You've got the sand and the fairness to admit that, Mrs. Gallito, and I may say in passing that you're the only one that has, and you've got to admit that I haven't had a square deal; not from the Pearl, God bless her, and certainly not from her Pop and that Flick," his eyes flashed viciously.

Mrs. Gallito filled up his waiting pause with a murmur of confused but sympathetic assent.

"I'm telling you now what I'd told them if they'd given me a chance, and it's this," emphasizing his words by striking the palm of one hand with the forefinger of the other, "I'm going back to Los Angeles and I'm going to move heaven and earth to get free; but in the meantime, Mrs. Gallito, I got to hear from her, I've got to keep in touch with her, and I believe you've got too much heart and too much common sense not to help me."

She drew back with feeble, inarticulate murmurs of fright and protest. "I wouldn't dare," she began.

"Wait a moment," said Hanson soothingly. "I'm not suggesting anything that could get you into trouble. Mercy, no! All I want you to do is this, just write me now and then and let me know how things are going, and maybe, once in a while, slip a letter of mine in one of yours to Pearl; but," as she gasped a little and opened her eyes widely, "not till you're sure it's quite safe."

"Well," she agreed, still in evident perturbation of mind, "maybe—"

"Oh, Mrs. Gallito," pleadingly, "can't you see that me and Pearl are born for one another? You know that she can't live away from the footlights. She just can't. And you know that I can put her where she belongs. You know that our hearts are better guides than all Bob Flick and her Pop can plan for her."

His efforts were not wasted. As he had foreseen, his arguments were of a nature to appeal to Mrs. Gallito, and it required only a little more persuasion to win her promise of assistance. He further flattered her self-esteem by interlarding his profuse thanks with vague hints of the extreme lengths to which his despair might have led him had it not been for the saving power of her sympathy and understanding.

He had already risen and was halfway to the door before he appeared to remember something. "Oh," halting, his hand on the latch, "where is that—that Jose? Pearl could not go up there with him about."

Mrs. Gallito, all timorousness again, beat her hands lightly together, in a distressful flurry. "No, he's there," she whispered, and glanced anxiously about her. Then she came nearer. "I heard Gallito and Bob talking about him only yesterday and Bob said there was some mischief brewing among Jose's pals down on the coast, and Gallito said, yes, and if he let Jose leave the mountain he'd be right back there again and in the thick of it and sure to be taken and that he, Gallito, meant to keep Jose in Colina all year, if necessary."

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So great was Hanson's satisfaction at this news that he had difficulty in concealing it, but Mrs. Gallito was not an observant person, fortunately, and, hastily changing the subject, he again expressed his thanks and departed.

He left the next morning for Los Angeles to the regret of his benefactress, Jimmy and the station agent.

CHAPTER VIII

The train which bore Pearl and her father to Colina had already completed its smooth progress through smiling foot hills and had begun a steep and winding ascent among wild gorges and great overhanging rocks before she noticed the change.

For the greater part of the journey she had sat motionless, huddled in a corner of the seat, a thick veil covering her face; but now she began to observe the physical changes in the landscape with a somber satisfaction, and, for the first time, accepted the mountains listlessly, almost gratefully, instead of rebelliously. In truth any change was grateful to her; she did not want to think of the desert or be reminded of it, and this transition, so marked, so sharply defined as to make the brief railway journey from the plains below seem the passage to another world, was especially welcome.

The human desire for change is rooted in the conviction, a vain and deceptive one, that an entirely different environment must include or create a new world of thought and emotion. So for once the Pearl's desire was for the hills. She who had ever exulted in the wide, free spaces of the desert, who had found the echo of her own heart in its eternal mutation, its luring illusions, its mystery and its beauty, now turned to the austere, shadowed, silent mountains as if begging them to enfold her and hold her and hide her.

It was dark when they reached Colina, but a station wagon awaited them and in this they drove through the village, a straggling settlement, the narrow plateau permitting only two streets, both of them continuations of the mountain roads, and surrounded by high mountains. Scattering lights showed here and there from lamps shining through cabin windows, but the silence, differing in kind if not in degree from the desert silence, was only broken at this hour of the night by the desolate, mocking bark of the coyotes.

Clear of the village, the horses turned and began to mount the hill which led to Gallito's isolated cabin. Their progress was necessarily slow, for the road was rough and full of deep ruts. The velvety blackness of a mountain night was all about them and even the late spring air seemed icy cold. Pearl had begun to shiver in spite of her wraps when the light from a cabin window gleamed across the road and the driver pulled up his horses.

“Somebody’s waiting for you,” said the driver.

“Yes, Saint Harry,” answered Gallito. “He’s getting supper for us.”

The door, however, was not opened for them and it was not until the driver had turned his horses down the hill that they heard a bolt withdrawn. Then Gallito pushed in and Pearl followed, stepping wearily across the threshold.

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The room, a large one for a mountain cabin, was warm and clean; some logs burned brightly on the hearth; a table set for supper was placed within the radius of that glow and a man was bending over a stove at one side of the fireplace, while two women, who had evidently been seated on the other side of the fire, rose and stood smiling a welcome. The air was full of appetizing odors mingled with the fragrance of coffee.

As they entered the man turned with a quick movement. He was an odd-looking creature, brown as a nut, with glinting, changing, glancing eyes which can see what seem to be immeasurable distances to those possessed of ordinary sight. He had a curiously crooked face, one eye was higher than the other and his nose was not in the middle, but set on one side; its sharp, inquisitive point almost at right angles with the bridge. He had the wide, mobile mouth of the born comedian, and his chin was as much to the right as his nose was to the left. He was extremely light and slender in figure and his movements were like quicksilver. His hair was black and straight and long, especially over the ears, and he had long, slender, delicate hands, which one noticed at once for their uncommon flexibility and deftness.

“Supper ready?” asked Gallito, without other greeting.

“Now,” replied the other man. He began lifting the food he had been preparing from the pans, arranging it on various dishes and slipping them upon the table with a rapidity and noiselessness which suggested sleight of hand.

Gallito gave a brief nod and advanced toward the two women, bowing low with Spanish courtesy. A smile, a blending of pleasure and amusement, softened his grim mouth and keen eyes as he shook hands with one, whom he introduced to his daughter as Mrs. Nitschkan. About medium height, she was a powerfully built creature, her open flannel shirt disclosing the great muscles of her neck and chest. Rings of short, curly brown hair covered her round head; and small, twinkling blue eyes shone oddly bright in her deeply tanned face, while her frequent smile displayed small, milk-white teeth. A short, weather-stained skirt showed her miner’s boots and a man’s coat was thrown over her shoulders. A bold, freebooting Amazon she appeared, standing there in the fire-glow, and one to whom hardihood was a birth-right.

The other woman towered above her and even above Gallito. She was a colossal Venus, with a face pink and white as a may-blossom. Tremulous smiles played about her soft, babyish mouth and a joyous excitement shone in her wide, blue eyes. Upon her head was a small, lop-sided bonnet, from which depended a rusty crepe veil of which she seemed inordinately conscious, and at the throat of her black gown was a large, pink bow.

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"Make you acquainted with Mis' Thomas, Miss Gallito," said Mrs. Nitschkan heartily. "Marthy's one of my oldest friends an' one of my newest converts. She's all right if she could let the boys alone, an' not be always tangled up in some flirtation that her friends has got to sit up nights scheming to get her out of. That pink bow an' that crepe veil shows she ain't got the right idea of her responsibilities as a widow. So I brought her up to my little cabin, just a quarter of a mile through the trees there, hopin' I'd get her mind turned on more sensible things than men. Gosh a'mighty! She's got a chance to shoot bear here."

"I don't think you got any call to introduce me to the Black Pearl that-a-way, Sadie." Mrs. Thomas's eyes filled with ready tears. "It ain't manners. I wouldn't have come with her, Miss Gallito, but I got to see pretty plain that the gentleman," here she blushed and bridled, "that was courting me was awful anxious to get hold of the money and the cabin that my last husband, in his grave 'most six months now, left me." She wiped the tears from her eyes on the back of her hand, a movement hampered somewhat by the fact that her handkerchief had been fashioned into a bag to hold some chocolate creams and was tied tightly to her thumb.

"That's what you get for cavorting around with a spindle-shanked, knock-kneed, mush-brained jack-rabbit of a man," muttered Mrs. Nitschkan scornfully.

But this thrust was ignored by Mrs. Thomas. The color had risen on her cheeks and there was a light in her eyes. Shyly, yet gleefully, she drew a letter from her pocket. "I got a letter from him to-day with an awful cute motto in it. Look!" She showed it proudly to Pearl, Jose and Gallito. "It's on cream-tinted paper, with a red and blue border, an'," simpering consciously, "it says in black and gold letters, 'A Little Widow Is a Dangerous Thing.'"

The little group seemed for the moment too stunned to speak. Mrs. Nitschkan was the first to recover herself. "Gosh a'mighty!" she murmured in an awed whisper, and allowed her glance to travel slowly over Mrs. Thomas's well-cushioned, six feet of womanhood, "A—little—widow!" huskily.

Gallito seized the opportunity here to direct Pearl's attention to the bandit, who had been nudging him and whispering to him for the last moment or so.

"Pearl, this is—" he hesitated a moment, "Jose."

Mrs. Nitschkan looked up at him in quick astonishment. "Gosh a'mighty," she cried, "ain't that kind o' reckless?"

But Jose nodded a quick, cynical approval and, with a sudden turn, executed a deep bow to the Pearl, one hand on the heart, expressing gallantry, fealty, the humblest admiration; all these sincere and yet permeated with a subtle and volatile mockery.

“Better so, Francisco,” he said in a voice which scarcely betrayed an accent, and indeed this was not strange considering that he spoke the patois of many people, being a born linguist. His father had been a Frenchman, a Gascon, but his mother was a daughter of Seville. “But you have not said all.” He drew himself up with haughty and self-conscious pride and, with a sweeping gesture of his long fingers, lifted the hair from his ears and stood thus, leering like Pan.

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"Crop-eared Jose!" cried Pearl, falling back a pace or two and looking from her father to the two women in wide-eyed astonishment. "Why, they are still looking for him. Are you not afraid?" She looked from one to the other as if asking the question of all. She was not shocked, nor, to tell the truth, particularly surprised after the first moment of wonder. She had been used to strange company all her life, and ever since her childhood, on her brief visits to her father's cabin, she had been accustomed to his cronies, lean, brown, scarred pirates and picaroons, full of strange Spanish oaths.

"You will not mention this in letters to your mother," ordered Gallito, glooming at her with fierce eyes. "You know her. Caramba! If she should guess, the world would know it."

"Lord, yes!" agreed Pearl uninterestedly. "You needn't be afraid of me," to Jose, "I don't tell what I know."

"That is true," commended Gallito, motioning her at the same time to the table.

It seems a pity to record that such a supper was set before a woman suffering from a wound of the heart. Women at all times are held to be lacking in that epicurean appreciation of good food which man justly extols; but when a woman's whole being is absorbed in a disappointment in love, nectar and ambrosia are as sawdust to her.

On the outer rim of that circle which knew him but slightly, or merely knew of him, the causes of the charmed life which Jose bore were a matter of frequent speculation, also continual wonder was expressed that his friends would sometimes take incredible risks in effecting the escape of this rogue after one of his reckless escapades. But Jose had certain positive qualities, had these gossips but known it, which endeared him to his companions; although among them could never be numbered gratitude, a lively appreciation of benefits received or a tried and true affection.

Certainly a dog-like fidelity was not among Jose's virtues. He would lift the purse of his best friend or his rescuer from a desperate impasse, provided it were sufficiently heavy. A favor of a nature to put him under obligations for a lifetime he forgot as soon as it was accepted. He caricatured a benefactor to his face, nor ever dreamed of sparing friend or foe his light, pointed jibes which excoriated the surface of the smoothest vanity.

No, the only virtues which could be accredited to Jose, and these were sufficient, were an unfailing lightness of heart, the facile and fascinating gift of yarn-spinning—for he was a born raconteur, with a varied experience to draw upon—a readiness for high play, at which he lost and won with the same gay and unruffled humor, and an incomparable and heaven-bestowed gift of cookery.

To-night the very sight of the supper set before him softened Gallito's harsh face. Brook trout, freshly caught that afternoon from the rushing mountain stream not far away from the cabin, and smoking hot from the frying pan; an omelette, golden brown and

buttercup yellow, of a fluff, a fragrance, with savories hidden beneath its surface, a conserve of fruits, luscious, amber and subtly biting, the coffee of dreams and a bottle of red wine, smooth as honey.

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"I hope you don't think that we're the kind of wolves that's always gatherin' round wherever there's a snack of food," murmured Mrs. Thomas softly as she took a seat beside Pearl. "We got our own cabin just a piece up in the woods, but Jose, he kind of wanted to make a celebration of your coming up."

Pearl did not answer, but slipped languidly out of her cloak, untwisted her heavy veil, removed her hat, Jose's eyes as well as Mrs. Thomas's following her the while with unmixed admiration, and sat down.

Jose immediately began to roll cigarettes and smoke them while he ate.

"Well, what is the news?" asked Gallito, as he, at least, began his evening meal with every evidence of appreciation; "good fishing, good hunting, good prospecting, eh, Mrs. Nitschkan?"

The gipsy, for she was one by birth as well as by inclination, nodded and showed her teeth in a satisfied smile. "So good that it looks like we'd be kep' here even longer than I expected when we come." She drew some bits of quartz from her pocket and threw them out on the table before him. "Some specimens I chipped off in my new prospect," she said, her eyes upon him.

"So," he said, examining them with interest, "your luck, Mrs. Nitschkan, as usual. Where—? Excuse me," a dark flush rose on his parchment skin at this breach of mining-camp etiquette which he had almost committed.

For a few moments they talked exclusively of the mining interests of the locality. It is this feverish, inexhaustible topic that is almost exclusively dwelt upon in mining camps, all other topics seeming tame and commonplace beside this fascinating subject, presided over by the golden fairy of fortune and involving her. To-day she tempts and eludes, she tantalizes and mocks and flies her thousands of wooers who follow her to the rocks, seeking her with back-breaking toil and dreaming ever of her by day and by night. Variable and cruel, deaf to all beseeching, she picks out her favorites by some rule of caprice which none but herself understands.

Supper over, Gallito ensconced his two feminine visitors in easy chairs and took one himself, while Jose, with noiseless deftness, cleared away the remains of food. Pearl had wandered to the window and, drawing the curtain aside, stood gazing out into the featureless, black expanse of the night.

"Quite a few things has happened since I saw you last, Gallito," said Mrs. Nitschkan conversationally, filling a short and stubby black pipe with loose tobacco from the pocket of her coat. "For one, I got converted."

“Ah!” returned Gallito with his unvarying courtesy, although his raised eyebrows showed some perplexity, “to—to—a religion?”

“Course.” Mrs. Nitschkan leaned forward, her arms upon her knees. “This world’s the limit, Gallito, and queer things is going to happen whether you’re looking for ’em or not. About a year ago Jack and the boys went off on a long prospectin’ spell, the girls you know are all married and have homes of their own, an’ there was me left free as air with a dandy spell of laziness right in front of me ready to be caught up ’twixt my thumb and forefinger and put in my pipe and smoked, and I hadn’t even the spirit to grab it.”

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"Why didn't you think about getting yourself some new clothes, like any other woman would?" asked Jose, eyeing her curiously.

"What I got's good enough for me," she returned shortly.

"You should have gave your place a nice cleaning and cooked a little for a change, Sadie," said Mrs. Thomas softly and virtuously.

"Such things look worse'n dying to me," replied the gipsy. "And," turning again to Gallito, "the taste goin' out of my tea and coffee wasn't the worst. It went out of my pipe, too. Gosh a'mighty, Gallito! I'll never forget the night I sat beside my dyin' fire and felt that I didn't even take no interest in winnin' their money from the boys; and then suddenly most like a voice from outside somep'n in me says: 'What's the matter with you, Sadie Nitschkan, is that you're a reapin' the harvest you've sowed, gipsyin' and junketin', fightin' and gamblin' with no thought of the serious side of life?'"

"And what is the serious side of life, Nitschkan?" asked Jose, sipping delicately his glass of wine as if to taste to the full its ambrosial flavors, like the epicure he was. "I have not yet discovered it."

"You will soon." There was meaning in the gipsy's tone and in the glance she bestowed upon him. "It's doin' good. I tell you boys when I realized that I'd probably have to change myself within and without and be like some of the pious folks I'd seen, it give me a gone feeling in the pit of my stomach. But you can't keep me down, and after I'd saw I was a sinner and repented 'cause I was so bad, I saw that the whole trouble was this, I'd tried everything else, but I hadn't never tried doin' good."

"No, Sadie, you sure hadn't made duty the watch-word of your life," agreed Mrs. Thomas.

Mrs. Nitschkan ignored this. "Now doin' good, for I know you don't know what that means, Jose, is seein' the right path and makin' other folks walk in it whether they're a mind to or not. Well I cert'ny gave the sinners of Zenith a run for their money."

She smoked a moment or two in silence, sunk in agreeable remembrance. She had been true to her word and, having decided to reform as much of the community as in her estimation needed that trial as by fire, she had plunged into her self-appointed task with lusty enthusiasm. As soon as her conversion and the outlet she had chosen for her superabundant energy were noised abroad, there was an immediate and noticeable change in the entire deportment of the camp. Those long grown careless drew forth their old morals and manners, brushed the moths from them, burnished the rust and wore them with undeniable self-consciousness, but without ostentation.

Upon these lukewarm and conforming souls Mrs. Nitschkan cast a darkling eye. It was the recalcitrant, the defiant, the professing sinner upon whom she concentrated her energies.

“So you see, Gallito,” rousing herself from pleasant contemplation of past triumphs, “it wasn’t only a chance to hunt and prospect that brought me. I heard from Bob Flick that Jose was still here and I see a duty before me.”

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"She could not keep away from me," Jose rolled his eyes sentimentally. "You see beneath that rough old jacket of her husband's which she wears there beats a heart."

"I got some'p'n else that can beat and that's a fist." She stretched out her arm and drew it back, gazing with pride at her great, swelling muscles.

"But never me, who will tidy your cabin and cook half your meals for you." He smiled ingratiatingly at Mrs. Thomas, who grew deeply pink under his admiring smile. "Why do you not convert Saint Harry?"

"Harry's all right," she said. "You need convertin', he don't. I got an idea that he's been right through the fiery furnace like them Bible boys in their asbestos coats, he's smelted."

"Harry got my telegram?" asked Gallito, speaking in a low tone, after first glancing toward Pearl, "and you have made a room ready for her?"

"Clean as a convent cell," said Jose, with his upcurling, mordant smile. "The wind has roared through it all day and swept away every trace of tobacco and my thoughts."

"That is well," replied Gallito with a sardonic twist of the mouth, "and where do you sleep to-night?"

"In Saint Harry's cabin."

"So," Gallito nodded as if content. "That will be best."

"Best for both," agreed Jose, a flicker of mirth on his face. "My constant companionship is good for Harry. It is not well to think you have shown the Devil the door, kicked him down the hill and forgotten him; and that he has taken his beating, learned his lesson and gone forever. It is then that the Devil is dangerous. It is better, Gallito, believe me, to remain on good terms with him, to humor him and to pass the time of day. Humility is a great virtue and you should be willing to learn something even of the Devil, not set yourself up on a high, cold, sharp mountain peak, where you keep his fingers itching from morning to night to throw you off. I have observed these things through the years of my life, and the middle course is ever the safest. Give to the church, observe her laws as a true and obedient son, in so far as possible, and only so far. Let her get her foot on your neck and she will demand such sacrifices!" He lifted his hands and rolled his eyes upward, "but the Devil is more reasonable; treat him civilly, be a good comrade to him and he will let you alone. But Saint Harry does not understand that. Saint Harry on his ice peak, and the Devil straddling around trying to find a foothold so that he can climb up to Harry and seize him with those itching fingers. Ho, ho!" Jose's laughter rang loud and shrill.

Pearl, hearing it, turned from the window with a disturbed frown and began to walk up and down the far end of the room, and Mrs. Nitschkan frowned ominously. "That's enough of your talk, Jose," she said peremptorily. "It sounds like blaspheming to me, talkin' about the Devil that light way. Remember one of the reasons I come here. Gallito, you'd better lay out the cards and let's get down to our game. What's the limit?"

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"Does Mrs. Thomas play as high as you?" asked Gallito.

"I don't care much for a tame game," said Mrs. Thomas modestly, with lowered lids. "They're too many long, sad winters in the mountains when gentl—, I mean friends, can't cross the trails to see you, an' you got to fill up your heart with cards and religion and things like that."

Jose had paused to watch, with a keen appreciation, the grace of Pearl's movements. "Caramba!" he muttered. "How sprang that flower of Spain from such a gnarled old tree as you, Gallito? Dios! But she is salado!"

Gallito frowned a little, which did not in the least disconcert Jose, and, rising, he moved a small table forward, opened it and then going to a cupboard in the wall drew from it a short, squat bottle, four glasses and a pack of cards. "Your room is just beyond this," he said, turning to Pearl. "Jose says that you will find everything ready for you. You must be tired. You had better go to bed."

Pearl twitched her shoulders impatiently. "I am not sleepy," she said sullenly. She threw herself in the chair that Gallito had vacated and lay there watching the fire with somber, wild eyes.

Jose threw another log on the fire and then the two men and two women sat down to their cards. A clock ticked steadily, monotonously, on the mantel-piece, but whether an hour or ten minutes passed while she sat there watching the brilliant, soaring flame of the pine logs Pearl could not have told, when suddenly the stillness of the night was broken by the sound of someone whistling along the road. It seemed a long way off at first, but gradually came nearer and nearer, tuneful and clear as the song of a bobolink.

"Saint Harry, by all the saints or devils!" cried Jose with a burst of his shrill laughter. "Ah, Francisco, the devil is a shrewd fellow; when he can't manage a job himself, he always gets a woman to help him." His glancing, twinkling eyes sought Pearl, who had barely turned her head as her father rose to open the door for the newcomer, exclaiming with some show of cordiality:

"Ah, Seagreave, come in, come in."

"Thanks," said an agreeable voice. "I got home late and found that Jose had made preparations to lighten my loneliness. Then I saw the light in your window and thought I would come down. You see I suspected pleasant company."

He advanced into the room and then, seeing Pearl, who had twisted about in her chair and was gazing at him with the first show of interest she had yet exhibited, he paused and looked rather hesitatingly at Gallito.

"We have a guest," said Jose softly and in Spanish.

“My daughter has returned with me,” said Gallito. “Pearl, this is Mr. Seagreave.”

“Saint Harry,” said Jose more softly still.

Mr. Seagreave bowed, although one who knew him well might have seen that his astonishment increased rather than abated at the sight of Pearl. As for her, she merely nodded and let her lashes lie the more wearily and indifferently upon her cheek.

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"Really, I wouldn't have intruded," said Seagreave in his pleasant English voice. "I had an idea from your telegram, Gallito, that Hughie was coming with you. Sha'n't I go?"

For answer Gallito pushed forward a chair and threw another log upon the fire. "My daughter is tired," he said. "She will soon retire; but when a man has been from home for a fortnight, and in the desert!" he raised his brows expressively, "Pah! He wishes to hear of everything which has happened during his absence and particularly, Mr. Seagreave, do I wish to talk to you about that lower drift. Jose tells me that you have examined it."

Thus urged, Seagreave sat down. He was tall and slight and fair, so very fair that his age was difficult to guess. His hair, with a silvery sheen on it, swept in a wing across his forehead, and he had a habit of pushing it back from his brow; his eyes were of a vivid blue, peculiarly luminous, and his features, which were regular, showed a fine finish of modeling. His age, as has been said, was a matter of conjecture, but judging from his appearance he might have been anywhere from twenty to forty.

"Don't let me interrupt your game," he said. "It is early yet, and if Miss Gallito isn't too tired, and if she will let me, I will talk to her while you play."

Jose smiled to himself and picked up the cards. The game went on. Seagreave, receiving no encouragement from Pearl, made no attempt at conversation, until at last, stirred by some impulse of curiosity, she lifted her eyes. It was this question of age she wished to decide. In that first, quick glance of hers she had taken it for granted that he was twenty, but in a second stolen look she had noted certain lines about the mouth and eyes which added years to his blonde youthfulness. Then her quick ear had caught Jose's "Saint Harry," and to her, who knew many men, those lines about mouth and eyes did not suggest a past of saintship.

Her surreptitious glance encountered that of Seagreave, for he, too, had withdrawn his eyes from the fire for a moment to let his puzzled gaze rest upon her. He had known vaguely that Gallito had a daughter, and he remembered in the same indefinite way that some one had told him that she was an actress, but, even so, he could not reconcile this—his mind sought a simile to express her—this exotic, with Gallito, these two mountain women, a mountain cabin, and an equally unpretentious home in the desert. She lay listlessly in her chair, a long and slender shape in a dull black gown which fell about her in those statuesque folds which all drapery assumed immediately she donned it; beneath it showed her feet in black satin slippers and the gleam of the satin seemed repeated in her blue-black hair. Her cheek was unwontedly pale. A monotone she appeared, half-within and half-without the zone of the firelight; but the individuality of her could not be thus subdued. It found expression in the concentration of light and color focused in the splendid rings which sparkled on the long, brown fingers of both her hands.

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Her narrow eyes met his sombrously. On either side it was a glance of curiosity, of scrutiny. She, as usual, made no effort to begin a conversation, and he, searching for a polite commonplace, said presently:

"Have you ever been in Colina before?"

"Often, but not in the last two years," she answered tonelessly, "not since you've been here, I guess. I hate the mountains."

"I have been here nearly two years," he vouchsafed, "and I feel as if I would never go away. But you live in the desert, don't you?"

"Sometimes, that is, when I'm not out on the road. The desert is the place. You can breathe there, you can live there," there was a passionate vibration in her voice, "but these old, cold mountains make you feel all the time as if they were going to fall on you and crush you."

"Do they make you feel that way?" He pulled his chair nearer to her so that his back was turned to the two men, and Jose, who saw everything, smiled faintly, mordaciously.

"How strange!" It was not a conventional expression, he seemed really to find it strange, unbelievably so.

"And you, how do they make you feel?" she asked wearily, a touch of scorn in her glance.

A light seemed to glow over his face. "Ah, I do not know that I can tell you," he said, and she was conscious of some immediate change in him, which she apprehended but could never have defined. It was as if he had withdrawn mentally to incalculable distances.

Pearl did not notice his evasion; she was not interested in his view of the mountains. What she instinctively resented, even in her dulled state, was his impersonal attitude toward herself. She was not used to it from any man. She did not understand it. She wondered, without any particular interest in the matter, but still following her instinctive and customary mode of thought, if he had not noticed that she was beautiful. Was he so stupid that he did not think her so? But there was no hint in his manner or look in his eyes of an intention on his part of playing the inevitable game, even a remembrance of it seemed as lacking as desire. The game of challenge and elusion on her part, of perpetual and ever more ardent advance on his. He was interested, she knew that, but, as she felt with a surge of surprise, not in the way she had always encountered and had learned to expect.

"Isn't it strange," she realized that he was speaking again, "that I haven't been drawn to the desert, because so many have had to turn to it? I have only seen it from traveling

across it, and then it repelled me, perhaps it frightened me.” He seemed to consider this.

For the moment Pearl forgot the inevitable game. “Frightened you!” she cried. “It is the mountains that frighten me; but the desert is always different. It—” she struggled for expression, “it is always you.”

Something in this seemed to strike him. “Perhaps I have that to learn.” Again he meditated a few moments, then looked up with a smile. “You must tell me all that you find in the desert and I will tell you all that I find in the mountains. It will be jolly to talk to a woman again.” He spoke with a satisfaction thoroughly genuine.

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She glanced at him suspiciously. She was uncertain how to meet this frank acceptance of comradeship, free yet from the intrusion of sex. "Maybe," she acquiesced a little doubtfully. Then she drew her brows together. "I don't want to learn anything about the mountains," she cried, all the heaviness and the dumb revolt of her spirit finding a voice. "And I don't want ever to go back to the desert again; and I don't even want to dance," looking at him in a sort of wild wonder as if this were unbelievable, "not even to dance."

He realized that she was suffering from some grief against which she struggled, and which she refused to accept. "You will not feel so always," he said. "It is because you are unhappy now."

There was consolation in his sincerity, in his sympathy, in his entire belief in what he was saying, and it was with difficulty that she repressed an outburst of her sullen sorrow. "Yes," her mouth worked, "I am unhappy, and I won't be, I won't be. I never was before. It is all in here, like a dead weight, a drag, a cold hand clutching me." She pressed both hands to her heart. Then she drew back as if furious at having so far revealed herself.

"That heals." He leaned forward to speak. "I am telling you the truth! That heals and is forgotten. I know that that is so."

"I know who you are," she said suddenly. "I have been trying to think ever since I heard him," she nodded toward Jose, bent over his cards, "say 'Saint Harry.' I remember now. I have heard Hughie often speak of you. They say that you are good, that if any one is sick you nurse him, and that if any one is broke you help him. They all come to you."

"Yes, 'Saint Harry'!" he laughed. "Oh, it's funny, but let them call me any name they please as long as it amuses them. What difference does it make? I am glad Hughie is coming up, I want some music. He puts the mountains into music for me."

"And for me." She smiled and then sighed bitterly, gazing drearily into the fire, now a bed of glowing embers. Then latent and feminine curiosity stirred in her thoughts and voiced itself. "Why are you here?" she said. "Why does a man like you stay here?"

His elbow rested on the arm of his chair, his chin in his hand, his gaze too upon the fading embers. "I don't know," he said in a low voice, "I had to come."

"Where from?" she still followed her instinct of curiosity.

"From the husks"—he turned his head and smiled at her—"from a far country where I had wasted my substance in riotous living."

She frowned a little. She was not used to this type of man, nor had she met any one who used hyperbole in conversation. At first she fancied that he might be chaffing her, but she was too intelligent to harbor that idea, so convincing was his innate sincerity; but nevertheless, she meant to go cautiously.

Again she questioned him: "From what far country?"

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He had fallen to musing again, and it is doubtful if he heard her. He saw before him immense, primeval forests, black, shadowy; vast, sluggish rivers, above which hung a thick and fever-laden air; trees from whose topmost branches swung gorgeous, ephemeral flowers; and then long stretches of yellow beach, where a brazen ocean tumbled and hissed. Then many cities, squalid and splendid, colorful and fantastic as the erection of a dream, and through all these he saw himself ever passing, appearing and reappearing, and ever scattering his substance, not the substance of money alone; that was still left him; but the substance of youth, of early promise, of illusion and hopes.

Pearl waited a long time, it seemed to her, for him to speak. At last she broke the silence. "And then?" she said.

He roused from his preoccupations and brushed back the wing of hair from his brow. "I realized that I was living, had always lived on husks, and that was what caused the restless fever in my blood, my heart was always restless; and then I began to dream down there in the tropics, really dream at night of these mountains just as you see them here, and in the day time I thought of them and longed for them, as a man whose throat is dry with thirst longs for cool water. Then, presently, I began to have brief, fleeting visions of them by day. And gradually the longing for the hills became so intense that I started out in search of them. I traveled about a good bit, and then drifted here. The place suited me, so I stayed."

She looked at him puzzled and half-fearfully, wondering if he was quite sane. "And will you stay here always?" she asked.

"Oh, as to that, I can't say. Perhaps. I hope so. Life is full here."

"Full!" she interrupted him. "And life! You call this life?" She laughed in harsh scorn.

"Don't you?" He looked at her with those blue, clear eyes that seemed to see through her and around her and beyond her.

"I!" Her glance was full of resentful passion; tightly she closed her lips; but there was something about him which seemed to force her to reveal herself and, presently, she began again. "I am like a coyote with a broken paw. It goes off by itself and hides until it can limp around. But life, real life, is all out there." She threw out her hands as indicating the world beyond the mountains. "If you call this life, you've never lived."

He ignored this, smiling faintly.

"What is real life to you?" he asked.

So compelling was his manner, for no one could shock Seagreave and no one could force him to condemn, that she almost said, "To love and be loved." But she resisted her impulse to voice this. "Until a little while before I came here, life meant to dance. I

know, though, what it is to get tired of the very things you think you love the most. After I've stayed a while in the desert, I've just got to see the lights of the city streets, to smell the stage, and to dance to the big audiences; but after a bit, the buildings and the people begin to crowd on me and push me and I feel as if I couldn't breathe, then I've just got to get back to the desert again."

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"Dancing is your expression," he said. "All of life is love and expression." And now there was a falling note in his voice which her ear was quick to catch. Almost she cried:

"Love! And yet you live here alone!"

"Yes," he went on, "we must have both. They are as necessary to us as breath. Without them—" he stopped, evidently embarrassed, as if suddenly aware that he had been talking more to himself than to her and that in thus forgetting her, he had been more self-revealing than he would have wished.

She shook her head, plainly puzzled. "But you are young," she said, and stole another glance at him, adding a little shyly, "at least not very old, and I feel, I am sure that you too have a broken paw, but when that is well you will go back to your own country, to cities again. You couldn't stand it here always."

He looked at her, an enigmatic smile on his lips. "Couldn't I?" he said. Glancing again at her as he rose, he saw that she seemed weary, her lashes lay long on her pale cheek. "Oh," with a touch of compunction in his tone, "I have, as usual, talked far too much. You are tired and we must go. Jose," lifting his voice, "as soon as you finish that game."

"The Devil is indeed at your elbow," cried Jose, flinging down his cards, "and prompts all you say. We have just this moment finished a game and Gallito is the winner."

Gallito smiled with bleak geniality. "Has Jose been wise?" he asked, rising and replenishing the dying fire.

"Fairly so," Seagreave smiled, "as far as he knows how to be. He has been up to some of his antics, though. They are beginning to say that this hillside is haunted."

While Gallito talked to Seagreave and Mrs. Nitschkan and Jose argued over certain rules of the game they had been playing, Mrs. Thomas sidled up to Pearl and stood looking at her with the absorbed unconsciousness of an admiring child.

"I s'pose," she began, swaying back and forth bashfully and touching the pink bow at her throat, "that it does look kind of queer to any one that's so up on the styles as you are to see me wearing a pink bow at my neck and a crepe veil down my back?"

Pearl looked up in wearied surprise. "It does seem queer," she said indifferently.

"Course I know it ain't just citified," Mrs. Thomas hastened to affirm; "but the veil and the bow together's got a meaning that I think is real sweet." She waited a moment, almost pathetically anxious for Pearl to see the symbolism of her two incongruous adornments, but her listener was too genuinely bored and also too self-absorbed to make the attempt. "It's this," said Mrs. Thomas, determined to explain. "The pink bow

kind o' shows that I'm in the world again and," bridling coquettishly, "open to offers, while this crepe veil shows that I ain't forgot poor Seth in his grave and can afford to mourn for him right."

But Pearl had not waited to hear all of these explanations. Without a word to the rest of the parting guests, and with a mere inclination of the head toward Seagreave, she had slipped away.

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Alone in her small, bare room, undressing by the light of a single candle, the brief interest and curiosity which Seagreave had aroused in her faded from her mind. For hours she lay sleepless upon her bed, listening to the rushing mountain stream not far from the cabin, its arrowy plunge and dash over the rocks softened by distance to a low, perpetual purr, and hearing the mountain wind sigh through the pines about the cabin: but not always did her great, dark eyes stare into the blackness; sometimes she buried her head in the pillow and moaned, and at last she wept, permitting herself the flood of tears that she had held in check all day. "Rudolf, Rudolf," was the name upon her lips.

CHAPTER IX

Within a few days Hughie came up to Colina, and through the long, chilly evenings near the peaks the little, isolated group met in Gallito's cabin. It was understood in the village that Gallito did not care to have his seclusion invaded, and this unspoken desire was universally respected; indeed, it was not questioned. In the solitary places are many eccentrics; they have escaped the melting pot of the city, and in the freedom of the desert and the mountains have achieved an unfettered and unquestioned individuality.

Those who had business dealings with the old Spaniard knew that he was to be found in places more easy of access than his lonely cabin among the rocks and trees; at the mine, for instance, of which he was foreman, the Mont d'Or; or, on an occasional Friday evening, in the village saloon, where he mingled with the miners, engaging in the eternal and interminable discussions of local mining affairs. He also kept a horse in the village, a fiery, blooded creature, which he exercised every few days, taking long rides over the various mountain trails. He was universally respected, as his judgment of mines was known to be sound, and his ventures unusually lucky; but no one was ever rash enough to encroach upon the reserve which he invariably maintained.

So, with small fear of embarrassing interruptions, although Gallito saw that all prudence was observed and every precaution taken, he and Jose, Mrs. Nitschkan and Mrs. Thomas sat over their cards, while Hughie played upon the piano and Harry Seagreave listened, with his eyes closed, to the music. He sometimes brought Pearl a cluster of the exquisite wild flowers which now covered the mountains, but he rarely made any but the briefest attempts at conversation with her, and after the first evening she showed no disposition to have him do so.

Instead of rousing from the depression which had overfallen her, she seemed, for a time, to sink the more deeply into it. Silent, listless, almost sullen, she passed her days. There was but little incentive for her to go down into the village, and she took small interest in the miners' wives who dwelt there. For a time she was curious to see Mrs. Hanson, but, learning through Hughie that that lady lived up near her mine on a mountainside two miles out of the village, and only occasionally, and at irregular

intervals, visited the camp, Pearl realized the difficulties in the way of catching a glimpse of her and contented herself with Bob Flick's description of her.

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Her mother wrote to her about once a week, brief, ill-spelled letters, always with an ardent inclosure from Hanson, and Pearl would lie out on the hillside during the long summer days reading, and re-reading them, and at night she slept with them next her heart. For the first few months Hanson was content to write to her and to extract what comfort he could from her notes to her mother. These he invested with cryptic and hidden meanings endeavoring to find a veiled message for himself in every line. But presently, growing impatient, he began to beg her for a word, only a word, but sent directly from her to him; yet, although the summer had waned to autumn, she remained obdurate, her will and her pride still stronger than her love.

Sometimes in the evening Hugh would beg her to dance, but she always refused. The desire for that spontaneous and natural form of expression was gone from her; and once when Hugh had persisted in urging her, she had left the room, nor appeared again all evening, so that it became a custom not to mention her dancing to her.

“Gosh a’mighty!” cried Mrs. Nitschkan robustly, looking up from a book of flies over which she had been poring, “think of getting a man on the brain like that.”

Jose, who had been putting away the supper dishes, assisted by Mrs. Thomas, who had regarded the opportunity as propitious for certain elephantine coqueties, stopped to regard the gypsy with that peering mixture of amusement and curiosity which she ever evoked in him.

“But, Nitschkan,” he asked, “were you never crazy about a man?”

“Marthy Thomas knows more about such goin’s on than me,” she returned equably; “but since you ask me, I was crazy once about Jack, and another awful pretty girl had him. But that wasn’t all.” She slapped her knee in joyous and triumphant remembrance, and the cabin echoed with her laughter.

“Ah!” Jose hastily put away his last dish and sat cross-legged on the hearth at her feet, looking up into her face with impish interest. “How did you manage him or her?”

“You can’t manage a her no more’n you can manage a cat,” bluntly. “You can’t make a cat useful, and you can’t make it mind; but,” significantly, “you can manage a dog and train him, too. I had to learn that girl that’d corraled Jack that a pretty face and ruffled petticoats may catch a man, but they can’t always hold him.”

“What can hold ’em?” interrupted Mrs. Thomas, sighing heavily. “Not always vittles, and cert’ny not a loving heart.”

Mrs. Nitschkan snapped her book impatiently. “Now, Marthy, don’t you stir me up with that talk of yours, like men was the only prize packages in life. I can’t see what these home-body women love to fool ’emselves so for. You’re just like my Celora, Marthy.

'Mommie,' she says to me once, 'I wonder when the right man'll come along and learn me to love him?' Well, I happened to be makin' a dog whip jus' when she spoke, and I says, 'Celora, if you give me much of that talk I'll give you a hidin', big as you are. You got your man all picked out right now, and you mean to marry him whether he thinks so or not, and he can't get away from you no more'n a cat can from a mouse.'"

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"No more than I can from you," Jose sprang to his feet with light agility and, leaning forward, made as if about to imprint a kiss upon her forehead.

But he had reckoned without his host. Mrs. Nitschkan's arm shot out before he saw it, and he was sent staggering halfway across the room. "A poor, perishin' brother tried that on me once," she remarked casually. "It was in Willy Barker's drug store over to Mt. Tabor. Celora was with me—she was about four—and I just set her down on the counter and said, 'Now, Celora, set good and quiet and watch Mommie go for the masher real pretty.'"

"I don't see why you got to be so rough on the boys, Sadie," deplored Mrs. Thomas, rocking slowly back and forth in a large chair. "'Course we know they're devils and all, but if it wasn't for their goin's on, trying to snatch a kiss now and then, life would seem awful tame for us poor, patient women. And even the worst of 'em's better'n none at all. Look at me! I had the luck to get a cross-grained, cranky one, as you know. Poor Seth!" She drew a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her eyes. "But you got to admit, Sadie, that even he was white enough to up and die before I got too old for other gentlemen to take notice of me."

"What'd you want 'em to take notice of you for?" asks Mrs. Nitschkan abstractedly, her mind on her flies.

"It's easy enough for you to talk that way," Mrs. Thomas spoke with some heat. "You got the what-you-may-callem—accomplishments—that gets their notice. You're apt to skin 'em at cards, you can easy out-shoot 'em, and there ain't a lady miner in the mountains that can pass off a salted property as cute as you."

"What's the use of livin' in a world of tenderfoots if you don't use 'em?" growled Mrs. Nitschkan.

"'Course. And don't think I'm blaming you, Sadie; I ain't." Mrs. Thomas spoke more gently. "All I'm sayin' is that you can't understand the women that's born feeling the need of a strong right arm to lean on, and has nothing but a nice complexion and a loving heart to offer. The game's a hard one for them, 'cause there're so many others in the field. It ain't always a complexion; sometimes it's a head of hair, or eyes, but whatever it is, competition's keen. I leave it to you, Mr. Jose, if a lady can say to a gentleman the first time she meets him, 'I got a dandy temper,' or 'I can bake a pie that'll coax the coyotes down from the hills.' No, you got to let the hair or complexion do its work first and sort o' insinuate the rest as acquaintance grows."

"There's a man comin' up here to-morrow, Marthy, but he won't know whether you got a strand of hair or a tooth in your head; he'll never see you."

“Maybe he can’t help it—not if I stand right in his way,” said Mrs. Thomas, with a coy glance from under her lashes at Jose.

“Oh, yes, he can,” returned Mrs. Nitschkan. “No matter who’s in the way he can’t see but one person, and that’s that sulky Pearl; for it’s good old Bob Flick, one of the best ever.”

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Two or three times Bob Flick had come up and remained several days, and on these occasions Pearl had roused somewhat from her indifference to life. On his last visit, late in September, he had succeeded in persuading her to ride again, and had sent down to the desert for a horse for her. She would not admit at first that she enjoyed being in the saddle again, but to his unexpressed satisfaction it was obvious that she did.

The crystalline, amber air was like wine; the mountains were a mosaic of color; the trees burned red and yellow, glowing torches of autumn, and accentuating all their ephemeral and regal splendor; among them, yet never of them, were the green austere pines marching in their serried ranks, on, on up the hillsides to timber line.

One day, as Pearl and Flick rode among the hills, a flood of sunlight falling about them, crimson and yellow leaves blowing on the wind, she expressed, for the first time, an interest in the desert and a desire to see it again.

"I'll have to go back sometime, Bob, I suppose," she said, "if it's only to see Lolita."

"I nearly brought her up with me," he said. "I thought maybe she'd stand it all right for a day or two; then I got afraid she'd sicken right away in this rare air, and I didn't dare."

"I guess so," sighed Pearl; "but, goodness! I'd sure like to see her again. I'd most give anything to hear her say, 'mi jasmin, Pearl, mi corazon.'"

"We understand each other, you and me and Lolita," returned Flick. "We all got the South in us, I reckon that's why."

"Maybe," she answered. "Yes, I'd like to see Lolita and mother. She won't leave her chickens and melons and sweet potatoes and all long enough to come up here, and, oh, there's times when I feel like I'd most give my eyes to see the desert again; but I couldn't stand it yet, Bob, not yet."

A shade had fallen over her face as she spoke and, to divert her, he began to speak of Jose. "Doesn't he make you laugh?" he asked. "He keeps everybody else on the broad grin."

"Men," she said scornfully. "I think he works a charm on you that you all put yourselves in danger for a thing like that. Sometimes he makes me laugh—a little; but if I had my way I would waste no time in putting him in prison where he belongs. What is it you see in him?"

"I don't believe women do like Jose much," reflected Flick.

“Except Nitschkan,” replied Pearl. “She says she’s trying to reform him and save his soul; but it mostly consists in getting him to do all the odd jobs she can think of, and Mrs. Thomas is trying to flirt with him.”

“I guess you don’t like him, because you don’t see him as he is,” ruminated Bob Flick. “He’s not afraid of anything; he’ll take chances, just without thinking of them, that I don’t believe another man on earth would. He’s always good-natured and amusing, and look how he can cook, Pearl,” turning in his saddle, “just think of that! Why, he could take a piece of sole leather and make it taste like venison.”

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But even this list of perfections failed to arouse any enthusiasm for Jose in Pearl, or to convince her that the proper place for him was not within the sheltering walls of a prison.

“Well, if you don’t care much for Jose, how about Seagreave?” There was a touch of anxiety in his glance as he asked this question. The jealousy which he could never succeed in overcoming, and yet of which he was continually ashamed, bit like acid into his heart as he thought of Seagreave’s fair youthfulness; the charm of his long, clear, blue eyes; the winning sweetness of his nature.

Pearl drew her brows together a little, her eyes gloomed through her long, silky, black lashes. “I don’t like queer people,” she said petulantly. “He always seems to be mooning about something, and most of the time he acts like you weren’t on the earth.” An expression of surprise and resentment grew upon her face and darkened it. Then, with a gesture of annoyance, she threw up her head, dismissing the subject from her mind. A vision of Hanson rose before her and her heart turned to the memory of his ruddy good looks, his gay, bold eyes, his magnetic vitality.

“Say, Bob,” she began, a little hesitatingly, “does that Mrs. Hanson still live around here?”

He nodded. “I got a letter from her the other day. She wanted me to attend to a little mining business down in the desert. She’s pretty shrewd in business, too.”

“Why couldn’t she attend to her own business?” asked Pearl sharply. “What’s she bothering you, a stranger, for?”

“Because her father died not long ago and she inherited some property and she’s got to go East to see about it. I shouldn’t wonder if she’s already started.”

She repressed a sudden start and looked quickly at him, but he was gazing out over the ranges and did not see her, which, she reflected, was an excellent thing, considering the wild and daring idea which had flashed across her mind. If Hanson but knew that his wife had left Colina no power on earth could prevent him from immediately journeying thither. Should she mention the fact in a letter to her mother? She debated this for a day or two, the temptation to do so was almost overmastering, but her pride finally triumphed in the struggle, and she left the matter on the knees of the gods.

Yet, in the depths of her wild heart, she knew that he would come, that he must long have awaited just such an opportunity, and she had no doubt that he kept himself informed of the movements of the woman who bore his name. Her spirits rose in the contemplation of glorious moments when she should live to the full again, when she should feel herself to be as a quickened and soaring flame of passion and intrigue. And what an opportunity! Her father was down at the Mont d’Or all day. Hughie, of course,

was about most of the time, but she would not meet Hanson in the cabin, but out in the golden October weather among the pines. Bob Flick was returning to the desert the next day, so she had nothing to fear from him.

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Several days, almost a week, passed, and then a letter from Hanson, telling her of Mrs. Hanson's departure, and assuring her that he meant to come to Colina, that he would not stop to consider any risks he might be taking, and that he was equally indifferent to her possible prohibition. He was coming, coming on the morning train the next Thursday, and this was Saturday.

She drew a long breath and pressed the letter to her heart. She would never yield to him, never; not so long as that barrier to a marriage between himself and herself—Mrs. Hanson—remained a legal wall between them, but, oh! if she was to live, she must see him now and again, at long, long intervals; but nevertheless occasionally.

The listless melancholy of months fell from her, and those about her, noting the change, laid it to Bob Flick's influence and to the fact that she was almost continually in the saddle; also Hughie and Gallito congratulated themselves that she was speedily forgetting Hanson. Her whole demeanor had changed, she even condescended to banter Jose, and she took his jibes in good part; and in the evenings when Jose and Gallito, Mrs. Nitschkan and Mrs. Thomas, had sat down to the silence of their cards, and Hughie played softly on the piano in a dim corner, she talked to Seagreave; in fact, their conversations became more prolonged every evening.

One morning, a few days before Hanson arrived, she had chosen to stroll up the mountainside, instead of riding as usual. Absorbed in her glowing anticipations, she had walked almost above timber line, then, presently, just as she realized that she was growing tired, the trail had led her to an ideal and natural resting place, a little chamber of ease. It was an open space where the pine needles lay thick upon the ground, so thick that Pearl's feet sank deeply into them as she entered. All about it were gnarled and stunted pine trees, bent and twisted by the high mountain winds, until they appeared as strange, Japanese silhouettes against the deep, blue sky. It was delightfully warm here, where the sun fell so broadly, and Pearl threw herself down upon the pine needles. The wind sighed softly through the forest, barely penetrating her retreat, and finally, under the spell of the soft and dreamy atmosphere, she fell asleep. After a time she awakened, and slowly opening her eyes saw to her surprise that Seagreave was sitting a few feet away from her. He held a book in his hand, but he was not reading, neither was he looking at her, but out through a break in the trees at innumerable blue ranges, floating, unsubstantial as mist in a flood of sunshine.

She sat up, and he, hearing her move, turned quickly and met her eyes.

"I came here to read," he said, in smiling explanation. "I often come, and, seeing you here and asleep, I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind if I stayed and kept away the bears and mountain lions."

She was still a little dazed. "Why, why," rubbing her eyes, "I must have been asleep. It is so pleasant here."

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He turned quickly. "You find it pleasant?" he said, "then the mountains must be beginning to exert their spell upon you."

"I don't know," she answered slowly; "I don't hate them like I used to; but I'll never really care for them. I love the desert."

"You must tell me what you find in the desert," he said. She looked out broodingly at the ranges, the strange sphynx look in her eyes, but she did not answer him. At last she withdrew her gaze from the hills and glanced rather contemptuously at the book in his hands. "Don't you ever work?" she asked abruptly. "You're a man."

"Sometimes I work down in the mines, if I want to," he replied carelessly; "but I rarely want to. Sometimes, too, I write a little."

"But don't you want to work all the time with your hands or your head, like other men do?" she persisted.

"No," he returned. "To what profit would it be?" There was just a trace of bitterness in his voice.

"But you are strong and a man," she spoke now with unveiled scorn. "You wouldn't be content always to sit up in a mountain cabin by the fire like an old woman."

"Wouldn't I?" he asked. "Why not?" The bitterness was more apparent now, and a shadow had fallen over his face. Pearl realized that, for the moment, at least, he had forgotten her presence, and in truth, his mind had traveled back over the years and he was living over again the experience which had made him a wanderer on the earth and finally a recluse in the lonely and isolated mountains.

It was a more or less conventional story. All events which penetrate deeply into human experience are. They are vital and living, because universal; therefore we call them conventional. Seagreave had been left an orphan at an early age, and as he inherited wealth and was born of a line of gentlemen and scholars who had given the world much of service in their day, his material environment offered him no obstacles to be overcome. There were no barriers between him and any normal desires and ambitions, nothing to excite his emulation with suggestions that there were forbidden and therefore infinitely desirable gardens in which he might wander a welcome guest. But life sets a premium on hard knocks. It is usually the bantling which is cast upon the rocks who wins most of the prizes, having acquired in a hard school powers of resistance and endurance.

Seagreave's pleasant experiences continued through youth into manhood. When quite young he became engaged to a charming girl about his own age whom his guardians

considered eminently suitable. Among many friendships, he had one so congenial that he fancied no circumstance could arise which could strain or break this tie.

And then, on the very eve of his marriage, his sweetheart had eloped with this friend of his boyhood, and he had not only this wound of the heart to endure, but also the consciousness that he was pilloried as a blind fool by all of his acquaintances.

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Consequently he had, in his first young bitterness and heartbreak, taken a sort of gloomy satisfaction in living remote from his fellow beings and burying himself in the wilds, ever strengthening his capacity to do without the ordered and cultivated life of which he had been a part, and which had seemed essential to his well-being; and he had no disillusionizing past experiences to teach him the philosophy that time assuages all griefs, and that it is the part of common sense to take life as you find it.

Gradually his new manner of living, of wandering whither he would without ties or responsibilities, became a habit to him. He lost interest in the world of achievement as well as in the world of manners, but so insidious was this change, this shifting of the point of view, that he had never fully realized it until now when, in some way, some indefinite, goading and not altogether pleasant way, Pearl was bringing a faint realization of his acquired habit of mind home to him.

As Pearl watched him and wondered what remembrance it was that clouded his face, her interest in him increased. "I wonder—" she said, and hesitated.

Her words recalled him to himself immediately; with a little gesture of impatience as if annoyed at his own weakness, he put from him these morbid memories of the past. "You wonder—what?" he asked.

She flushed slightly at the thought that he might think her guilty of an intrusive curiosity, but she could not stop now. She must know more. Her craving intelligence demanded some explanation. "Jose," she said doubtfully and almost involuntarily.

A smile of pure amusement rippled about his mouth. "Yes," he said, "Jose. What about him?"

Speech came readily enough to her now. "You know what Jose is," accusingly. "You know the big reward that is offered for him, and yet you keep him in your cabin and treat him almost like a brother."

"Quite like a brother," he said; "why not? Who would have the heart to put Pan in prison? Do you think shutting Jose up behind bars would make him any better? At any rate, he is safe to do no mischief here, and he is happy. Would you want us to give him up?"

"I!" She looked at him in surprise and shook her head. "But then we are different, my father and me. He likes bad company, and I guess I take after him. But you, they call you Saint Harry, you are respectable."

"Not I," he said earnestly; "you must not accuse me of such things. Look yonder at that long mountain trail, leading up to the peaks. There are mile-stones in it. So it is in life. When we have stopped trying to make people measure up to our standard we have

passed one; when we have gone beyond forgiveness and learned that there is never anything to forgive we have passed another, and when we have ceased from all condemnation we have progressed a little farther.”

She made no response to this. In that sunwarmed silence the wind whispered softly through the pines, a sound like the monotonous, musical murmur of distant seas. “But you will forget all that,” she said suddenly. “You will go back to the world. I know.”

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He smiled invincibly. "How do you know?"

She tapped her breast lightly with her jewel-encrusted hand. "From myself. Oh, how I have hated life since I came here, but now I love it again, I want it." She threw wide her arms and smiled radiantly, but not at him, rather at the vision of life her imagination conjured. "I want to dance, dance, dance, I want to live."

"And you will dance for us here in the mountains before you go away?" he asked, with interest. "Good dancing is very rare and very beautiful. There are very few great dancers."

"Yes, only a few," she said briefly. He could not know that she was one of them, of course, but nevertheless it piqued her vanity that he did not divine it or take it for granted. She resolved then and there to show him how she could dance, and as she decided this, a subtle, wicked smile crept about her lips. Since he was so sure that he would never return to the world, the world should come to him.

"But you haven't said yet that you would dance for us," he said.

"Yes," the same smile still lingering in her eyes and on her lips, "yes, I will. The camp have sent half a dozen invitations for me to do so, through Hughie. They have a dance once a week in the town hall, don't they? When is the next one?"

"I think I heard Hughie say next Thursday night. He always helps out the orchestra when he is here, doesn't he?"

Next Thursday night! Her eyes widened. That was the evening of the day that Rudolf was coming. Perhaps—perhaps, he would stay over and see her, it was not much of a risk he would be taking in doing so. Her father would not go down to see her dance, he would prefer to sit over his cards with Jose, and no one else knew Hanson. Oh, what a prospect! She almost clapped her hands with joy.

The wind sent a shower of pine needles over them, and Seagreave looked up, scanning the sky with a keen glance. "It will soon be time for the snow to fly," he said.

She looked at him incredulously. "Why, it is mild as summer."

"Yes, but this is October, and October in the mountains. Perhaps in only a few days now the ground will all be covered with snow."

"I hope I shall be away before that time," shivering a little.

"But think what you will miss. Think how beautiful it will be; all still, just a great, white silence; the snow with its wonderful shadows, and sometimes, when the air is very clear, I seem to hear the chiming of great bells."

She shivered again and rose. “I don’t believe I’d like it,” she said. “I think it would frighten me.”

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He walked down the hill with her to Gallito's cabin, but on their way they spoke little. Her mind was full of Hanson's coming, and of the revelation of dancing which she meant to show him and, incidentally, Saint Harry. It was not until later in the day that she remembered how impersonal, according to her standards, her conversation with Seagreave had been. Not once, either by word or look had he told her that she was beautiful and to be desired. A new experience for her; never before had she encountered such an attitude in any man. It must be, therefore, that there was some other woman in his life; but where? Certainly not here in Colina or she would have heard of it, and he had been in the mountains two years without leaving them. Surely he, too, must have known unhappiness in love. At intervals during the day she built up various hypotheses explaining the circumstances of his grief, and she also let her imagination dwell upon the woman, picturing her appearance and wondering about her disposition.

That evening at supper she arranged with Hugh that she was to accept the standing invitation of the camp, and that she would dance for them the following Thursday evening, and with an entire return of enthusiasm talked music and different steps to him until Jose and Mrs. Thomas, rendered more expeditious even than usual by their interest in the topic, had cleared away all traces of the meal and moved the table back against the wall. Then Hugh began to play.

"Wait a minute," Pearl cried to him, "until I get my dancing slippers and my *manton de Manila*." She vanished through the doorway leading to her room and reappeared presently, a fan in her hand and a gorgeous fringed, silken shawl thrown about her; it was white and embroidered in flowers of all colors. "Ready," she called over her shoulder to Hugh.

Then she also began, but not at once to dance; instead, she executed a series of postures; almost without apparent transition she melted from one pose to another of plastic grace, her body the mere, boneless, obedient servant of her directing will.

These she followed with some wonderfully rapid exercises. Sometimes she stood perfectly still and one saw only the marvelous play of her body muscles, plainly visible, as no corsets had ever fettered her unmatched lines. Again, holding the body motionless, she moved only the arms, now with a slow and alluring rhythm, and again with incredible rapidity, showing to the full the flexibility and liquidity of the wrist movements for which she was later to be so famous. Then holding the body and arms quite still she danced only with her legs, and then arms, legs, body married in a faultless rhythm, she whirled like a cyclone about the room.

Her father and Jose sat and smoked and watched her every movement with keen, critical eyes. Were they not Spaniards who had danced all through their childhood and youth, as naturally as they breathed? About Gallito's mouth played the bleak smile which in him betokened content, while Jose could barely wait for her to finish her



preliminary exercises before he besought her to let him join her. Even Mrs. Nitschkan laid down some fishing tackle with which she was engrossed and Mrs. Thomas looked on admiringly and half jealously.

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"Dios," cried Jose plaintively, "Hughie's music invites me, even if the Senorita does not."

Pearl smiled complaisantly upon him. "The Jota!" she said, and immediately he joined her, making no bad second. Together they danced until Seagreave came down from his cabin, and then, flushed and laughing, she flung herself into a chair and refused to go on, although he begged her to do so.

"Say, Sadie," breathed Mrs. Thomas, "don't you believe I could learn to do that?"

"No," returned her friend, looking up from an earnest contemplation of various hooks, "I don't believe that no woman that's been married and had children and sorrows and buried a husband and is as heavy as a hippopotamus, and stumbles and interferes with both feet like Mis' Evans's old horse, Whitey, can learn something where the trick of it is keepin' up in the air most of the time."

"You needn't hurt a person's feelings by being so harsh." Mrs. Thomas's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, jus' take in Mr. Seagreave," she whispered; "I haven't seen him look at a lady that way yet."

"Cert'ny not at you. He ain't seem' no miner's wives," returned Mrs. Nitschkan cruelly.

"Father," cried Pearl joyously to Gallito, "I have lost nothing. I am not even tired, nor stiff. If anything, I am better than ever. Isn't it so? No," as Seagreave still continued to urge Jose and her to dance, "no," she lifted her narrow, glittering eyes to his, all the old challenge in them again, the pale coffee stains beneath them had deepened, her cheeks held the flush of a crimson rose, "not until Thursday night, then I shall dance the desert for you, and not alone the desert," she flashed her man-compelling, provocative smile straight into his eyes, "I shall bring the world to you, and then you will find how tired you are of these old mountains."

He smiled at her serenely, remotely, as one of the high gods might have smiled upon a lovely, earthly Bacchante. What had the vain and fleeting world to offer him who had so long ignored it?

Then, while Hugh still continued to play, Seagreave followed her to a shadowy seat near a window, whither she had withdrawn to be out of the warmth of the fire, and together they sat there talking until the moon dropped behind the mountain.

Jose, having finished his game of cards with Gallito and the two women, who had now left the table and were examining Pearl's *manton de Manila*, sent his twinkling, darting glance in their direction. "Caramba!" he cried softly, "but she has the sal Andaluz, she can dance! I have seen many, but not such another." And then he crossed his arms and bent his body over them and rocked back and forth in soundless and apparently inexhaustible mirth in which Gallito finally joined him.

“I don’t know what you are laughing at, Jose,” he said; “but it is very funny.”

“I laugh that the Devil has chosen you as an instrument, my Francisco,” he said.

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"Because I give you shelter?" asked Gallito, lighting another cigarette.

"Because the Devil schemes always how he can lure Saint Harry from his ice peak. He has not succeeded with cards, nor with wine, nor even with me, for I have tried to tempt him to plan with me those little robberies which for amusement I dream of, here in these damnable solitudes. But before he was a saint he had a wild heart, had Harry. You have but to look at him to know that. Have you forgotten that he has not always lived in these mountains? Do you not recall that he was middle-weight champion of Cape Colony, that he was a scout all through the Boer war? That he also saw service in India and has certain decorations to show for it? Saint Harry! ha, ha, ha!

"The one thing he could not resist was any kind of a mad adventure, all the chances against him and all the hounds on top of him, and he pitting his wits against them and scheming to outwit them. A petticoat could never hold him. Oh, yes," in answer to Gallito's upraised brows, "there have been one or two, here and there, but they meant little to him, as any one might see. But, as you know and I know, Gallito, the Devil often wins by persistence; he never gives up. So, although Saint Harry's case is a puzzling one, the Devil is not discouraged. He looks about him and says, 'My friend, Gallito, my old and tried friend, has a daughter, beautiful as a flower, graceful as a fountain. I will bring her here and then Saint Harry will scramble off his ice peak fast enough.'"

"Your foolish wits run away with you," growled Gallito.

"My legs must run away with me now," said Jose, rising and stretching his arms and yawning. "But tell me first why was your daughter sad when she first came here?"

"Because she had fallen in love with a damned rascal," said Gallito bitterly, "after the manner of women."

"After the manner of women," Jose nodded, and whispered behind his hand, so that the two mountain ladies might not overhear him. "Believe it or not, many have loved me. But women like extremes, too; if they love rascals, they also adore saints. They see the saint standing there in his niche, so calm, so peaceful and composed, entirely forgetful of them, and this they cannot endure. Their brains are on fire; they spend their time scheming and planning how they can claw him down from his pedestal. They burn candles and pray to all the saints in Paradise to help them, and they offer hostages to the Devil, too. They do not really know the difference between devil and angel or between good and bad; but they cannot bear it that the saint is indifferent to them. That is something that drives them mad. Ah, it is a strong saint that can stand firm in his niche against their wiles."

"It is an experience that you will never suffer from, Jose."

“But who can say?” exclaimed Jose, and speaking with gravity. “Some day I shall devote myself to good works and to making my peace with the church, and who knows, I may yet be a saint. But one thing I am sure of, I shall never leave my niche for a woman.”

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"You know nothing, Jose."

"I know that I will never waste my cooking on a woman. I will enter a monastery of fat monks first and cook for them. They will appreciate it. But to return to Saint Harry and your daughter now—"

"Come," said Gallito harshly, pushing back his chair, "it is time you went home. The ladies," indicating Mrs. Nitschkan and Mrs. Thomas, who had been getting on their capes and hoods, "are waiting for you to escort them."

CHAPTER X

As the day drew near upon which Pearl expected to meet Hanson again all things seemed, as if by some special arrangement with the Fates, to accommodate themselves to her plans. She had intended to ask Seagreave for the use of his private parlor among the pines, intimating that she desired to retire thither to practice some new steps, and, lo! the night before, after discussing weather probabilities with her father and Jose, he had decided to spend the greater part of the day in the village laying in a full stock of winter provisions.

Hughie also would be in the village, making arrangements for the event of the evening and seeing that the piano was properly installed and tuned. Gallito would of course be at the Mont d'Or, and as for Jose, he had announced his intention of assisting Mrs. Thomas in the making of some delicate and elaborate cakes, difficult of composition and of which Pearl was especially fond, and also of constructing certain delicious pastries. No one could think of Jose as merely cooking; the results of his genius justified the use of such high-sounding words as "composing" or "constructing." Thus, his morning would be fully occupied.

Propitious Fates! Her pathway was smoothed before her; yet, alas! such is the perversity of the human mind, that as the morning dawned, as the minutes ticked themselves away on the clock, as the hour drew near when she should again meet Hanson, after all these months of separation, her spirit grew heavier instead of lighter. There was a return of listlessness and an indifference to his coming which constantly increased. She even felt indifferent to her own appearance.

At last, reluctantly, she threw a lace scarf about her head and, wrapping a long, crimson cloak about her, she left the cottage and took her way slowly up the hill.

As it was yet far too early for her rendezvous she turned aside from the main road and followed the narrow mountain trail which led to the cabin occupied by Mrs. Nitschkan and Mrs. Thomas. The gypsy, in her usual careless, almost masculine attire, stood in the door of her cabin gazing out at the mountains in all their mellow and triumphant

glory, the evanescent glory of late autumn. A pick and fishing rod lay across the door sill and a lean, flea-bitten dog dozed at her feet. Her arms were akimbo and a pipe was thrust between her teeth.

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Her quick ear caught the sound of Pearl's approach and suddenly her blue, twinkling gaze dropped from the hills to the trail which led to her door. Seeing who her visitor was, a smile of blended curiosity and welcome crossed her face. "Howdy, Pearl," she called jovially, "come and set a spell." She removed the pick and fishing rod and dragged the dog out of the way. Through the open doorway Mrs. Thomas and Jose might be seen in the room beyond, bending over a table, evidently deeply engrossed in the composition of some cakes.

"I can only stay a minute; I got a notion to walk this morning." There was a cool deviltry in the slanting gaze with which she surveyed the other woman.

"Seagreave, I'll bet," returned Mrs. Nitschkan frankly. "It ain't in either you or Marthy Thomas to let a man alone. What possesses you, anyway?"

Pearl continued to regard her with that subtle, burning, mocking look. "Your kind can never know," she taunted.

"Mebbe," said Mrs. Nitschkan laconically, "but you're different from Marthy. She's just mush. She'll be thinkin' now that she's cracked about Jose. If it wasn't him it would be your father, and if there wasn't no man up here at all, she'd hoist that crepe veil on her head, stick a red or blue bow at her neck and go swingin' down to camp, tryin' to persuade herself an' me that all she went for was a package of tea or some bacon. But you're different, always a yellin' about bein' free and yet always a tryin' to get tangled up."

Again Pearl laughed wickedly. "You tramp woman! Why would you rather hunt bear or mountain lions than shoot squirrels? Because there's danger in it." She laughed mirthlessly. "I guess it's for the same reason that I got to hunt the biggest game there is —man, and he hunts me."

Mrs. Nitschkan relighted her pipe. "Bob Flick's your best bet," she remarked impersonally.

"Talk about guns and fishing rods and dogs, something you know about," said Pearl scornfully, touching the dozing dog lightly with her foot. He growled angrily, resenting the liberty.

"You better leave Flip alone," cautioned Mrs. Nitschkan; "he's liable to bite anybody but me. Always be kind to dumb animals, 'specially cross dogs. And, say, Pearl, I been running the cards this morning. It was such a dandy day that I didn't know whether I'd do some assessment work or spend the day fishin'; the cards decided in favor of fishin'. I had to get some light so's I could tell how to go ahead. How any one can get along without a pack of cards! It's sure a lamp to the feet. If you wait a minute I'll run 'em for you."

She vanished inside and returned immediately with a board and a well-worn pack of cards. These she shuffled and, after Pearl had cut them several times, she began to lay them out in neat rows on the board on her knee, uttering a strange, crooning sound the while and studying each card as it fell with the most absorbed interest.

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"Um-mmm!" with a heavy sigh and shaking her head forebodingly. "You better go home, girl, as fast as you can and shut yourself up in the cabin all day. Did you ever see anything like that?" pointing to the cards. "Trouble, trouble, nothin' but trouble. If it ain't actual murder an' death, it's too near it to be any joke. Look how them spades turns up every whipstitch. How can folks doubt!"

But the cards of evil omen lying there on the board before had roused all of Pearl's inherent superstition and stirred her swift anger against Mrs. Nitschkan. "Parrot-croaker!" she exclaimed angrily, and followed this with a string of Spanish oaths and expletives. "Trouble is over for me."

Mrs. Nitschkan was on her feet in a minute. The board and the cards fell unheeded to the ground. Her small, quick eyes began to roll ominously and show red, and her relaxed figure became immediately tense and alert as that of a panther on guard.

"Trouble's just beginnin' for you," her voice was a mere guttural growl. "A little more sass from you, you double-j'inted jumpin'-jack dancer, and I'll jerk you to the edge of that cliff yonder and throw you down. I'm feelin' particularly good right now," rolling up her sleeves and showing the great knots of swelling muscles on her arms. "Get out of my way."

With one big sweep of her arm she brushed her companion aside as if she had been a fly; but with incredible rapidity Pearl recovered herself and sprang directly before her.

"Then get me out," she taunted, "try it, try it. I'd slip through your fingers like oil. It's no good to flash your over-sized man-muscles on me; I'm made of whip-cord and whalebone. Do you get that?"

Mrs. Nitschkan's courage sprang from a sense of trained and responsive muscles and of tremendous physical strength, but at the sound of that cool voice, those mocking, unwavering eyes, there swept over her an awe of the slither woman's far higher courage. It was an almost superstitious fear and respect which chilled the hot blood of her passion, the instinctive obedience of the flesh to the indomitable spirit. Reluctantly, against her will and in spite of her anger, the fighting gypsy paid deference to the steel-like, unflinching quality of the Pearl, when, rising above her slender physique, she faced unafraid the brute strength which threatened her, and dominated the situation by sheer consciousness of power.

The gypsy, chilled and subdued, confused by forces she could not understand, fell back a step or two and Pearl seized this opportunity to slip away, calling a careless good-by over her shoulder.

But the depression which had touched her from the time she wakened now lay heavier on her spirit. Her mind reverted to the cards of ill omen and she shivered with a faint

chill of apprehension. And as she walked on it seemed to her that the atmosphere was in tune with her mood.

The air was soft, and yet sharp enough to quicken the color in her cheeks, but still indefinably wistful. The song of the wind among the pines, that mountain wind which never ceases to blow, had a sort of sighing pensiveness in its falling cadences. The deep, blue sky dreamed over the russet tree tops and the yellow leaves filled the forest with their flying gold.

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And the spirit of the year seemed to have entered into Pearl. She was as wistful as the day, as pensive as the sighing wind. She arrived early at her destination. The sun lay warm in her little bower of encircling pines and she sat down on a fallen log to await Hanson's coming. He could not take her by surprise for, through a little opening in the trees, she could see the trail, it was in plain view.

Sitting down then to wait, she rested her elbow on her knee and her chin in the palm of her hand. It seemed as if the power of anticipation were gone from her. She wondered dully at her own languor, not only of body, but of mind. In a few moments she would see again the man whom she had passionately loved, and in parting from whom she had not dreamed it to be within human possibility so to suffer, and yet, at the prospect of meeting him again, her heart throbbed not one beat faster. She could not even look forward to dancing that night with any excitement or pleasure. She wondered what Seagreave would think of her when he saw her; she would be a vision far more brilliant than any spirit of the autumn woods, and she would wear her emeralds again, the emeralds for which Bob Flick had squandered a fortune. She put up her hand and touched them where they hung about her neck, concealed under her gown, for she wore them night and day, never allowing them to leave her person. Good old Bob! Seagreave had said there were only a few great dancers. Well, she would show him. She could dance; no matter how critical he was, he would have to admit that. And then her heart seemed suddenly to run down with a queer, cold little thrill.

There was Hanson ascending the trail. He was only a few feet away, and even as she jumped to her feet he saw her and waved his hand. He paused a moment for breath and then hurried on.

"Pearl!" he cried, and caught her in his arms, covering her face with kisses and crushing her against his heart. It seemed hours to her, but it was really only a moment before she pushed him from her, slipped from his arms, and stood panting and flushed before him.

"Pearl, O Pearl!" he cried again, and would once more have caught her deftly to him, but again she slipped from him. "Sit down," she cried petulantly, motioning to the fallen log. "You're out of breath, you've had a long climb." She herself sat down and he followed her example, encircling her with his arms; a tiny frown showed itself in her forehead and she bent slightly forward as if to evade his clasp, folding her arms about her knees.

"Gee! You bet it was a climb," he said, wiping his brow and still breathing a little hard. "But I'd have climbed right on up to heaven if you'd been there waiting for me. Lord, Pearl! if I'd had to wait much longer to see you it would have finished me, I do believe. Oh, sweetheart, you're lovelier than ever, and you're not going to punish either of us any more, I can tell you that. You're coming down with me and we're going to live, Pearl, live, just as I told you we would, down there in the palms in the desert. Now I'm telling

you again among the pines, and this time you're going to listen and come. I guess we've both of us pretty well found out that it's no use our trying to live apart any longer."

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Her crimson cloak had fallen from her shoulders, and Hanson, holding her hand in his, had pushed up her sleeve and was kissing her arm, as he talked, up as far as her elbow and down again to the tips of her fingers. She did not even attempt to draw her hand away, she was still in that state of apathy, where all her senses seemed dulled; and so she let him babble on, murmuring his adoration and his rose-colored dreams of the future.

"By George!" he exclaimed, in sheer, sincere amazement. "To think of you, the Black Pearl, spending all these months up here in these dead old mountains without even a moving-picture show to look at. You got an awful will, girl."

She gazed with somber eyes beyond him. Life, did he say "life"? That was what she asked, what she demanded, life as glorious and as rich in color as a full-blown rose. And only a little while ago she had dreamed that she could find it with him, that *that* was what he offered to her. She remembered the question that Harry Seagreave had asked her. "What does life mean to you?" Ah, since that first night in the mountains life seemed to have expanded into infinite horizons before her widening vision. She dreamed over them, forgetful for the moment of the man beside her, until he, turning in the full tide of his talk, pressed his lips ardently, passionately to hers.

Taken by surprise, she uttered one of her fluent Spanish oaths and, springing to her feet, stood with her body slightly bent forward, her hands on her hips, gazing at him with her narrow, gleaming eyes. Her apathy was gone, she was alive now to her finger tips.

He rose, too. "Honey, what is it?" he questioned dazedly. "What's got you now?"

"Don't touch me," she said tensely. "Don't dare to touch me."

He looked at her unbelievably and then fell back a pace or two. "My Lord! What's the matter with you?" he cried.

"I don't know," she muttered wildly. Her eyes still measured him, his bold, obvious good looks, his ruddy self-complacency, his habitual and shallow geniality, the satisfied vanity of a mouth steadily becoming looser; the depiction of years of self-indulgence in the little veins on his highly colored cheeks; the sagging lines of his well-set-up figure, ever taking on more flesh.

So she saw him, not perhaps as he was, but in the light of her own harsh and unmodified criticism, and mercilessly she reflected upon him all the scorn she felt for herself. She did not consider or even remember that with what strength of affection he possessed he had loved her; that, after his constitution he had given her of his best, all he had to give, in fact; that for her he had more than once faced danger, and just to see her again was even now facing it, fearlessly.

He had grown to expect from her an infinite variety of moods, but something in her pose, her expression, frightened him now. “Honey, what are you driving at?” he asked, a little tremulously, and stretched out his hand to lay it on her shoulder.

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But again an oath whipped from her lips, her glance darkened. She drew back from him with the horse-shoe frown showing plainly on her forehead.

He looked at her, his whole face broken up, his mouth trembling, something like tears in his eyes. "Why, Pearl," he faltered, "ain't you glad to see me? Why, here I been waiting all these damned, dreary months, never thinking of any one but you, never even looking at another woman, just dreaming of the moment when I could put my arms around you again and know that you loved me and were mine."

A hard and bitter smile showed on her mouth. "Yours! Loved you!" she cried. "My God! You!"

Her unmistakable, unconcealed scorn was like a dagger thrust in the heart, and that stab of pain stirred his anger and restored him to himself. His face went almost purple, his cold eyes blazed. "Say," he cried roughly, "what are you driving at, anyway? Come down to cases now." He caught her by the wrist. "What did you let me come up here for? Just to make a monkey of me? Have you been treasuring spite against me all these months, and is this your way of getting even?"

She dragged her hand away from him and stepped back. "I let you come, if you want to know it, because I thought I was in love with you. Lord, think of it!" she laughed drearily. "I haven't fooled you any worse than I have myself."

He rubbed his hand across his eyes. "It ain't true," he said loudly, positively, defiantly.

"Hush," she exclaimed, darting forward. "What was that?" There was a sound as if some one had trod the underbrush not many feet away. She listened intently a moment, a wild fear at her heart that Seagreave might have returned unexpectedly. It was probably some animal, for there was no further sound. "Oh," she cried, in involuntary relief, "it must have been Jose!"

A gleam came into his eyes, a light of triumph as at the remembrance of some potent weapon of which he had been carelessly forgetful. "And who is Jose?" he asked.

She lifted her startled gaze to his, the question recalled to her her own unthinking speech. "Oh, one of the miners," she said indifferently.

He knew her too well to fancy that he could trap her into any new admissions, and he had no wish to arouse her suspicions. Therefore he dropped the subject, especially as he felt fully answered.

He leaned against a tree and, drawing a cigar from his pocket, lighted it, although the hand with which he did so trembled. "I guess some explanations are in order between you and me," he said. "I guess it's about time that you began to get it into your head that you can't make a fool of me all the time. I'm ready and willing to admit that there

was some excuse for you down in the desert. I made a bad break there, which I'm freely conceding was no way to treat a lady. But that don't explain or excuse the way you've treated me this morning," he laughed bitterly. "There's no way to explain it unless living here in the mountains has gone to your head or unless there's another man. Is there?" his eyes pierced her. "Is there?"

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She looked back at him with a hard, inscrutable smile, but she did not answer.

Another man! He couldn't, wouldn't believe it. Why, it was only yesterday that they two had met and loved in the desert. Again he fell to pleading. "Oh, Pearl, be like what you were again. Don't stand off from me that way, honey. It ain't in you to be so cruel and hard. Come back to me, here in my arms. Have your spells; treat me like you please; but come back to me. Oh, honey, come."

She looked beyond him, not at him, and then ground a little heap of freshly fallen pine needles beneath her heel.

"What's the use?" she said curtly. "It's over. We can quit right here, Rudolf. I'm done with you, for good."

His outstretched arms fell by his side, his jaw set. "I guess that's right," he said viciously. "Any bigger fool than me could see that; and I'm not going to waste any more time crawling around on my hands and knees after you; I can tell you that. But you can't fool me on the other man proposition."

"I'm not trying to," she interjected cruelly.

"Who is he?" his voice was ragged and uneven. "Not Flick, I'll bet my hat. He's been your dog too long for you to fling him anything but a bone. You'll never tell me, though."

"Not I," she answered indifferently.

"Then I'll just satisfy myself—to-night."

She started and frowned. "You're not staying for that," harshly. "It's not safe."

"Oh, yes, I am staying for that, just to satisfy a little curiosity I've got, and I guess I'll find it safe enough. I guess you've been playing with kids so far in your career, Miss Pearl Gallito; but you'll find that the old man's not quite so easy disposed of as you think. I've got an idea that you'll be down on your knees trying to make terms with him before we're precisely 'quit' as you've just said."

"Bah!" she said. "Wind, wind. You can't frighten me with threats. Stay and watch me dance all you please. That's the only way you'll ever see me again—from the audience." Without any appearance of haste, she lifted her scarf from the pine branch on which she had thrown it and twisted it slowly about her head, then picking up her crimson cape from the ground, she shook the pine needles from it, wrapped it about her, and without another word to him, without even a look, took her way down the trail.

She did not believe that he meant what he said, she did not believe that he meant to stay and see her dance that evening. The thought that he would do so had annoyed

her at first, but as she walked downward through the wine-like amber air, she realized that she did not particularly care. Her whole being seemed absorbed in the revelation which had come to her in the first moment of her meeting with Hanson—her love for Seagreave. In this new, exclusive emotion, the recent interview and all that had led up to it became to her a mere unpleasant episode, upon which her indifferent imagination refused to dwell. She wanted to be alone, that she might fully realize this stupendous change in her feelings and in her entire outlook upon life. As she thought upon it she saw that it was no sudden miracle, wrought in the twinkling of an eye, but an alteration of standards and emotion so gradual that she had not been aware of it.

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Back in the cabin she luxuriated, exulted in the fact that she would be alone all day. She piled high the fire with logs, and threw herself in an easy chair. Thus she could dream undisturbed, could lie watching the leaping flames and vision for herself again that fair, regular, serene face, that tall, strong, slender figure. She counted the hours until she should see him again, until she should dance for him, for it was for him, him alone, that she would dance.

Thus she passed the greater part of the day, and even resented the intrusion upon her thoughts when her father returned a little earlier than usual from the mine.

"I got a telegram from Bob to-day," he said. "All that was in it was, 'Coming up to see Pearl dance to-night.'"

"What!" she cried, showing her dismay. "What is he doing that for?"

"What he says, I suppose," returned Gallito, "to see you dance."

She frowned vexedly, but said nothing.

Her father spoke again. "How are you going down? You will not walk with Bob and Hugh, Mrs. Nitschkan and Mrs. Thomas?"

"No," she answered carelessly, although a deeper crimson showed in her cheek. "Mr. Seagreave said last night that he would take me down in his cart."

Gallito nodded, apparently satisfied, and as Jose came in then to prepare supper, the matter was dropped.

As for Pearl, her vexation of the moment was gone; it could have no place in her mood of exaltation, and when, a few minutes later, she greeted Bob Flick, he thought that he had never seen her more gay. All through supper, too, her mood of gayety continued, but immediately after that meal she drew Flick aside.

"Bob, I want to tell you something," she said. "No use Hughie, nor Pop, nor any of the rest of them knowing anything about it," she hesitated a moment, "but Hanson came up to-day."

There was no change in his impassive face, only a leap of hard light in his eyes, and yet she knew that he was on guard in a moment. "Hanson?"

"Yes, and I saw him for a few moments," she lifted candid eyes to his, "and, honest, Bob, it's all over. I never expect to see him again, and I never want to."

He looked at her, as if trying to read her soul. "Say, Pearl, what is this," he asked, "straight?"

“It’s what I’m telling you,” she looked back at him, nodding emphatically, and then her face broke into a smile, her sweetest, her most alluring smile. “Say, Bob, I got to thank you for a good many things, not to speak of these,” she touched the emeralds under her gown; “but the biggest thing you’ve ever done for me yet was to keep me from running away with Hanson.”

Her sincerity was undoubted, and a flush of pleasure rose on his cheek, and a light came into his eyes which only she could bring there. He pressed her hands warmly, looking embarrassed and yet delighted. “You never said anything in all your life, Pearl, that ever pleased me like that.”

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She patted his arm lightly and caressingly, and smiled at him again, under her lashes. She couldn't help that with any man. "You're awful good to me, Bob; I guess you're the best and onliest friend I've got."

"I'm what you want me to be," he spoke a little sadly but very tenderly. "It'll never make any difference to me what you do or what you don't do; there'll never be any change in me."

She let her fingers lie in his clasp, but her glance was absent now, her thoughts had flown again to Seagreave. "Goodness!" she exclaimed, rousing suddenly and glancing at the clock, "I've got to make a hustle for it."

She was ready half an hour later when Seagreave stopped at the door. Hugh and Bob Flick had already gone, her father and Jose had settled themselves for the evening over the cards, and Pearl stood before the fire, a long, dark cloak covering her from head to foot and a black mantilla over her head. Jose's eyes were full of longing.

"Oh, that I might go, too," he cried. "The Black Pearl may dance, dance, after the spirit that is in her; may express her art, but I, although I grow mad to express mine, must stay mewed up in these mountains with nothing to do but cook and play cards and talk to a half saint and a stale, old sinner. If Nitschkan and the petite Thomas had not come, I should have died. Look at those!" he twinkled his long, delicate fingers in the air, "there is not such another pair of hands on a combination lock in all this world."

Seagreave and Gallito laughed, but paid no further heed to him, and Harry turned to Pearl with a pretense of disappointment.

"I thought I should see a butterfly," he said, "a butterfly that had flown up from the land of eternal summer, and you're only a chrysalis."

"It's too cold for butterflies up here," she laughed. "Wait until I get down to the warm hall." But although she returned his banter, she did not look at him, her eyes were downcast, and on the drive down the hill she scarcely spoke. Seagreave was one of those rare persons who respect another's mood of silence, and consequently he did not notice this new constraint which had overfallen her.

The hall, lighted with bull's-eye lanterns, was crowded with people, every one of the chairs taken and every inch of standing room occupied. There was no platform, but the space upon which Pearl was to dance was screened off by red curtains.

But even before she entered the little dressing booth prepared for her, she hastened to peep through the curtains, scanning the audience with an eager eye. Her face fell as she saw that Hanson, true to his promise, was there, and on one of the front seats, not

far from Seagreave and Bob Flick, who were sitting together. His eyes were dull, his face flushed, and he lurched flaccidly in his chair; he had been drinking heavily all day.

He was wondering dully as he sat there if she would enter in the same indifferent manner that she had adopted the first night he had seen her down in the desert. Probably she would; it had been very effective.

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But the time for conjecture was over. The curtains were drawn aside, and Hugh sat down at the piano and began to play a seductive, sensuous accompaniment. Then through a crimson curtain at the rear Pearl flashed in as if blown by the mountain wind. The chrysalis had cast aside its shell and this tropical butterfly had emerged. Her skirts were of yellow satin, and from a black bodice her beautiful bare shoulders rose half revealed and half concealed by her rose-wreathed, white *manton de Manila*. In her black, shining hair, just over one ear, was a bunch of scarlet, artificial blossoms.

She floated about the floor for a moment or two like a thistle-down blown hither and thither by the caprice of the wind, scarcely seeming to touch the ground, upborne by the music-tide. Throughout her career she was always at her best when she took those first few moments about the stage and waited for her inspiration.

Then she drifted nearer to Hughie and murmured, "The Tango." He changed his tempo immediately, and almost without a pause of transition she began that provocative measure—the dance of desire. Thrilling with the joy of expressing her love, her beautiful new love for Seagreave, through her art, she danced with a verve, an abandon, a more spontaneous impulse than she had ever shown before. The Tango! She made it a thing of alluring advances, of stinging repulses, of sudden, fascinating withdrawals and exquisite ardors.

When the applause had finally died down, the hall was still noisy with a babel of voices; those who could, moved about in the crowded space, and little groups formed and broke up. Bob Flick, speaking to this or that acquaintance, felt some one touch him lightly on the arm, and turned suddenly to see Hanson standing beside him.

"Hello, Flick," with a sort of swaggering bravado, "our old friend, the Black Pearl, is going some to-night, ain't she?"

"I don't know you," drawled Flick, the liquid Southern intonations of his voice softened until they were almost silky, "and," his hand shot back to his hip with an almost unbelievable rapidity, "I'll give you just three minutes to apologize for mentioning Miss Gallito's name, for speaking to me, and for being here at all."

Hanson's face had turned a sickly white, more with anger than fear. "Considering the argument you stand ready to offer," he said, "there's nothing to do but to apologize my humblest on all three counts. I had hoped that you'd remember me and be willing to introduce me to your friend." He turned a cynical and evil glance upon Seagreave, who was talking to some one a few feet away. "But since you won't, I'll go, just adding that you and your friend, there, are likely to meet me soon again."

There was a touch of scorn in Flick's faint smile. "The three minutes are up," he said, and without a word Hanson turned and sought his seat.

The curtains parted now and Hugh again sat down to the piano, but his music had changed; it was no longer sensuous and provocative, but strange, and curiously disturbing, with a peculiar, recurring, monotonous beat.

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It was the voice of the desert full of a savage exultation in its own loneliness and forsaken isolation, and through it rang a cry of deep, disdainful triumph, as if it said: "All puny races of men, come to me; embroider my vast surfaces with the green of your fields and gardens, build your houses upon my quiescent sand and dream that you have conquered and tamed me. And I abide, I abide. Silent, brooding, unwitting of your noisy incursions, I lie absorbed in my dream under my own illimitable skies. But soon or late, when the moment comes, I wake, I rouse, I see my inviolate desolations invaded. Then I gather my strength, I drown you with my torrential rivers, I torture you with my burning sun, I obliterate you with my flying sand. So shall my cactus bloom once more, my jeweled lizards crawl unmolested and the cry of the coyote echo again through the vast, soundless spaces of my desolation. Then to my looms, to my looms and out of emptiness and silence and space and light to weave all mysteries of color and all illusions of beauty."

"Lord!" cried Bob Flick to Seagreave, "he's playing the desert. I've seen her look just like the music sounds. That's a sand storm; there's no other sound in the world like it." He turned his eyes full of a puzzled wonder on Seagreave. "How can he play all that so that you and I can see it, when he can't see it himself?"

"But he does see it," insisted Seagreave; "never think that he doesn't, and sees it through finer avenues of sight than mere material organs of vision. He sees the mountains, too. Why, he can play the very shadows on the snow for me."

During the Spanish dances Seagreave had not shared the excitement of the audience, and thus had maintained his usual serenity. He had been intensely interested and appreciative and admiring; but emotionally unmoved; but now, as this troubling music of Hughie's seemed to express the dominion of unsuspected but potent earth-forces, primitive, savage and forever irreclaimable, his calm became strangely disturbed. Dimly he realized that should every desert on the globe finally be subdued by the plow, the irrigating ditches and the pruning hook, they would still remain as realities in the mind of man, forever clouding his aspirations toward the mountain peaks and the stars. For the desert must ever remain an unsolved enigma, never to be reduced to a formula, never to be explained by any human standards; now whispering to man of the mysteries of the soul and revealing to him more of the infinite than his finite senses may grasp; and now mocking him with illusions, her beautiful mirages wrought of airbeams and sunlight, and transforming him into a beast of greed with her haunting intimations of hidden and inexhaustible treasure.

Thus Hughie's music; and presently Pearl floated out. She had changed her Spanish costume for the one of scarlet crepe in which Hanson had first seen her, a crown of scarlet flowers on her dark hair. Her very expression, too, had changed, her eyes were elongated, her features seemed delicately Egyptian; the brooding sphynx look was on her face.

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"She's great, ain't she?" asked Bob Flick.

Seagreave nodded. He had never seen her superior in technique. It took character, he appreciated that, to have endured the years of tiresome, mechanical practice, and to have undertaken it so intelligently that she had achieved her marvelous results; and she had, beside, youth and beauty and magnetism. All this alone would have made her a great dancer, but as he recognized, she had more, much more to bring to her art; a complex nature which, in its unsounded depths ever held a vision of beauty, and a sense of this vision which amounted to unity with it, and therefore gave her the power of expressing it. Her mind, too, was plastic to all primitive impulses and to Nature; she blended with it. She was but little influenced by persons, her will was too dominating, her intelligence too quick, and—but here his analysis ceased.

The Pearl was dancing to Hugh's strange music, she was dancing the desert for him—Seagreave. He knew it was for him, although she never glanced in his direction. And as she danced, he grew to realize that this feat was not an intellectual one. She was not portraying the spirit of the desert as gleaned from study and observation and melted in the crucible of her poetic imagination and molded by her fancy until it was a thing of form in her thought. The Black Pearl danced the desert because in her was the power to be one with it and live in its life through every cell of her being. It was a matter of feeling with her, one phase of her affinity with the forces of earth; but because she had the artist's constructive imagination, she could put it into form and dance it, and by projecting her own feeling into it, convey it to others.

The world with its round of outworn, hackneyed appeals, its wearisome repetitions of crude and commonplace joys, its tawdry and limited temptations, had long ago fallen away from Seagreave—and left him nothing, but to-night a voice that he had long ignored, the voice of life, commanded him.

"If the desert seems forever to claim her own, what is that to you! Your work is to reclaim and in the face of a thousand defeats and desolations still to reclaim, with the eternal faith that for you the wastes shall blossom like the rose. Work, no matter how brokenly, how futilely. To build houses of sand is better than to sit in profitless dreams and live in an animal content."

When later he drove Pearl up the mountainside, almost in silence, as they had come, after his few words of admiration and appreciation of her dancing, there was a shadow for the first time in Harry's clear eyes, a shadow which did not pass.

CHAPTER XI

Had Gallito but known it, his theory of the unexpected was never more perfectly demonstrated than it was upon the night Pearl danced and in the days which followed.

Hanson had left early the next morning with the firm determination of returning almost immediately accompanied by one or more detectives and of securing that much coveted prize, Jose. Also, he gloated over the prospect of seeing Gallito, Bob Flick and Seagreave arrested for conniving at Jose's escape and for harboring him during all these months.

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But the unexpected did occur. As Seagreave had predicted, the snow began to fall, and began the very night that Pearl danced in the town hall; and fell so steadily and uninterruptedly that the progress of the train which bore Hanson down the mountains was considerably impeded. Thus, the very forces of the air conspired for Jose, and ably were they seconded by other invisible and unknown agencies. Even before Hanson had reached the coast he found himself powerless "in the fell clutch of circumstance." He had taken cold in the mountains and for several weeks was too seriously ill even to contemplate with much interest his plan of revenge. And by the time that he had recovered sufficiently to give consideration to the matter again, a very little investigation convinced him of the necessity for patience. So thoroughly had the season and the elements conspired, that Colina was effectually cut off from the outer world, a camp beleaguered by snow, and Jose, for several months at least, would be the prisoner of the mountains and not of man.

But Colina was used to this experience. It was one which she had regularly undergone every winter of her existence. Therefore, her inhabitants prepared for it and bore it with what equanimity they could summon. It was but a small camp so far up in the mountains that the mines were practically only worked during the late spring, the summer and the early autumn months, for the water which ran the concentrating and stamp mills was frozen early in the winter and the mines were practically closed down. One or two, like the Mont d'Or, were kept open, and worked a few hours a day, but no milling was done and the ore dumps increased to vast size.

The railroad, a steep and tortuous way, was not, *per se* a passenger line, but existed to carry the ore down to the smelters, therefore, when there was no ore to carry, it was a matter of indifference to the mine owners who controlled the line whether trains ran or not; in fact, they preferred not from a strictly business standpoint, and truly they had an excellent excuse in the heavy drifts which completely obliterated the narrow, shining, steel path which led to the world beyond the mountains.

The police officials whom Hanson consulted as soon as his returning health permitted him to do so, realized that in spite of their anxiety to secure the famous and slippery Crop-eared Jose, he was quite as safely imprisoned by the mountains as if they themselves had secured him. There was no possible escape for him. All trails were blocked long before the railroad was, so there he was, caught as securely as a bird in a cage, and they, his potential captors, might sit down to a comfortable period of pleasant anticipation and await that thaw which was bound to come sooner or later. So much for Gallito's unexpected.

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As for those who would have been interested had they but known—the little group held in compulsory inaction by those white, encircling hills—they accepted it as a part of the year's toll, no more to be murmured at than the changing seasons, and as inevitable as were they. But it was an experience which Pearl had never known, and Seagreave looked to see it wear upon her spirit, and daily experienced a new surprise that there was no evidence of its doing so. Instead, she seemed to glow hourly with a richer and fuller life, a softer beauty. But although an intimacy greater than he and she had yet known, would seem to be enforced by this winter of isolation and leisure, she did not, for a time, see as much of him as before. A constraint, almost like a blight upon their friendship, seemed to have fallen between them ever since the night that she had danced. Seagreave did not come down to Gallito's cabin quite so frequently in the evenings, and, according to Jose, spent much time by his own fireside absorbed in reading and meditation; and when he did come it was usually late and, instead of talking to Pearl, he would listen in silence to Hugh's playing or else engage him in conversation.

But this attitude on his part failed to cloud Pearl's spirits. She had seen men taken with this not inexplicable shyness before, and she made no effort to rouse Harry from his abstraction or to lure him from his meditations; femininely, intuitively wise, she left that to time.

But even in her moods of gayety the Black Pearl was never voluble, and her habit of silence was a factor in maintaining the mystery with which Seagreave's imagination was now beginning to invest her, and during those winter evenings when she would often sit absolutely motionless for an hour at a time, her narrow eyes dreaming on the fire, the sphynx look on her face, more than once he felt impelled to murmur:

“The Sphinx is drowsy,
Her wings are furled:
Her ear is heavy,
She broods on the world.
Who'll tell me my secret,
The ages have kept?—
I awaited the seer,
While they slumbered and slept.”

Thus, more and more, he saw her as the image of beauty and of mystery, and ever more frequently he pondered on the nature of the message of the desert. But had he come down to Gallito's cabin earlier in the evening he would not have found her brooding on the firelight. Usually, she danced, keeping well in practice. She and Hughie would discuss by the hour new movements and effects, and not only discuss, but try them, and she and Jose, who had a light foot, often gave Gallito the benefit of seeing them in many of the old Spanish dances.

But one evening when Seagreave came down, Pearl was not resting after her exertions, but ran forward to greet him with unwonted vivacity, and drew him toward a window in a dim corner of the room, out of earshot of her father and Jose.

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"Oh!" she cried. "Look, look at what they have sent me from the camp for dancing for them. I had no idea it would be so much." She took a roll of bills from her bosom and showed it to him. Her cheek was flushed, her eyes were like stars. "Why, even here, even up here," she cried, "I can make money."

"You look as if you enjoyed making money," he smiled.

She looked up at him as if surprised, and then laughed. "Of course, of course I do. Who doesn't?" Her touch on the bills was a caress. She seemed to find a joy in the very texture of them. He never dreamed for a moment that she took a delight in those rather crumpled and dirty bills. He merely took it for granted that she exulted in the visible expression of appreciation of her art.

"And what will you do with it?" he asked.

"I will send it to my bank when I can get any letters through, and then when this snowball is big enough I will invest it."

"In mines?" still idly interested and smiling.

She shook her head. "I leave that to my father, he is a good judge and he is lucky at it, and my mother is always buying patches of land and trading them off, usually to good advantage. But my specialty is unset stones. I have some very good ones, really, I have. Oh," with a little glance over her shoulder toward her father and Jose, "I will show them to you some day when Jose is not around. If he knew I had them he would steal them just for the pleasure of keeping himself in practice."

"How you love beauty," he said.

"But they are valuable," she said. "Oh, yes, I love them, too. I love to let them fall through my fingers, to pour them from one hand to another. Sometimes, when I am all alone here in the cabin, I sit and I open my little black leather bag and take them out and hold them in the palm of my hand, and I turn them this way and that way just to catch the light, and there is nothing so beautiful; in all the world there is nothing so beautiful as jewels, except," she caught herself quickly, "the desert, of course."

He sighed a little and stirred restlessly, the very mention of the desert made him vaguely uneasy. He had listened to the call of the mountains and obeyed it, and from that moment the desert, like the world, had no place in his thoughts; but since the night that Pearl had danced it had remained in his mind, and had become to him as a far horizon. The desert has ever been a factor in the consciousness of man, not to be excluded, and although Seagreave did not realize it, the moment had come in which he must reckon with it. He felt the fascination and repulsion of its impenetrable mystery, of its stark and desolate wastes, whose spell is yet so potent in the imagination of man, that many have

found in its barren horror the very heart of beauty. He wondered if the uncontaminated winds which blew from out the ages across the vast, empty spaces murmured a message of greater import than that whispered to him among the mountain tops, if the wings of light which beat unceasingly above its shifting sands lifted the soul to some undreamed of realm of eternal morning. Something that slept deep within him stirred faintly; the old passion to adventure, to explore rose in his heart, his restless, reckless heart, which had, so he believed, found peace.

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The shadow deepened in his eyes, but he suddenly roused from this momentary abstraction to find that Pearl was still speaking.

"Yes, I love them because they are so beautiful, but I love them, too, because they are valuable."

"Well, there is no question about your making all the money you wish," he said, a slight weariness in his tone, "thousands and thousands. The world will fling it at you. It will cover you with jewels."

She smiled, a faint, secretive smile of triumph. Ah, so he recognized that. She had made him feel and admit that she was one of the few great dancers.

Then, she, too, sighed. "If only," she said, forgetful of him and following out her train of thought aloud, "if only when I get what I want, I wouldn't always want something else! Did you ever feel if you could just be free, really free, you wouldn't want anything else in the world?"

"How could any one be more free than you are?" he laughed down at her.

"I know, I know," she agreed, still speaking wistfully, "but I'd like to be free of myself; myself is so strange, and there's so many of me." Then the veil of her instinctive reticence fell over her again and she began to talk of her recent attempts to get about on snow-shoes, Jose and Hugh having been her instructors, so far. Harry immediately offered his services, and she accepted them, agreeing to go out with him the next morning.

And as they talked Jose glanced at them from time to time, a touch of malicious laughter in his odd glancing eyes; there were few things that escaped Jose.

That evening, after Seagreave had gone home, when Jose and Gallito and Mrs. Thomas and Mrs. Nitschkan had sat late over their cards, Gallito had risen after a final game, mended the fire, poured himself a glass of cognac, lighted another cigarette and, stretching himself in an easy-chair, entered into one of those confidential talks which he occasionally permitted himself with his chosen cronies. The earlier part of the evening Jose and Pearl had danced for a time together, and then Pearl had danced for a time alone and in a manner to please even her father's critical taste. Now, in commenting on this, he remarked:

"You see the change in my daughter. She is now cheerful, obedient and industrious. When she came she was none of those things. She is, you see, a good girl at heart, but her mother had almost ruined her. If men but had the time they should always bring up the children of the family. It is only in that way that they can ever be a credit to one."

Mrs. Thomas, who had been bending over the stove brewing a pot of coffee which she and Mrs. Nitschkan drank at all hours of the day and night, raised herself at the utterance of these revolutionary sentiments and looked at Gallito in grieved and bewildered surprise; but Mrs. Nitschkan, who had been pouring cream into the cup of steaming coffee which Jose had just handed to her, first took a long draught and then remarked with cool impartiality:

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"The trouble with you, Gallito, is that you can't bear for nobody, man, woman, child or devil, to get ahead of you. I guess I know somep'n' about the bringin' up of young ones myself."

Here Mrs. Thomas sighed and shook her head with that exasperated incomprehension which all women displayed when the subject of Mrs. Nitschkan's children came up for discussion. Educators discourse much upon the proper environment and training of the young of the human species, but theories aside, practical results seem rather in favor of casting the bantling on the rocks. For, in spite of Mrs. Nitschkan's joyous lack of responsibility, her daughters had grown up the antitheses of herself, thoroughly feminine little creatures, already famous for those womanly accomplishments for which their mother had ever shown a marked distaste, while the sons were steady, hard-working, reputable young fellows, always to be depended upon by their employers.

"It's nothing but your pizen luck, Sadie," murmured Mrs. Thomas.

"We must allow that Providence has been kinder to you than most," remarked Gallito sardonically.

"It's a reward," said Mrs. Nitschkan with calm assurance, refilling her pipe with more care than she had ever bestowed upon her children. "It's 'cause I ain't ever shirked an' left the Lord to do all my work for me."

At this Mrs. Thomas, too overcome to speak, tottered feebly back from the stove and fell weakly into a chair.

"No, sir," continued the gypsy with arrogant virtue, "the trouble with all the parents I know, includin' present company, is that they're too easy. I don't work no claim expectin' to get nothin' out of it, do I? And I don't bring a lot of kids into the world and spend years teachin' 'em manners—"

She was interrupted here by a brief and scornful laugh from Mrs. Thomas, who, on observing that her friend was gazing at her earnestly and ominously, hastily converted it into a fit of coughing.

"Spend years teachin' 'em manners an' sacrifice myself to stay at home and punish 'em when I might be jantin' 'round myself, not to have 'em turn out a credit to me."

There was a finality about the statements which seemed to admit of no further discussion, but after Jose had escorted the two women to their cabin, he had returned for one of those midnight conferences with Gallito over which they loved to linger, and the Spaniard had again expressed his satisfaction in Pearl's changed demeanor.

Jose's laughter pealed to the roof. "You have eyes but for mines and cards, Gallito. Though the world changes under your nose, you do not see it. The moles of the earth—they are funny!"

"Bah!" casting at him a scornful glance from under his beetling brows, "your eyes see so far, Jose, that you see all manner of things which do not exist."

"I have far sight and near sight and the sight which comes to the seventh child," returned Jose with pride. "Therefore, seeing what I see, I say my prayers each day, now."

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A bleak smile wrinkled Gallito's parchment-like cheeks. "And to whom do you pray, Jose, your patron saint, or rather sinner, the Devil?"

Jose looked shocked. "You are a blasphemer, Gallito," he reproved, and then added piously, "I say my prayers each day that I may, by example, help Saint Harry."

"And why is Harry in need of your example?" said Gallito, holding up his glass between himself and the fire and watching the deep reflections of ruby light in the amber liquid.

"It goes against me to see an unequal struggle," sighed Jose. "He is hanging on desperately to his ice-peak, but the Devil has almost succeeded in clawing him off."

Gallito frowned. "This talk of yours is nonsense, Jose; but if there is anything in it, Harry may understand that any interest he may have in my daughter can lead to nothing. She is a dancer before she is anything else, it is in her blood. Harry does not and never can understand her; only one of her own kind can do that. He is by nature a religious; his cabin is the cell of a monk."

Again Jose's eerie, malicious laughter echoed through the room.

"Aye, laugh," growled Gallito; "but you see my daughter for the first time. You think because she smiles at Harry that she loves him; you think because she is the only woman he talks to that he loves her; you do not know her. She is young, she is beautiful and a dancer. She has had many lovers ever since she put her hair up, and learned how she could make a fool of a man with her eyes and her smile, and she has made them pay toll. She always did that from the first." There was a note of fierce pride in his harsh, brief laughter. "Yes, she would smile and promise anything with her eyes, but she gave nothing. It is strange"—the old Spaniard, his austere spirit mellowed by his excellent cognac, fell into a mood of confidential musing, an indulgence which he rarely permitted himself—"that Hugh, the child of a woman I never saw, reaches my heart more than my own daughter does. But Pearl is a study to me. I say to myself, 'She cares for nothing but money, applause, admiration,' and yet, even while I say it, I am not sure; I do not know, I do not know."

Again he admired the glints of firelight reflected in his cognac glass. "But this I do know, Jose, she is an actress before she is anything else."

Jose leered knowingly. "You think only of your daughter," he said. "What about Saint Harry? He has mad blood in him, too. It is only a few years that he has been a saint; before that the Devil held full sway over him. And," he added pensively, after a moment's cogitation, "there are many lessons one learns from the Devil."

"You should know," returned Gallito, with his twisting, sardonic smile.

“Ah, the Devil is not all bad,” said Jose defensively. “One can learn from him the lesson of perseverance, and perseverance is a virtue.”

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Gallito waved his hand with a polite gesture. "You know more of him and his lessons than I, Jose. I am always ready to grant that." He took another sip of cognac, blew a succession of smoke wreaths toward the ceiling, and again resumed his midnight philosophizings. "What puzzles me, Jose, is what is going to become of us in Heaven. We shall never be content. Content is a lesson that no one has ever learned. Look at Saint Harry. He has Heaven right here. His time to himself, enough to live on without working, no women to bother him, your cooking; and it may be on that that you will win an entrance to Heaven; it will certainly be on nothing else. But, if, as you say, he is interested in my daughter, he is throwing away all chance of keeping Paradise."

"Do we not all do that?" said Jose dismally. "It is because a man cannot conceive of a Heaven without a woman in it. He thinks in spite of all experience to the contrary that she is what makes it Heaven."

"Yes, experience counts for nothing," Gallito sighed for himself and his brothers.

But if Seagreave sat silent and absorbed when he came to Gallito's cabin in the evening, it did not bother Pearl. She was an expert in such symptoms. Sometimes he talked to her in a rather constrained fashion, but for the most part he sat on the other side of the room, listening to Hugh's music.

One evening when he sat listening he suddenly lifted his eyes and gazed at the Pearl, who sat almost the length of the room away from him. The cabin was lighted only by the great log fire, and the leaping, ardent flames of the pine, mingled with the soft, glowing radiance of burning birch, invested the room and its occupants with that atmosphere of mystery and glamour, essential in flame-illuminated shadow. And Hugh was playing the music the masters dreamed in the twilight hours when silence and shadow permitted them, even wooed them to a more intimate revelation of the heart than the definite splendors of daylight inspired.

Beyond the zone of the firelight, the room was all in a warm gloom, rich and dim. Pearl and Hugh had gathered fir branches, even some young trees, and had placed them about the walls, and in the warmth their aromatic, delicious odor permeated and pervaded the cabin, and one discerning those half-defined branches might easily imagine that the walls stretched away into the dim forest.

Pearl lay back in an easy chair, her narrow, half-closed eyes on the leaping flames. The wind, low to-night, the wind of eternity which blows ever in the mountains, sang about the cabin and blended with Hugh's music like a faint violin obligato. But even in this soft twilight of blending and mingling and harmonizing, with pine branches above and beyond her and shadowed gloom about her, Pearl never for a moment seemed the spirit of the forest.

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With its dim depths for a background, she shone on it, as brilliant and distinct from it as a flashing jewel on the breast of a nun. Her crimson frock caught a deeper warmth from the firelight, her black hair shone like a bird's wing, the jewels on her fingers sent out sparkles of light and flame. As Saint Harry continued to gaze at her the forest with all its haunting, dreaming witchery vanished, the high invitation of the mountains, "Come ye apart," ceased to echo in his ears. The world environed, encompassed her; he seemed to discern the yearning of her spirit for it, the airy rush of her winged feet toward it; and yet her eyes, those eyes which sometimes held the look of having gazed for ages on time's mutations, were turned toward the desert. Then Seagreave's moment of vision passed and he turned to Hugh with an odd sinking of the heart.

Hugh had ceased to play and sat silent now on his piano stool with that motionless, concentrated air of his, as if listening to something afar.

"Hughie," said Seagreave softly, "what *are* you and your sister, anyway?"

Hugh laughed and, leaning his elbow on the keys, rested his cheek on his palm. "I am a little brother of the wind," he said. "I was just listening to it singing to me out there; and Pearl, well, Pearl is a daughter of fire."

"What is it that you hear that I don't?" asked Harry. "I listen to the wind, too, sometimes for hours, up there in my cabin; but it's only a falling, sighing thing to me, sometimes a rising, shrieking one. What is this gift of music?"

"I don't know," said Hugh simply, "but if you will wait a moment, I will play you the song the wind is singing through the pines to-night. It is just a little, sad one."

Again he sat immobile, listening for a while and then began to play so plaintive and wistful a melody that Harry felt the old sorrow wake and stir within his heart and demand a reckoning of the forgetful years. Not realizing that he did so, he arose and began to pace up and down the room, nor remembered where he was until he looked up to see Pearl watching him, surprise and even a slight curiosity upon her face.

"Forgive me," he said, stopping before her, "for walking up and down that way as if I were in my own cabin, but something in Hugh's music set me to dreaming."

"You didn't look as if they were happy dreams," she said.

"Didn't I?" he spoke as lightly as he could; then he changed the subject. "Do you know that the crust on the snow is thicker than it has been yet? How would you like to go out on your snow-shoes to-morrow morning?"

She looked her pleasure. "That will be fine," she cried eagerly.

She was up betimes the next day, anxious to see whether more snow had fallen during the night; but none had. To her joy, it was one of those brilliant mornings when the sky seems a dome of sapphire sparkles, and the crust of the snow with the sun on it is like white star-dust overlaid with gold. The radiance would have been unbearable had not the bare, black trees veiled the sky with their network of branches and twigs and the pines softened the snow with their shadows.

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Pearl had rapidly acquired proficiency in her new accomplishment, and she and Seagreave had covered several miles when, on their return, they paused to rest a bit in the little bower of stunted pines. Here Seagreave cut some branches from the trees for them to sit on and, gathering some dry, fallen boughs and cones, built a fire.

They enjoyed this a few moments in silence and then Pearl spoke. "Why," she asked with her usual directness, "why did you get up and walk up and down the room last night when Hughie was playing? What was it in his music that made you forget all of us and even, as you said, forget that you were not in your own cabin?"

"That was stupid of me and rude, too," he said compunctiously. "Something that he was playing called up so vivid a memory that I forgot everything."

There was a quick gleam in her eyes; she was resentful of memories that could make him forget her very presence, hers. "What was it you were thinking of?" she asked. Her voice was low.

He looked out over the snow before he answered. "A girl," he said, and cast another handful of pine cones upon the fire.

She did not speak nor move, and yet her whole being was instinct with a sudden tense attention. "Yes, a girl," she said insistently. "What was she like?" the words leaped from her, voicing themselves almost without her volition.

He sighed and appeared to speak with some effort. "It was long ago," he said. "She was like violets or white English roses."

"And did you love her?" she asked, that soft tenseness still in her voice, "and did she love you?"

"I suppose every man has his ideal of woman, perhaps unconsciously to himself, and she was mine."

He sighed again and she glanced quickly at him from the corners of her eyes with a half scornful smile upon her lips. She knew that she did not suggest violets, shy and fragrant and hidden under their own green leaves; neither was there anything in the mountains to suggest the gardens in which roses grew. But he had left the violets and English roses long ago, because of that spirit of restlessness within him, and finally he had come to these wild, savage mountains and was content here, where it was difficult even to picture the calm and repose of the gardens he had left. He had said that he did not know why he had come, but Pearl did. She never doubted it. It was the call of her heart across the world to him, seeking him, reaching him, drawing him to her.

"And does it make you unhappy to think of her now?" she asked still softly.

“No,” he said, “no, not now. But last night something in the music caused the years to drop away and I was back there again and she rose before me. Really, I felt her very presence. I saw her as plainly as I see you now.”

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Pearl rose and shook the snow from her cloak. "Forget it," she said scornfully. The little horse-shoe frown showed between her brows, and her eyes as she looked at him were full of a sparkling disdain. "That girl wasn't worth that," she snapped her fingers. "And here you've been loping over the globe for years, because she turned you down. I should think you'd feel like a fool." She spoke quite fearlessly, although Seagreave had thrown up his head and stood looking at her with a white face and compressed lips. "But that ain't the reason," she went on shrewdly. "I know men. You like to think you quit things because of the girl," she laughed that low, harsh, unpleasant laugh of hers. "You quit 'em because you got lazy, and anything like a responsibility was a bore. That's straight."

Without another glance at him, she sped down the hill, like an arrow shot from a bow.

CHAPTER XII

As that long, white winter slowly wore away there were many in the camp who, although they had endured the strain of a wearing monotony through many previous seasons, nevertheless suffered greatly from it; and, in consequence, as the clock of the year began to indicate spring an almost riotous joy was felt and expressed when it was announced through the camp that the Black Pearl had again consented to dance for them.

It was considered a truly fitting celebration of the fact that there had already been one great thaw, and, although there was every possibility of things freezing up again, yet nevertheless spring had at last loosed her hounds and they were hard on winter's traces. In fact, one belated train, after hours spent on the road, had succeeded in pushing through, an evidence that they all would soon be running with their accustomed, if rather erratic regularity, and there was naturally a tremendous excitement and jollification in the camp at this arrival of the first mail bearing news from the outside world.

The messages for Pearl included a letter from her mother and one from Bob Flick, but none from Hanson. Bob Flick announced that his patience was worn thin and that he would be up on the first train bearing passengers. Mrs. Gallito's letter was full of commiserations for her daughter on her enforced detention, and she evidently regarded the nature of that durance as particularly vile.

"Pearl, how you been standing it up in that God-forsaken hole where you can't even keep warm is what beats me. Seems to me I went to church once, oh, just for a lark, and the preacher talked about some plagues of Egypt, all different kinds, you know. It was real interesting. I always remembered it. But in looking back over plagues I've seen, the very worst of all was snow. I'm afraid, when I see you again, you'll be all skin

and bone and shadow. I do hope you won't be sick like poor Hanson. I had an awful sad letter from him; seems he took cold and's been at death's door."

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Pearl rustled the paper impatiently. She was not interested in this news. Hanson occupied her thoughts so little that she did not even pause to wonder how he was. The very sight of his name in the letter stirred a vague irritation in her. Absorbed in her love for Seagreave, Hanson had become to her as a forgotten episode.

However, her mother dropped the subject and took up the more interesting one of Lolita. "That bird certainly has mourned for you, Pearl. I guess she'd have just about pined away if it hadn't been for Bob Flick."

But Pearl was not the only recipient of letters from the outside world; all of the little group, with the exception of Jose, had received their quota, even Mrs. Nitschkan. But the bulk of the mail, which Gallito brought up from the village postoffice and gravely distributed, fell to Mrs. Thomas. Almost without exception, these envelopes were addressed in straggling, masculine characters which suggested painful effort and seemed to indicate that the writers were more used to the pick and shovel than to the pen. But although Mrs. Thomas had to spell out the contents of each missive with more or less difficulty, her giggles, blushes and occasional exclamations showed how much pleasure they afforded her.

Mrs. Nitschkan, however, after glancing carelessly at the large, yellow envelope which was addressed to her in a clerkly hand, cast it carelessly aside and went on assiduously cleaning and oiling her gun. But the sight of it aroused Mrs. Thomas's curiosity, and after glancing at it once or twice over the top of her own letters, she could not forbear to ask:

"Ain't you going to read your letter, Sadie?"

"Mebbe. Sometime. By an' by. When I get good an' ready," returned the gypsy indifferently and abstractedly, squinting with one eye down the barrel of her gun. "What do I want with letters? I got two bear an' a mountain lion before the snow flew."

Mrs. Thomas laid aside her letters for the moment, and, lifting a large pot of coffee from the stove, poured out a cupful for her friend and then one for herself. "Here, Sadie," she coaxed, "rest yourself with a cup of coffee. I'll set down the sugar and cream an' whilst you're drinking it, open your letter. Come now, do. Maybe it's from a gentleman."

"It sure is," replied Mrs. Nitschkan, laying her gun carefully across her knee, wiping her hands on the cloth with which she had been polishing it, and then dropping several lumps of sugar into the cup, she poured herself a liberal allowance of cream. "It's a bill for that double-j'inted, patent, electrical fishin' rod that I sent East for, clean to New York City, for a weddin' present for Celia."

Mrs. Thomas gave a faint, scornful laugh at the thought of this most incongruous gift for Mrs. Nitschkan's pretty, feminine daughter. "A fishin' rod for Celia!" she exclaimed, "when all she ever thinks about is cookin' an' sweepin' an' sewin' all day."

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"That's it," Mrs. Nitschkan radiated self-approbation and satisfaction. "It made a nice show at the weddin', didn't it? And it has sure been useful to me since."

But Mrs. Thomas had again absorbed herself in her correspondence, and it is doubtful if she heard these last words. "Say, Sadie," she cried presently, a ripple of joyous excitement in her voice, "listen here to what Willie Barker says, 'If you don't come back soon, I'm a-going to lay right down an' die, or maybe take my own life.'"

"Then you'll stay right on here," said Mrs. Nitschkan shortly but emphatically. "Such a chanst as that's not to be missed."

Mrs. Thomas pouted, "But, honest, can't we pretty soon leave these old prospects that you're a-nursin' along to salt an' get ready to palm off on some poor Easterner?"

The gypsy took a long draught of coffee, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. "Your ungratefulness'll strike in and probably kill you, Marthy Thomas. Here I burdened myself with you to save your life insurance and the nice little property Seth left you from a pack of wolves in the camp that's after them, an' not you, an' what thanks do I get? All these months I been workin' like the devil to convert you an' Jose, an' as far as either of you's concerned, I might a darned sight better have put in my time tryin' to save the soul of a flea. You couldn't even let a poor, God-forsaken robber like Jose alone. Don't you know that if you get a thousand husbands they'll all treat you as bad or worse'n Seth did?"

"He's an angel in heaven right now an' don't you dare say a word against him, Sadie Nitschkan," cried Mrs. Thomas defensively, "but he was a devil all the same."

"They'll all be devils," returned Mrs. Nitschkan fatalistically. "They's no man can stand seein' a feather pillow around all the time an' not biff it, especially when it can turn on a gallon of tears any time of the day or night."

Mrs. Thomas made no effort to refute this last aspersion. Instead, she began to weep loudly and unrestrainedly. "Bob Martin says in his letter that he hopes I'm havin' a pleasant time," she sobbed. "He don't know the loneliness, not to say the danger, of being snowed up in these mountains with a woman that ain't got no more feelin' than to skin you alive whenever she's a mind to. I ain't afraid of gentlemen, even husbands, but sometimes when you get to jawin' me, Sadie, with a gun in your hand, it makes my poor heart go like that, an' I crawl all over with goose-flesh."

Fortunately, the thaws continued, and if no great quantity of snow fell between now and then, the first passenger train was scheduled to run through on the day that Pearl would dance, but Bob Flick, by some method known to himself, had succeeded in making his journey on the engine, and thus arrived at Gallito's cabin several days before he was expected, looking a little more worn than usual and faintly anxious, an expression which

speedily disappeared as he saw the radiant health and spirits of Pearl. As for her, she was unfeignedly glad to see him.

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"I sure have worried a lot about you this winter, Pearl," he said to her that evening as they two sat a little apart from the rest, Gallito, Jose, Hugh and Seagreave, who all clustered about the fire, while Pearl, as usual, had drawn her chair within the warm gloom of the pine-scented shadow.

"Ain't you silly!" She looked up at him with her heart-shattering, adorable smile.

"I am always about you," he said. "You're all I think of, Pearl, night and day."

She patted his arm lightly. "I've always got you to depend on anyway, haven't I, Bob?" Her soft, lazy, sliding voice was itself a caress.

"You sure have. Anytime, anywhere. No matter what happens, I can't ever change, Pearl. Lord! You ought to know that by this time."

"Maybe I do, Bob, and maybe I like knowing it."

"I hope you do, but it wouldn't make any difference whether you did or didn't. I got to love you. I guess the cards fell that way for me before I was born and nothing can ever change that layout."

"You've never failed me yet, Bob."

"And never will. Oh, Pearl, don't you, can't you see your way to marrying me?"

She stirred restlessly, a faintly troubled look shadowing her face. "There's so many of me, and I never know what I'm going to do or how I'm going to feel. I'd just be bound to make you miserable."

"It wouldn't be the first time," he said a little sadly. "But you see I know you. I ain't got any mistaken notions about you, and I love you more than any other man in this life'll ever do, Pearl."

Again she moved and looked at him as if his words had roused in her some regret. "I guess that's so; but—it wouldn't be a square deal."

"I'll tend to that," he urged, "and you'll just have to know that I'm always loving you, no matter what's to pay."

"I—" she began, but was interrupted by Jose, who bowed low before her.

"Senorita," grandiosely, "the ladies and your father beg that, unworthy as I am to dance on the same floor as you, that yet, as a compliment to Mr. Flick, we go through some of the Spanish dances together."

Pearl assented and half rose, but Flick laid a detaining hand on her sleeve. "She will in a minute," he said. "Run along now, Jose, me and Miss Gallito's got something to talk over." He bent close to her again. "Pearl," there was the faintest shake in his voice, "what are you going to tell me, now?"

"Oh, Bob," the regret was in her voice now, "I wish, I wish you didn't feel that way. I love you more than 'most anybody in the world—but not that way. And—and I don't want to lose your love for me. I like to know it's there. I sort of lean up against it."

He waited a moment or two before answering her, and then his voice was as steady as ever. "You can always come back to my love for you. The stars can fall out of the sky and the mountains slide down, but my love for you can't change, Pearl. It's fixed and steady and forever."

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"Dear old Bob," she touched his cheek as she passed him with a light caress and went on into the room beyond to get her dancing slippers.

It was later that evening that Jose began his unceasing importunities to see Pearl dance in the town hall. A stern and surprised veto of this plan was his immediate answer. But Jose was the most convincing and plausible of pleaders.

"But, Gallito," he cried almost piteously, "since Mrs. Nitschkan has watched my manners I have been like an angel. No more does the camp say that this hill is haunted, you know that."

"I told you what you'd get if you didn't stop hootin' at people who was passin'," remarked Mrs. Nitschkan, knocking the ashes from her pipe out on the hearth and then carefully refilling it. "But you're none so good now that you need brag. I don't know that playin' monkey tricks to frighten folks ain't just as good a way to put in the time as sittin' 'round holdin' hands with Marthy Thomas."

"Sadie!" Mrs. Thomas drew forth her handkerchief and prepared to shed the ready tear. "How you can have the heart to talk so to a woman that ain't buried her husband twelve months! Mr. Jose ain't even thought of takin' the liberties you sit there accusin' him of. If I had a live husband to pectect me, you wouldn't dare treat me like what you do. Whenever you miss a shot, or get fooled on a prospect, or get some money won away from you, you come back to our little cabin an' sit lookin' at me like you was a wolf an' talkin' like you was a she-bear. And—and it's darned hard, that's what it is."

"If you were a man, Nitschkan," Jose drew himself up truculently, "you would indeed answer for such speeches, and you would not have converted me so easily, either. I have no fear of men." This was quite true, he had not, but his eye quailed and drooped before the steady gaze of Mrs. Nitschkan.

"Come, come," said Gallito peremptorily, "I am glad to see you all each evening about my fireside, but I will have no arguing nor quarreling, understand that. A man's house is his castle."

Jose diplomatically dropped the subject, which did not mean that he had abandoned his plan for one moment. He merely waited a more convenient season. His strongest arguments were that it was not an infrequent occurrence for Gallito to entertain guests of his own nationality in his mountain cabin. "And my hair!" cried Jose pathetically. "It would be a crown of glory to Nitschkan if she had it; but it is a shame to me, a man, to have to wear it so long. No one in the camp could possibly know that I have ears."

Gallito at first absolutely refused to listen to him, but so adroitly did Jose bring up the subject every evening that he began to make some impression on his stern jailer. He was careful, though, not to mention his hopes until near midnight, when Gallito's

normally harsh mood was greatly softened not only by winning the final game, which Jose invariably permitted now, but also by the mellowing influence of his bland, old cognac. Then Gallito would embark on an argument, determined to convince Jose of the wild folly of his desire.

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Their debate continued for several evenings and finally ended, as Jose meant it should, in Gallito giving a reluctant consent, under certain conditions which he insisted should be rigidly carried out.

He admitted that it was unlikely that any suspicion would be aroused in the village. Those who saw the party enter the hall would, if they thought about the matter at all, take it for granted that the stranger was some friend of Bob Flick's who had come up with him on the train. But two conditions Gallito insisted upon: the first, that Jose was to turn the collar of his heavy overcoat high up about his face and draw his hat low over his brows, and the second was that he was only to be permitted to observe the dancing from behind the curtain of the little recess at the end of the hall which served Pearl as a dressing room. He might gaze his fill through the peep-hole there, but under no circumstances was he to be seen in the body of the hall. But these conditions, as Gallito pointed out, were entirely dependent on Pearl. It was a question whether she would tolerate Jose for a whole evening in her dressing room.

At first she flatly refused to do so and turned a persistently deaf ear to Jose's pleading. She had to slip out of one frock and into another at least three times. There would not be room with Jose sitting there.

"But, dear Senorita, I will not be sitting there," he cried. "When the moment comes that you change your frock I will be standing with my face to the wall and my eyes covered with my hands."

"I should hope so," murmured Mrs. Thomas, who was present.

But Pearl had another reason for not wishing to be alone with Jose upon this occasion. She meant to wear her emeralds, and she was not so anxious that the light-fingered bandit should have so near a view of them. When she mentioned this to Bob Flick and her father, however, they laughed at her fears. Not that they trusted Jose, but, as they pointed out, no matter how much he might be tempted by the jewels, there was no possible way for him to escape with them. He was clever enough to realize this, therefore his resistance to temptation under trying circumstances might be taken for granted. So Pearl at last gave her reluctant consent.

Upon the afternoon of the day that Pearl was to dance Hughie brought the news that the first train bearing passengers had arrived, hours late, nearer six o'clock in the evening, than twelve, noon, when it was due; but nevertheless it had made the journey. It brought several people, but no one seemed to know who they were.

"It is a question," said Gallito, squinting his eyes at the sky, "whether they will get back as easily as they came. See, the snow is again beginning to fall."

It was still snowing as the entire party, men and women, drove down the hill to the town hall. As there was not room for all in the mountain wagon, Seagreave again drove Pearl down in his cart.

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They arrived early, as Gallito meant they should, and to his satisfaction found almost nobody in the hall, which was yet but dimly lighted.

Pearl immediately vanished into her dressing room, with Jose carrying the case containing her make-up, changes of costume, slippers, *etc.*, close behind her.

Mrs. Nitschkan and Mrs. Thomas, Flick, Gallito and Seagreave selected their seats in the front row and, sitting down, began a discussion of certain mining matters while the house gradually filled. This took but a few moments. The inhabitants of Colina were too keen for a little diversion after the winter famine of amusement to stand upon the order of their coming. They came at once, and almost in a body.

Pearl was equally prompt, ready to begin upon the stroke of the hour, and as the time approached Hughie could be heard running his fingers over the keys, although the curtains had not yet been drawn back. By this time there was no longer standing room in the hall.

Mrs. Nitschkan was still deep in a mining discussion. "Who should I run across yesterday," she was saying, "but the Thompson boys. They just took a lease on the 'Pennyroyal,' you know, and they wanted me to go up and look it over. Well, I know, and you know, Gallito, the history of that mine from 'way back. 'She's got a bad name, boys,' I says, 'a bad name.' Well, I went through some of the new drifts with 'em, and I chipped off some specimens." She pulled two or three of these from her coat pocket and passed them over to the men. "They sure look mighty good to me," she chuckled. "The truth of the matter is that that mine ain't never been worked right. We can knock it so skilful, though, Gallito, that the boys'll be glad to let us have it for 'most nothing. Jus' look 'round the hall, Bob, an' see if you can see 'em here to-night."

To oblige her he turned in his leisurely fashion and began to scan the audience.

Flick had never been known to start; that was a part of his training. If a cannon had been fired off close to his ear, the narrowest observer could not have discerned the twitch of a muscle; neither would he have exhibited the faintest change of expression; training again. Now, his face was quite as impassive as usual. His mild, indifferent glance continued to rove over the house, noting with the accuracy of an adding machine certain men who either stood or sat in different parts of the house. Presently he encountered the gaze of Hanson, who was sitting almost directly opposite to him and who was evidently trying to attract his attention.

Eye held eye. On Hanson's face was unconcealed triumph, a cynical exultation. He nodded with smiling insolence, but Flick regarded him with a blank stare of non-recognition for a moment or so and then turned indifferently away. It was a matter of considerable surprise to those who bent watchful eyes on him from various parts of the hall that he did not, as far as they could see, speak either to Gallito or Seagreave.

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In any event, he would have had but little time for consultation with them, for almost immediately the curtains were drawn aside, Hugh began to play, and Pearl made her appearance. That was the signal for applause as prolonged as it was enthusiastic. She was like a vision of the spring so eagerly awaited by these prisoners of winter. Her frock, which fell to her ankles, was of some white, silky, soft material and was deeply bordered with silver; her sleeves were of silver and there was a touch of silver on the bodice. Her emeralds gleamed like green fire against her bare white throat and as she danced a froth of rose-colored petticoat was visible, foaming above her ankles.

To all those eager, watching people Pearl seemed truly the incarnation of May in all its glory and shimmer, and Hughie's music was like the silver, fluting notes of her insistent heralds proclaiming the south wind, and bird calls and murmuring rivulets of melting snow. And when she ceased and they finally permitted her to withdraw before dancing again it was almost with a shock that they realized that the snow was still falling outside.

It was then that Bob Flick turned at last to his two companions. "You've seen?" was his brief, low-voiced comment. Both men nodded.

"Every deputy in the county here," said Seagreave in as low a voice as the one Flick had used. "No exits for us anywhere. The sheriff has them well stationed."

"Thank God, I came," muttered Gallito, "but I wish we knew their plan."

"That's easy," said Flick. "Hanson's so sure that he's won the game before it's played that he's ready to tell any one that will listen to him how it all happened, before it's begun. I guess I'll go over and talk to him a little before Pearl comes on again."

He rose to his tall, languid height and sauntered in his laziest fashion across the floor.

"Say, stranger," he began, resting his elbow on the back of a chair next Hanson, and leaning his head on his hand, "haven't we met before. It seemed to me a few moments ago when I caught your eye that your face was more or less familiar."

"Well, now ain't that strange!" exclaimed Hanson in affected surprise. "But I just had a sort of an idea that you'd recognize me to-night in spite of my disguise. Yes, now you ask me, let me tell you, since your memory is so poor, that we have met once or twice before, but it ain't likely that we ever will again. Sad," he shook his head and sighed heavily, "I hate to disappoint you by telling you so, but, someway, I got that idea firmly fixed in my head."

"Is that so?" said Flick politely. "Well, maybe you're right. It does kind of look so from the layout you've got here. How are you going to play it, anyway? Both ends to the middle, I suppose."

“Correct,” returned Hanson blithely. “We lined up outside to watch you when you got out of the wagon. If you hadn’t brought him with you we wouldn’t have disturbed you during the entertainment; just gone up the hill and got him and then rounded the rest of you up afterward. But you were kind enough to save us that trouble.”

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"Don't mention it," drawled Flick; "but I don't just sabe why you didn't take us when we drove up. You had the whole bunch of us then."

"We're taking no chances," Hanson winked knowingly. "The boys up here have been having a pretty long, dull winter, and such a move on our part might have given them the idea that we were trying to break up their fun this evening, which they wouldn't have stood for. Then, old Gallito's popular here, God knows why, and if he'd asked the boys to stand by him and they saw a chance of some excitement, why, we'd have had an unnecessary mix-up. See? Not but what we'd have been a good deal more than equal to any scrap they could have put up even if led by you and old Gallito, but the sheriff didn't want any trouble of that kind when it was so easy to avoid it."

"Good sense," commended Flick, "but are you so sure you've entirely side-stepped that danger? There's after-the-ball-is-over still to be considered."

"Trust old uncle wiseacre over there for that," said Hanson vaingloriously, and nodding as he spoke toward the sheriff, who leaned big and calm and watchful against the door at the back of the room. "He's a born general. The plan, son, can't be beat. They know he's in the Pearl's dressing room and they got the building well surrounded on the outside. I guess it's a scheme that even such crafty crooks as Gallito and—" He paused and quailed a little under Flick's steady regard, the "*you*" he had meant to say died on his lips. From neither victor nor victim did Bob Flick ever permit a familiarity. "Yes, there's no getaway possible," he substituted hastily. "It'd be foolish of you boys to try and put up a fight."

"I guess you're right," agreed Flick. "I guess we're too old and stiff and tired to draw our guns unless there's a chance for us, anyway." Flick rose with his usual languor. "Well, so long Mr.— your name sure does escape me." He strolled back to his companions, resuming his seat in his usual unhurried and indifferent way. The curtains had not yet parted, so he took occasion to relate to Gallito and Seagreave the result of his conversation with Hanson, careless of the fact that the latter sat watching them, gloating with malicious amusement over the spectacle of the three of them so hopelessly entangled in the net and yet engaging in the futile discussion of methods of escape.

As Bob Flick whispered the scheme to the two men the gloom deepened on Gallito's face. It seemed to him too comprehensive and efficacious to evade. But Harry did not share his depression. As he listened his face changed and set. In his eyes was a flash like sunlight on steel. He was the old Seagreave again whom Jose had once described to Gallito. The Seagreave whose mind worked with lightning rapidity, who ventured anything, as gay and invincible he fought in the last ditch, his back to the wall and all the odds against him.

"I've got an idea," he said. "It may not work, but it's a chance." He bent forward and in a rapid whisper outlined his plan for them. "I wonder," he said, "if they'd nab me if I

started to go over and talk to Hughie? Do you suppose they would permit me a word with him?"

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Flick laughed. "Any number of them," he said. "If the rats they've caught want to run around in the trap, what's that to them?"

Seagreave had no opportunity to carry out his plan just then, for Hugh began to play and Pearl made her second appearance. The very sight of her, their vision of spring, who seemed to have sped up from the valley far below and transformed the dark and dreary winter, brought the house to its feet and sent a storm of applause ringing to the rafters.

But she was spring no longer. In this dance of the seasons she was giving them she now typified summer, splendid and glowing. Her gown was a vivid green, spangled with gold and wreathed in roses. A festoon of pink and crimson flowers lay about her neck, its long ends falling almost to the foot of her frock, and her hair was crowned with roses. And her dancing had changed. It was no longer the springtime she portrayed, with all her plastic grace of motion, symbolizing its delicate evanescence with arch hesitations and fugitive advances, and all the playful joyousness of youth.

On this second appearance she was dancing the summer and dancing it with a passionate zest and spirit, alternated with enchanting languors. When at last she ceased it seemed as if the encores which drew her back on the stage again and again would never end.

And the sheriff, noting this, stirred uneasily and whispered to a grizzled companion: "I wish this was over, Lord, I do! Things don't look quite so dead sure as they did. Gosh! She's got 'em all right in the hollow of her hand."

"It's her you got to reckon with," returned the companion gloomily. "This blasted long winter's got the boys right on edge. They're jus' spoiling for some deviltry or other, and if she comes out in front of the curtain and makes an appeal to 'em, why, there'll be one of the meanest scraps that's been seen in the mountains for some time."

"You bet," agreed the sheriff. "What do you suppose that Seagreave's chinning Hughie about."

"God knows!" returned his pessimistic companion. "Nothing that's going to help us any, you can stake your bottom dime on that. Here she comes again, and you and me's just as big fools about her as the rest if we'd let ourselves be."

This time Pearl danced the autumn, a vision of crimson and gold, with grape leaves wreathing her black hair. If Hugh had conveyed to her any disturbing news during the intermission, she showed no trace of it in her dancing, and if she had stirred her audience to impassioned enthusiasm before, it was unlimited, almost frantic now. She was the flame of autumn upon the mountain hillsides, a torch burning with the joy of life and flinging her gay, defiant splendor in the menacing face of winter. Before she had

finished the house was on its feet, shouting and clapping and refusing to let her leave the stage.

“She’s gone to their heads worse’n wine,” muttered the sheriff. “I suppose it’s now she’s goin’ to ask ’em to stand by her, an’ with leaders like Gallito an’ Bob Flick an’ Harry Seagreave to line ’em up an’ carry things with a rush, where in hell are we?”

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But the dramatic appeal he had anticipated was not made. The Pearl, after one recall after another, had thrown a final kiss to her appreciative audience, had retired to her dressing room and positively refused to appear again.

The sheriff sat down limply for a moment. "I'm beat," he said to the man who had shared his fears, "just beat. The Lord is sure on our side to-night. Gosh! They had the whole thing in their own hands and didn't know it. Well, the rest is pie. All we got to do is to take 'em all nice an' quiet now, and probably not a gun drawn." He moved about giving his orders to different men about the hall.

Slowly the good-humored, laughing crowd filed out. The presence of the sheriff and the various deputies aroused no suspicion. It was but natural that any one who could get there from the surrounding camps should be present.

About half of the people had passed through the narrow door when Pearl made her appearance at the back of the hall. She had thrust her arms into a long, fur-lined crimson cloak, but it fell open from the neck down, revealing her crimson and gold frock and gleaming emeralds. A black lace mantilla was thrown over her head and half over her face, showing only her sparkling eyes. She began taking various gay, little steps, still full of that joy of movement which had possessed her all evening.

Those who remained in the hall began to laugh and applaud. She danced a moment in response to it, and then, pausing, suddenly bowed low and shook her head definitely. Then she wrapped her cloak closely about her, turning up its wide, fur-lined collar, and, linking her arm with Hughie's, came down the room with him still taking those irrepressible little steps. Just as she reached the door she whisked a handkerchief from a pocket in her cloak and held it to her nose. A waft of exquisite perfume filled the air, but the eyes of the two deputies who guarded the door were fixed with an almost stunned astonishment upon the jewels which covered her bare hands.

The sheriff had given orders that the Pearl and Hughie, Mrs. Thomas and Mrs. Nitschkan were to be allowed to pass, were, in fact, to be got out of the hall just as quickly as possible; but these orders had not been clearly understood and the two deputies at the door halted Pearl, Hughie and Mrs. Thomas, who was close to them.

Before either Pearl or Hughie could protest Seagreave, who had been about ten feet behind them, was at their side. "Let them pass," he said. "Those are your orders."

"I hadn't heard it," said the other man, "and I'm not taking my orders from you."

But the words were scarcely out of his mouth before Seagreave's arm, that "left" which had floored many an opponent in the old days of his middle-weight championship, shot out in a hook, lightning-like, to the right side of the jaw of the nearest deputy. The man reeled under that impact and went crashing over against his companion, bringing them

both in a heap to the floor. At the same moment Pearl, grasping Hughie's arm, pulled him about the two who lay half stunned and was out of the door like a flash.

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Mrs. Thomas, who had been taken into the confidence of the group only so far as to have it impressed upon her that she uttered the word Jose at her peril, and that the bandit's name was now Pedro, had not been quick enough to follow Pearl and Hugh in their flight through the door and now stood helplessly gazing about her, confused, almost dazed, by the whole situation.

The sheriff, whose attention had meanwhile been occupied by Mrs. Nitschkan, who was creating a lusty disturbance in the middle of the floor, ran forward, shouting orders. "Let 'em go, I tell you!" to those who would have pursued the Pearl. "Where's your heads? I told you that this hall had got to be cleared, and cleared quick, of the women. As for you, Seagreave," catching Harry by the arm, "don't try to wriggle through that door. You're under arrest."

"Look here, sheriff, it's snowing heavily. Hugh's blind, as you know, and can't possibly drive my horse up the hill. I drove Miss Gallito down in my cart and was to drive her back. You know there's no earthly way for me to escape, so if you let me drive those two up the hill, I'll either come back here or you can get me in my cabin."

"So that's your game, son!" the sheriff smiled cynically. "To stir the boys up now. It's too late. They're all safe home, with their boots off, and their wives talkin' to them. Even the girl couldn't make 'em forget the honor of capturing Crop-eared Jose here in Colina, so run along, run along. The girl's too pretty to be hurt with a frisky horse. My Lord!" striding down the hall again, "you fools stop scrapping with that termagant and put her out, put her out, I say."

"Try it yourself," called Nitschkan tauntingly, enjoying to the full her "hour of glorious strife," and resisting with perfect ease the vague and chivalrous efforts of half a dozen deputies to hustle her from the hall. "Any more of you try to mix it up with me and I'll put you all down for the count."

"Oh, Sadie, Sadie," cried Mrs. Thomas, running down the hall toward her friend, "it do beat the dogs how you act. These gentlemen'll think you're no lady. Do behave more refined."

But Mrs. Nitschkan paid no heed to her pleadings. "Who's this Jose you're all talking about?" she cried. "I know Pedro, but no Jose."

Then she wasted no more breath in words, but gave herself strictly to the business of the moment, prolonging the straggle far beyond the patience of the sheriff and his men. But ultimately numbers prevailed, and, although she resisted to the last moment, giving no quarter and asking none, she was finally landed outside and the door locked upon her.

Swearing volubly, the sheriff turned his attention to that far end of the hall where the deputies who had not been engaged in the struggle with Mrs. Nitschkan stood guard over Gallito and Flick, who had ranged themselves before the crimson curtain of Pearl's dressing room. Two men, three, counting Jose behind the curtain, against at least twenty! Hanson, from the back of the hall, yielded to his inclination to laugh.

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"They lined up just as I expected," muttered the sheriff as he advanced down the room, "and it's a lot of good it's going to do them. Say," he called to Flick and Gallito, "it ain't no use drawing your guns, boys. I guess you two old hands got sense enough to see that. So all you got to do is to hand over the prisoner. We'll tend to the rest of you later."

"I guess you're all right"—Bob Flick's soft voice had a carrying quality which caused his words to be heard all over the hall—"but we all, Gallito and myself here, feel kind of puzzled. Of course, we see right from the first what the game was and that you were after us, but we ain't wise yet."

[Illustration: "There stood the Black Pearl alone."]

"Is that so?" sneered the sheriff. "Well, you soon will be. You step aside from that curtain, and, Bob Flick, my men have orders to wing you and Gallito both the minute you even start to throw your hands back."

Gallito shrugged his shoulders and threw up his hands and Flick laughingly waved his in the air.

"I guess you're right there, Bill," he said. "You sure got the argument of numbers. But say, boys, honest, what bug you all got in your heads? You see in this land of the free you can't subject me and my friend Gallito to such indignities as you're a heaping on us. As far as I can make out, you're only laying up trouble for yourself, and also"—here there rang a peculiarly menacing note through his soft, southern voice—"if I'm correct, you're accusing Miss Pearl Gallito of being a suspicious character, and I'm assuring you now, boys, that either in the desert or here in the mountains that that's the sort of thing you've got to answer for."

"Stop your kidding, Bob," said the sheriff, impatiently. He took a rapid stride forward and with one quick sweep of the arm ripped back the curtain.

Then he fell back staring, dumb with surprise. For there stood the Black Pearl alone, a man's coat buttoned across her bare chest, and beneath it the froth of her rose-colored silk petticoats. She stood nonchalantly enough, her head thrown back, her hands on her hips, surveying the group of men with a quick, disdainful smile, and then laughed insolently across them at Hanson.

"My Lord!" cried the sheriff, recovering himself, "how did you get here? Why, you just went out of the door."

"Gee! Jose dressed up in her clothes and made a getaway," called a shrill voice from the rear.

The sheriff swore audibly and violently as he ran to the door. “Here, three of you boys,” he ordered, “stay here and hold these prisoners. It ain’t ten minutes since the others left and there’s no chance on earth for ’em to escape. We’ll have ’em before you know it. Come on, the rest of you.”

CHAPTER XIII

The morning dawned, but the Sheriff and his aids, their numbers considerably increased by the various masculine inhabitants of Colina who had joyously proffered their assistance—welcoming anything that promised a little excitement after the wearing monotony of the winter—were still seeking Jose, who seemed to have vanished in some manner only to be explained as miraculous.

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Gallito, Bob Flick, Pearl and Hugh, Mrs. Nitschkan and Mrs. Thomas had all been taken to the village hotel and were there under guard, while Seagreave, also under guard, was permitted to remain temporarily, at least, in his cabin.

The reason for this was that the sheriff was beginning to turn over certain rather vexing questions in his mind. Suppose, for instance, Jose should really have made his escape, impossible as that feat appeared, what definite, tangible proof had he that the crop-eared bandit had really been harbored by Gallito? Only some vague statements made by a woman to Hanson, a woman who thought that she had overheard a conversation or several conversations between Gallito and Bob Flick. There had undoubtedly been some one, some one whose interest it was not to be caught, as the events of the previous night showed, but the explanation they had all given, Flick, Gallito, Hugh, Seagreave and the women, had struck the sheriff as extremely plausible, far more plausible, in fact, than Hanson's story that Crop-eared Jose had been secreted for months at a time in Gallito's cabin.

The explanation which Gallito and all of his group had given was this. A younger brother of Gallito, Pedro by name, had been visiting him for some time. This youth had led a somewhat irregular life both in Spain and in this country, and had become involved in several more or less serious affairs; more, so Gallito averred, from a certain wildness and recklessness of nature than from any criminal instincts. Several of his companions had been arrested and, fearing that he would be also, he had fled to Colina and begged Gallito to shelter him until it was safe for him to go to work in one of the mines.

The night before he had been very anxious to see Pearl dance in public, and, not daring to sit in the audience for fear of being recognized by some chance wayfarer, he had gained Pearl's consent to watch the entertainment from the safe seclusion of her dressing room.

Both Flick and Seagreave, who were in Gallito's confidence, believed that the boy's fears were greatly exaggerated, but when they saw the sheriff and all of his deputies in the hall their curiosity was aroused. Flick had then gone over to speak to Hanson and Hanson's conversation had convinced him that Pedro was really in danger and would be arrested before the evening was over. They then devised the plan of having him escape in Pearl's dancing dress and long cloak, meaning to drive him up the hill and let him take his chances of eluding his would-be captors in the forest surrounding Gallito's cabin. But he had slipped out of the cart a short distance up the hill. Seagreave believed that there were a pair of snow-shoes in the bottom of the cart, which had disappeared. That was all any of them could say.

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But when Seagreave pointed out to the sheriff that if no one remained in either his or Gallito's cabin, it was extremely likely that both dwellings would be looted before nightfall, also that without the fires made and kept up the provisions would freeze and that with a guard over him, he would be as easy to lay hands on as if he were down at the hotel with the rest, the sheriff gravely considered the matter and was disposed to yield the point. As Seagreave remarked, he certainly had not mastered the art of flying and he knew no other way by which he might escape. "Poor Pedro!" he sighed.

"You bet it's poor Pedro," said the sheriff grimly. "Why, you know as well as I do, Seagreave, that there ain't no way on God's green earth for that boy to make a getaway. Of course, he's given us a lot of bother, what with that damned snow falling again last night and covering up any tracks he might make, but we're bound to get him. Why, a little army, if it had enough ammunition, could hold Colina against the world. When you got a camp that's surrounded by canons about a thousand foot deep, how you going to get into it, if the folks inside don't want you? Now, take that, boy! How's he going to strike the main roads and the bridges in the dead of night, especially when the bridges is all so covered over with drifts that you can't see 'em by day? And, anyway, the crust of the snow won't hold him in lots of places. 'Course he may flounder 'round some, but there's no possible chance for him, and I'm thinking that the coyotes'll get him before we do."

To this Seagreave agreed, and after the sheriff had further relieved his feelings by some vitriolic comments upon Hanson, he granted him permission to look after the two cabins, and indifferently ordered the deputy in charge to go down the hill and get his breakfast at the hotel, remarking with rough humor that he'd leave Seagreave the prisoner of the mountain peaks and he guessed they'd keep him safe all right.

So the two men, their appetites sharpened by a night spent in searching for the fugitive, took their way down toward the village, and it was not long thereafter that Pearl, having secured permission to go up to the cabin and make some changes in her clothing, wearily climbed the hill. The lacks in her costume had been temporarily supplied by the inn-keeper's wife, but these makeshifts irked her fastidious spirit.

She had suggested that Mrs. Nitschkan and Mrs. Thomas go with her, but they were too thoroughly enjoying the limelight in which they found themselves to consider trudging up to their isolated cabin. Mrs. Thomas, in a pink glow of excitement, cooed and smiled and fluttered her lashes at half a dozen admirers, while Mrs. Nitschkan recounted to an interested group just where and how she had shot her bears.

"Say, have you took in the sheriff?" Mrs. Thomas found occasion to whisper to Mrs. Nitschkan. "He's an awful good looking, an' I think he got around that hall so stylish last night."



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"What eyes he's got ain't for you," answered the gypsy cruelly. "He's kept his lamps steady on Pearl."

"That's all you know about it," returned Mrs. Thomas with some spirit. "He sat beside me at the table this morning and squeezed my hand twice when I passed him the flap-jacks. He's a real man, he is, an' likes a woman to be a woman, an' not a grizzly bear like you or a black panther like that Pearl."

Pearl's progress up the hill was necessarily slow. The wagons had cut the snow into great ruts which made walking difficult, and where it was smoother it was exceedingly slippery. But her weariness soon vanished under the stimulus of the fresh morning air. Even the exertion of dancing the evening before and the night of excitement which followed had left no trace. She was, indeed, a tireless creature and supple as a whalebone. So, after a few moments' exercise in the exhilaratingly pure air, the sparkle returned to her eye, the color to her cheek, and her step had regained its usual light buoyancy.

Although March had come with its thaws, there was no suggestion of spring in the landscape. From the white, monotonous expanse of snow rose bleak, skeleton shapes of trees lifting bare, black boughs to the snow-sodden clouds. Upon either side of the road lay a forest of desolation—varied only by the sad, dull green of the wind-blown pines—which stretched away and away until it became a mere blue shadow as unsubstantial as smoke on the mountain horizon; and yet spring, still invisible and to be denied by the doubting, was in the air, with all its soft intimations of bud and blossom and joyous life; and spring was in Pearl's heart as she hastened up the hill toward Seagreave. It brushed her cheek like a caress, it touched her lips like a song.

When she was about a quarter of a mile up from the village she crossed a little bridge which spanned a deep and narrow crevasse, a gash which cleft the great mountain to its foundation. Pearl lingered here a moment to rest, and, leaning her arms on the railing, looked down curiously into the mysterious depths so far below.

The white walls of the sharp, irregular declivity reflected many cold, prismatic lights, and down, far down where the eye could no longer distinguish shapes and outlines, there lay a shadow like steam from some vast, subterranean cauldron, blue, dense, impenetrable. It fascinated Pearl and she stood there trying to pierce the depths with her eye, until at last, recalled to herself by the chill in the wind, she again turned and hastened up the hill. But before seeking Seagreave and asking him to share his breakfast with her, she followed the instincts of her inherent and ineradicable coquetry and, stopping at her father's cabin, made a toilet, slipping into one of her own gowns and rearranging her hair. Then, throwing a long cape about her and adjusting her mantilla, she closed the door behind her and turned into the narrow trail which

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led at sharp right angles to the road to Saint Harry's cabin. It was, Pearl reflected, almost like walking through the tunnel of a mine; the snow walls on either side of her were as high as her head. Occasionally the green fringes of a pine branch tapped her cheek sharply with their rusty needles. Then the tunnel widened to a little clearing where stood the cabin, picturesque with the lichened bark of the trees on the rough-hewn logs.

Seagreave had evidently seen her coming, for before she lifted her hand to knock he threw open the door. "Ah," he cried, a touch of concern in his voice, "I was just going down to the other cabin to make up the fires before you came. If you stopped there you must have found it cold, and you did stop," his quick eye noting the change she had effected in her costume.

"Yes," she smiled, "they wouldn't let me come up the hill in Jose's coat and my rose petticoats, and I felt like a miner in the clothes they lent me." She had entered the cabin and had taken the chair he had pushed up near the crackling, blazing fire of logs which he had just finished building to his satisfaction. The bond of sympathy between Seagreave and Jose was probably that they both performed all manual tasks with a sort of beautiful precision. Gallito had characterized Harry's cabin as the cell of a monk. It was indeed simple and plain to austerity, and yet it possessed the beauty of a prevailing order and harmony. Shelves his own hands had made lined the rough walls and were filled with books; beside the wide fireplace was an open cupboard, displaying his small and shining store of cooking utensils. For the rest a table or two and a few chairs were all the room contained.

It was the first time Pearl had ever been in the cabin, and, although she maintained the graceful languor of her pose, lying back a little wearily in her chair, yet her narrow, gleaming eyes pierced every corner of the room, with avid eagerness absorbing the whole, and then returning for a closer and more penetrating study of details, as if demanding from this room where he lived and thought a comprehensive revelation of him, a key to that remote, uncharted self which still evaded her.

Seagreave himself, whose visible presence was, for the time, outside the field of her conjecture, was busy preparing her breakfast, and now, after laying the cloth, he placed a chair for her at the table and announced that everything was ready. He seated himself opposite her and Pearl's heart thrilled at the prospect of this intimate *tete-a-tete*, the color rose on her cheek, her lashes trembled and fell.

"Where's Jose?" she said hastily, to cover her slight, unusual embarrassment. "Tell me quick how you managed it. Neither Bob nor Pop could tell me because someone was always with us."

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"Ah," he said, "the gods were with us, but it was a wild chance, I assure you. Fortunately, it was still snowing. Hugh and Jose were already in the cart and everyone else had hastened home as fast as he or she could go. The boys would not have waited for me if I had not dashed out just when I did, and I was glad enough to escape, for I was afraid they would make some mistake in the road, Hugh not being able to see, and Jose familiar with the village only through our description of it. I wasted no time in jumping into the cart and then drove like Jehu to the Mont d'Or, fortunately on our way up the hill."

"The Mont d'Or!" she interjected in surprise. "But why did you stop there?"

He shrugged his shoulders significantly. "It is Jose's shelter. He had the keys of the engine room. Your father had sent them to him, and with them he let himself in, and then locked the door behind him. We got a fair start, of course, but it was only a few moments after we reached here that three or four of the deputies were on our heels."

"Ah," she cried, "they thought you had driven him here."

"Naturally, and it is unnecessary to say that they spent several hours in searching, not only this cabin, but your father's and Mrs. Nitschkan's to boot, and also the stable yonder." He pointed to a little shed farther up the hill where he kept his horse and cart. He held out his coffee cup for her to refill and laughed heartily. "I have no doubt that they will return at intervals during the day to see if there isn't some tree-top or ledge of rock that they may have overlooked; but at present they are too busy exploring every nook and cranny of the various mines, especially the Mont d'Or."

She put down the coffee pot with a clatter and threw herself back in her chair with a gesture of intense disappointment. "Then surely they will find Jose!" she cried.

"Oh, you do not know," he exclaimed. "Wait; it was stupid of me not to have explained. Your father is a wonderful man. He overlooks nothing. He foresaw that in spite of all precautions, Jose—and other friends of his," there was a trace of hesitation in his tones in speaking to her of her father's chosen companions, "might be trapped here in the winter time when they could not escape over the one or two secret trails which he knows and which he has shown Jose. So, long ago, working secretly and overtime in the Mont d'Or, he hollowed out a small chamber. It is above one of the unworked stopes and its entrance defies detection."

"But are you sure?" she interjected earnestly. "Have you seen it yourself?"

"Yes, I was with Jose the first time Gallito showed it to him. Then he, your father, took us over the other parts of the mine and brought us back to the same spot to see if we could discover the hiding place for ourselves. I assure you we could not. Neither Jose nor myself liked being baffled in that way, for it seemed to us that we went over every

inch of the ground, and your father stood there laughing at us in that sarcastic way of his. Finally we gave up the search and Gallito marked it, so that it might be found in a hurry. It is above one's head and the wall is too smooth to climb in order to reach it—”

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"How can Jose get in then?" interrupted Pearl.

"Jose has a key to your father's locker, and in that locker he keeps a rope ladder. Jose throws up the ladder and the hooks catch on a dark, narrow little ledge; climbing up to this, he finds a small opening; he wriggles into this and finds himself in a small chamber which your father always keeps well provisioned. From this chamber a narrow passage leads up to the surface of the ground, thus providing two exits; but, of course, the one above ground cannot be used now, owing to the snow."

Pearl, who had been listening breathlessly to this description of Jose's hiding place, leaned back with a sigh of relief. "Then it looks as if Jose might be all right for the present. I do hope so for all our sakes."

She sat silent for a few moments, apparently turning over something in her mind. When she spoke again her manner showed a certain embarrassment. "Do—do you know," she asked rather hesitatingly, "how they got the information?"

"No," he replied. "And that is what is puzzling all of us, but they have so far refused to tell us."

Almost she uttered a prayer of thankfulness. She very strongly suspected that the only way Hanson could have secured the information was through her mother's inveterate habit of eavesdropping, a weakness of hers which she had failed to hide from her daughter, and a feeling almost of gratitude came over Pearl that so far Hanson had been decent enough to spare that poor babbler.

She took a last sip of coffee and rose from the table. "I must go down to the other cabin," she said, reluctance in her heart, if not in her voice.

"I will go with you"—Seagreave rose with alacrity to accompany her—"and get the fires builded. It should really have been done long ago. But what am I thinking of? Wait a moment." He clapped his hand to his pocket. "One never knows what avenues of cleverness and cunning a great temptation may open up." He laughed a little. "On that wild drive to the Mont d'Or I insisted on Jose removing your necklace and all your rings with which he had decked himself. I dare say it cost him immeasurable pangs, but he had no time to express them. As I was driving he passed them over to Hugh, and when we reached here Hugh gave them to me. He explained that in attempting to give them to you he might be seen, and if he were it might lead to some embarrassing questions."

He drew from his pocket first the emeralds and then the rings, laying them carefully upon the table, where they formed a glittering heap.

"I don't think it is possible that Jose withheld anything," Seagreave continued. "He would not dare, and I am quite sure that neither Hughie nor I dropped even a ring when

he gave them to me. Still I would be very much obliged if you will look them over and see if they are intact.”

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At the sight of her treasures Pearl uttered an exclamation of pleasure and fingered them lovingly, laying the emeralds against her cheek with a gesture that was almost a caress. "Thank you. Oh, it was good of you to think of them at such a time and rescue them for me." Her soft, sliding voice was warm with gratitude. "They are all here." She slipped the rings on her fingers, her eyes dreaming on them. She fastened the emeralds about her neck and hid them beneath her gown, pressing them against her flesh as if she found pleasure in their cold contact.

She lifted her eyes to him; her smile was languourously ardent; impulsively she caught his hand and held it for a moment against her cheek. He started and she felt him tremble. Then hastily he withdrew his hand, murmuring at the same time a confused, almost inarticulate protest; but Pearl did not wait to hear it. She had risen abruptly and, catching up her cloak and wrapping it hastily about her, had opened the door before he could reach it and had stepped out into the snow.

Seagreave, who had paused a moment to close the door behind them, heard her utter a sharp exclamation and turned quickly.

"Dios!" she cried. "Dios! What is it?"

She had fallen back against the wall of the cabin and was gazing about her with a strange and startled expression. Seagreave's eye reflected it as he too stared about him with a look not yet of alarm but of wild, deep wonder. For the moment, at least, all things were the same. Above them the peaks towered whitely in the sullen, gray sky. On a level with their eyes, the illimitable forests of bare, black trees mingling with the denser and more compact shapes of the evergreens, stretched away over the hillsides, casting their long blue shadows on the snow-covered ground until they wore blurred indistinguishably in the violet haze of distance. Unchanged, and yet so strong was the presage of some unimagined and disastrous event, that when a long shiver ran through the earth Pearl screamed aloud, and, stumbling toward Seagreave, reached out gropingly for his hand.

For the second that they waited the earth, too, seemed to wait, a solemn, awe-filled moment of incalculable change, a tense moment, as if the unknown, mysterious forces of nature were gathering themselves together for some mighty, unprecedented effort.

Then shiver after shiver shook the ground, the earth trembled as if in some deep convulsion, the white peaks seemed bowing and bending—then a roar as of many waters, the air darkened and earth and sky seemed filled with the mass of the mountains slipping down—down to chaos.

Pearl had ceased to scream and had fallen to her knees, clinging desperately to Seagreave. Her face was blanched white with terror, and she was muttering incoherent prayers.

As for Harry, he had forgotten her, forgotten himself, and was living through moments or centuries, he knew not, which, of wonder and horror.

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And what a sight! It was not simply a great mountain of snow slipping thunderously down to the valleys beneath; but in its ever gathering momentum and incredible velocity it tore great rocks from the ground and either snapped off trees as if they had been straws, or wholly uprooted them, and now was a fast-flying mass of snow, earth, trees and rocks whirling and hurtling through the air.

A huge rock had, as if forcibly detaching itself, flown off from the avalanche and buried itself in the ground only a few feet beyond Harry and Pearl, and more than one uprooted tree lay near them. Death had missed them by only a few paces.

Not realizing her immunity even after the air had begun to clear, and still panic-stricken and fearful of what might still occur, Pearl continued to moan and pray until Seagreave, who had been so dazed that he had been almost in a state of trance, again became aware of her presence and, partially realizing her piteous state of terror, lifted her in his arms and, wrapping them about her, endeavored to soothe her and allay her fears, although he had not yet sufficiently recovered himself to know fully what he was doing, and was merely following the instinct of protection.

It was impossible for him to realize the mundane again immediately after these undreamed of and supernormal experiences. Holding Pearl, who still clung to him frantically, cowering and trembling against him, he leaned upon the rough, projecting walls of his cabin and gazed with awed and still unbelieving eyes into this new and formless world, yet obscured with flying snow.

Gradually as the air cleared he saw that a new world, indeed, lay before them. "Look, look, Pearl," he cried, hoping to rouse her from her state of blind fright. "It has been an avalanche and it is over now."

"No, no," she moaned, and buried her head more deeply in his shoulder. "I dare not look up. It will come again."

"No, it doesn't happen twice. It is over now and we are safe and the cabin is safe."

And yet, in spite of himself, he sympathized with her fear more than he would have admitted either to himself or her. Anything seemed possible to him now. He had looked upon a miracle. He had seen those immutable peaks, as stable as Time, bend and bow in their strange, cosmic dance, for the change in the position of one had created the illusory effect of a change in all.

"Come, look up, Pearl," he urged. "It is all over and everything is changed. Look up and get accustomed to it."

Everything was indeed changed. For a few yards before the cabin his path with its white, smooth walls was intact, but beyond that lay an incredibly smooth expanse of

bare earth. The road was obliterated; the vast projecting rock ledges which had overshadowed it had disappeared. They had all been razed or else uprooted like the rocks and trees and carried on in that irresistible rush. The light poured baldly down upon a hillside bare and blank and utterly featureless. But far down the road where the bridge had spanned the canon there rose a vast white mountain, effectually cutting them off from all communication with the village below.

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Nothing remained of familiar surroundings. This was, indeed, a new world. At last Seagreave roused himself from his stunned contemplation of it and bent himself to the task of coaxing Pearl to lift her head and gaze upon it, too.

At last she did so, but at the sight of that bare and unfamiliar hillside her terrors again overcame her. "Come," she cried, dragging at his arm, "we must go—go—get away from here. Dios! Are you mad? It is the end of the world. Come quickly."

"Where?" asked Seagreave gently.

"Home," she cried wildly. "To the church. We can at least die blessedly."

Seagreave shook his head, his eyes on that white wall—that snow mountain which rose from the edge of the crevasse and seemed almost to touch the sky. "Listen, Pearl," he spoke more earnestly now, as if to force some appreciation of the situation upon her mind. "This cabin is the only thing upon the mountain. The avalanche has carried everything else away."

"Not my father's cabin, too," she peered down the hill curiously, yet fearfully, in a fascinated horror. "Oh, but it is true. It is gone. Oh, what shall we do? But we must get down to the camp. Come, come."

But for once Seagreave seemed scarcely to hear her. He had leaned out from the sheltering wall and was scanning with a measuring and speculative eye the white heap that rose from the edge of the canon and seemed almost to touch the lowering and sullen sky.

"Thank God, the camp is safe," he murmured. "The canon must have saved it, or else it would have been wiped off the earth just as Gallito's cabin has been. But it has swept the bridge away, of course."

"Oh, come." Pearl dragged at his sleeve. "I can't stay here. I am afraid."

"Pearl," and there were both anxiety and tenderness in his voice. "You must understand. Try to realize that there is no way to get down."

"But there must be some way," she insisted, "with snow-shoes—"

He shook his head gently but definitely. "There is no way. We might as well face it." He cast another long look at the sky. "It is the season for the thaws, the big thaws, but, even so, it will take time to melt down that mountain out there. No, it is useless to argue," as Pearl began again her futile rebellion against the inexorable forces of nature, "but what am I thinking of?" in quick self-reproach. "You must not stay out here in the cold any longer. Come." He threw open the cabin door.

But if Pearl heard him she gave no sign, but still leaned weakly, almost inertly, against the walls of the cabin, gazing down the hillside with dazed and still frightened eyes.

Seeing her condition, Seagreave wasted no more words, but lifted her in his arms and carried her into the room they had so recently left. There he placed her in a chair and pushed it near the fire and she sat shivering and cowering, her hands outstretched to the blaze.

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The light from the fire streamed through the room and Pearl, cheered and restored more by that homely and familiar radiance than by any words of comfort he might have uttered, gradually sank further and further back in her chair and presently closed her eyes. It seemed to him that she slept. At first her rest was fitful, broken by exclamations and starts, but each time that she opened her eyes she saw the familiar and unchanged surroundings, and Seagreave sitting near her; and, reassured, her sleep became more natural and restful.

When she awoke it was to find herself alone. Seagreave had left, but she could hear him moving about in the next room, near at hand if she needed him. He was evidently bringing in some logs for the fire.

“As if nothing had happened,” she muttered, “and things will go on just the same. We shall eat; we shall sleep. How can it be?”

She got up and began to walk up and down the room. She was young, she was strong, and the shock of those few moments of wonder and horror had almost worn off. Her active brain was alert and normal again, and she thought deeply as she walked to and fro, considering all possible phases of her present situation.

Then, ceasing to pace back and forth, she leaned against the window and looked out. The strange, new world lay before her, an earth bereft of its familiar forests, and which must send forth from its teeming heart a new growth of tender, springtime shoots to cover its nakedness. And as she gazed the sun burst through the gray clouds and poured down upon the wide, bare hillside an unbroken flood of golden splendor.

Hearing a slight sound behind her, she turned quickly. Seagreave had entered and, approaching the window, stood looking at the white sloping plain without.

“I couldn’t chop any more wood,” he said. “It seemed too commonplace after this thing that we have seen. But you—how are you?”

“I’m all right,” she returned. But she did not meet his eyes; her black lashes lay long on her cheek; her cheek burned. She realized in a confused way that there was some change in their relative positions. She had always felt because of his reticence, his withdrawal into self, his diffidence in approaching her, easily mistress of any situation which might arise between them; but since those moments when they two had gazed upon the avalanche, and she in her terror had flung herself upon his breast, and had wrapped her arms about him and buried her face in his shoulder, he had assumed not only the tone but the manner of authority and had adopted again a natural habit of command, dropped or laid aside from indifference or inertia, but instinctively resumed when through some powerful feeling he became again his normal self, alive and alert, vigorous and enthusiastic. It was as if he had suddenly awakened to a whole world of new possibilities and new opportunities.

Beneath his long, steady gaze her own eyelids fluttered and fell; her cheeks flushed a deeper rose; her heart beat madly. She was furious at herself for these revealing weaknesses, and yet she, too, was conscious of new, undreamed-of possibilities, sweet, poignantly sweet.

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“Pearl,” his voice was low, shaken by the emotion which had overtaken both of them, “do you know that, as far as you and I are concerned, we are the only living human beings in all our world?”

She looked at him and, unknown to herself, her face still held its glow of rapture; her eyes were pools of love.

Her little rill of laughter was broken and shaken as falling water. “The sheriff didn’t get us, and yet we’re prisoners, prisoners of the snow.”

“And you, my jailer, will you be kind to me?” But there was nothing pleading in his tone. It rang instead with exultant triumph.

“Why, Pearl”—a virile note of power as if some long-dreamed-of mastery were his at last swelled like a diapason through his voice—“we’re in for a thaw, a big thaw, but it will take time to melt down that mountain out there in the crevasse; and you and I are here—alone—for a fortnight, at least a fortnight.” He emphasized the words, lingering over them as if they afforded him delight.

“A fortnight! Here! Alone with you!” she cried. “Never, never. There must be a way—” she murmured confusedly and ran to the window to hide her agitation and embarrassment, pulling the curtain hastily aside and looking out unseeingly over the hills. She was trembling from head to foot.

The wind had risen and was wailing and shrieking over the bare hill and the air was dim with flying snow; but the spring that hours before had kissed her cheek and touched her lips like a song rose now in Pearl’s heart. She pressed her tightly clasped hands against her breast and closed her eyes. A new world! And she and Harry were in it together—and alone.

CHAPTER XIV

The dawns rose, the suns set, after the avalanche as before, and Pearl and Seagreave, alone in the cabin, isolated from the world of human beings, took up their lives together, together and yet apart, in the great, encompassing silence of this white and winter-locked world.

Winter-locked, yes, but all the mighty, unseen forces of Nature were set toward spring. Nothing could stop or retard them now. Under sullen, lowering skies; beneath the blasts which swept down from the peaks; in spite of flying snow; unseen, unsuspected, in the darkness and stillness and warmth of the earth, the transformation was going on. The tender, young banners of green were almost ready for the decking of the trees, and almost completed was the weaving of pink and blue and lavender carpets of wild flowers for the hillsides.

And the spring that had arisen glorious in Pearl's heart when she had realized that she and Harry were prisoners of the avalanche was still resurgent. For the first day or two of their isolation she lived, breathed, moved in the splendor of her heart's dream. It encompassed her with the warmth and radiance of a flood of sunshine.

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In spite of her protests and appeals, Seagreave would not permit her to help much with the household tasks, but busied himself almost constantly with them, maintaining with a sort of methodical pleasure the inspired order of his cabin. It is possible that he gave to each task a more exhaustive and undeviating attention than even he considered necessary, and this to cover the sense of embarrassment he felt in adapting himself not only to this pervasive, feminine presence, but to the exigencies of an unwonted companionship hedged about with restrictions.

He often felt as if he were entertaining a bird of brilliant tropical plumage in his cabin, as if it had flown thither from glowing southern lands and brought with it sensuous memories of color and fragrance, and wafts of sandalwood.

Sometimes he and Pearl walked about on the barren hillside, constantly washed more bare of snow by the daily rains which had begun to fall, and sometimes he read aloud to her a little, but in spite of Pearl's intelligence she had never cared much for books. She craved no record of another's emotions and struggles and passions. No life at second hand for her. She was absorbed in the living.

But if in the day there were many tasks to be done, and Harry could occupy more or less time in the hewing of wood and carrying of water, and all of the practical duties which that phrase may stand for, there were long evenings when he and Pearl sat in the firelight, their speech and their silence alike punctuated by the wail of the mountain wind about the cabin and the singing of the burning logs upon the hearth.

And it was during those evening hours that Seagreave felt most the shyness which her constant presence induced in him. By day he busied himself in securing her comfort, but by night he was tormented by his own chivalrous and fastidious thought of her, by his desire to reassure her mind, without words, if possible, as to the consequences of their isolation.

But sometimes after he had lighted her candle and she had said good-night, and had entered the little room where she slept, he would either sit beside the glowing embers or else build up afresh the great fire which was never permitted to die out night or day during the winter months, his thoughts full of her, dwelling on her, clinging to the memories of the day.

Jose's personality had been neither ubiquitous nor dominating. Seagreave had noticed him no more about the cabin than he had the little mountain brook which purred its way down the hill; but now his housemate was feminine, and with every passing hour he was more conscious of it. At night, after Pearl had gone to bed, he felt her presence as definitely as though she were still there. Some quality of her individuality lingered and haunted the room and haunted his thoughts as the sweet, unfamiliar odor of an exotic blossom permeates the atmosphere and remains, even when the flower is gone.

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And as for Pearl, whether she walked on the barren hillsides or dreamed by the fire, or stood at the window watching Harry chop wood or carry water from the rushing mountain brook, her mind held but one thought, her heart but one image—him.

The studious abstraction, the ordered calm which characterized Seagreave's cabin, made fragrant by burning pine logs and fresh with the cold winds from the mountain tops, had altered by imperceptible and subtle gradations until the atmosphere was now strangely electrical, throbbing with vital life, glowing with warmth and color. In outer semblance nothing was changed, no more than was the appearance of the world outside, and yet beneath the surface of the lives in the cabin, as beneath the surface of the earth without, all the mighty forces of Nature were bent to one end.

Without, the spring thaws which were to melt down the mountain of snow in the ravine below were no longer presaged, but at hand. The rain fell for hours each day, but the dull and weeping skies, the heavy air, oppressed Seagreave's spirits and made him now sad and listless, but for the most part curiously restless.

Strive as he would, he could not escape nor ignore it, this atmosphere of the exotic which filled his cabin, the atmosphere of Pearl's beauty and magnetism and of her love for him. He did not recognize it as that. He only felt it as some strange, disturbing element which, while it troubled his thought, yet claimed it. His growing love for her filled him with a sort of terror. It seemed to him a mounting tide which would sweep him, he knew not whither, and with all the strength of his nature he struggled to hold to the resolution he had made the first day they were alone in the cabin, not to press his love upon her until she had left the shelter of his roof and was back again with her father.

One evening the two sat in the cabin together, as usual, Seagreave on one side of the fire reading—that is, his eyes were upon the book and he seemed apparently absorbed in its contents—but in reality his entire thought was focused upon Pearl, who sat opposite him in a low chair, her hands clasped idly in her lap, and he struggled desperately to maintain his attitude of friendly comradeship when he addressed her.

The leaping of the flames on the hearth made quaint arabesques of shadow on the rough walls and the wind sighed and sobbed in the chimney. Thus they sat for an hour or two in silence and then Seagreave lifted his eyes and stole one of his swift and frequent glances at Pearl. Something he saw riveted his attention and he continued to gaze, forgetful of his book, of his past resolutions, of anything in the world but her.

She was just loosening the cord which bound the throat of a small black leather bag, and while he watched her she poured its contents into her lap and sat bending over a handful of loose and sparkling jewels. She was not aware of his scrutiny, but sat in complete absorption, her dark, shining head bent over them, lifting them, turning them this way and that to catch the firelight, letting them trickle through her long, brown fingers.

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There, sparkling in the fire-glow, was the desire of the world, the white, streaming flame of diamonds, the heart's blood of rubies, and sapphires—the blue of the sea and the sky—all their life and radiance imprisoned in a dew-drop.

“How beautiful they are!” he cried involuntarily, but what he really meant was, “How beautiful you are!”

She started and looked up at him in surprise. “Yes, they are,” she said. “I have been gathering them for a long time. There are only a few, but every one is flawless.”

“I never considered jewels before.” He bent forward the better to see them. “I have often seen women wear them, but I just regarded them as a part of their decoration. Yet I can understand now why you love them. They are very beautiful, unset that way.” He looked at her deeply. “But I believe it is for some reason deeper than that that they have a fascination for you. You are like them.”

She let them fall like drops of rainbow water through her fingers; then she lifted her lashes. “Am I hard and cold like them?” She sent darting and dazzling full in his eyes her baffling, heart-shivering smile.

He did not answer at once, and she, still gazing at him, saw that he paled visibly, every tinge of color receding from his face; his eyes, deep and dark, held hers, as if reading her soul and demanding that she reveal the strange secrets of her nature.

The forces of life ready to burst through the harsh crust of the earth without and express themselves in the innocent glory of flower and grass and tender, green leaves, and the sound of birds, were now seeking expression through denser and more complex human avenues. All the love, all the longing which Seagreave had so sternly suppressed during these days he and Pearl had spent together, rose in his heart and threatened to sweep away in a mighty tide of elemental impulses all of those resolutions of restraint to which he had clung so hardly.

He arose and leaned his arm on the mantel-piece, still gazing at her as if he could never withdraw his eyes. “You are so—so beautiful,” he stammered, scarcely knowing what he said. “The world will claim you. You have so much to give it and all your nature, all your heart turns to it. You will soon forget this hut in the mountains, and—and all that it has meant.” He buried his head in his arms.

She, too, rose and laid the handful of her jewels on the table without another glance at them. “These mountains!” She threw wide her arms and drew a long, ecstatic breath. She came near to him and touched his arm. “I hated them once, I love them now.” She smiled up at him, her darkly slumbrous, scarlet-lipped smile.

He leaned toward her as if to clasp her close, but the vows he had sworn to himself a thousand times since she had been in his cabin alone with him still held him. Slowly he drew back and with all the strength of his nature fought for self-control. He called upon every force of his will, and in that supreme moment his face hardened to the appearance of a sculptured mask; all of its finely-drawn outlines seemed set in stone.

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She turned angry shoulders to him and stirred the stones on the table with impatient fingers until they rolled about, flashing darts of light. Symbols of power, of material and deadening splendor; eternal accompaniments of imperial magnificence! The sapphires sang triumph, the diamonds conquest, the rubies passionate and fulfilled love.

"They are what you really care for." He spoke huskily; his voice sounded thick and uncertain in his ears. "That and—and your wonderful dancing, and applause—and success and money. It's natural that you should—but it all makes me realize—clearly, that I can't even try to force myself into your life. There's no place for me. Even—even if you were kind—you sometimes seem to—to—to suggest that you would be—I'd be just a useless cog, soon to be dropped. It's all complete without me. But, for God's sake, I'm begging you, I'm begging you, Pearl, not to be kind to me for the rest of the time that we're here together."

"And what about me?" she flashed. "You've thought everything out from your own side, and you've just been telling it. Don't you think I've got a side, too? I guess so."

He looked at her in surprise, the emotion that had changed and broken his expression fading into wonderment and puzzle.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Kiss me, and I'll show you," she said audaciously. All the allurements, the softness and sweetness of the south was in her mouth and eyes.

"How can we go on like this?" His voice was a mere broken whisper. He yearned to her, leaned toward her, and yet refrained from holding her.

"Like *this*," she murmured, and threw her arms about him and laid her head on his heart, her face upturned to his.

"I told you"—so close was she held that she scarcely knew that she was breathing—"I told you—that if I once held you in my arms I'd never let you go."

"You may have told yourself; you never told me before. But I'm content."

"Content! That's no word for this," he cried between kisses. The mounting tide he had feared had become a mighty torrent sweeping away all his carefully built up mental barriers, and with that obliterating flood came a sense of power and freedom. All the youth in his heart rose and claimed its share of life and love and happiness.

"Let me go," she said at last, and drew away from him, flushed as a dawn and rapturous as a sunrise.

"No, never again," and stretched out his arms, but she slipped behind the table, putting it between them. "Sit down," she commanded, "and build up the fire. I want to talk, talk a long time, all night maybe."

"I hope so," he said ardently, and, obeying her, stooped to place fresh logs on the embers. "But what is there to talk about? We've said and will continue to say all there is in the world worth saying. I love you. Do you love me?"

"Maybe you won't want to say that after you've heard me." She had leaned forward, her arms on her knees, her eyes on the flames which leaped from dry twig to dry twig of the burning logs and on the shower of sparks which every minute or so swept up the chimney.

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"You hit it off pretty well when you said that all I really cared for was money and jewels and my dancing and the big audiences and all that." Her eyes had narrowed so that the gleaming light that shone through her lashes was like a mere line of fire. "You see, I got to play the game. I got to. Nothing but winning and winning big ever's going to suit me. I saw that when I was awful young. I sort of looked out on life and it seemed to me that most people spent their lives like flies, flying around a while without any purpose, trying to buzz in the sun if they could, and by and by dropping off the window pane."

"Nothing but winning will suit you," he said drearily. "You are only repeating what I told you." All the life, the passion had gone out of his voice. "And I'm no prize, heaven knows!"

"I ain't through yet," she said. "I never did talk much. I guess I'm going to talk more to-night than I ever talked in my life, but I always saw everything that was going on around me, and it didn't take me long to make out that all you'll get in life is a kick and a crust if you haven't got some kind of power in your hands."

"God, you're hard, hard as iron!" The room rang with the echoes of his mirthless laughter. "Five, three minutes ago, you were in my arms, soft, yielding, trembling, giving me back kiss for kiss, and now you sit there expounding your merciless philosophy."

"It ain't me that's merciless," she returned, apparently unmoved, "it's life. You think my dancing's great, so does everybody; so it is. Well, it didn't grow. I made it." Here she lifted her head with pride, and folded her arms on her chest. "Maybe you don't think it took some training. Maybe you don't think it took some will and grit when I was a little kid to keep right on at my exercises when I ached so bad that the tears would run down my cheeks all the time I was at them. My mother knew that you had to begin young and keep at 'em all the time, but mom never would have had the nerve to keep me to it. She used often to cry with me.

"When I was a girl I'd liked to have had a good time, just in that careless way like other girls, but I gave that up, too, so's I could work at my dancing. When I'd get tired and blue I'd look at the stones I'd begun to collect with the money I'd earned. I'm hard, yes, I guess you're right. I guess you got to have a streak of hardness in you to be one of the biggest dancers in the world, or to be the biggest anything, but"—here she ran across the room and was down on her knees beside his chair—"I'm not hard any longer. Those jewels there," pointing to the table behind her, "they don't mean a thing to me any longer, nor my dancing, either, nor money, nor applause, nor anything in the world but you."

He shrank away from her as if he feared the subduing magnetism of her touch. "The useless cog to drop away when you get tired of him! I told you your life was all rounded and complete."

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"It's not," she cried passionately, "without love. Without your love. I've got it and you can't take it away from me."

He brushed the wing of hair back from his pallid face. "My love!" His voice seemed to drip the bitterness of gall. "Where in heaven's name is there any place for it?"

"There isn't much room for anything else," she returned, "and that's the truth. I've told you that all those things that you say make my life complete, don't mean that," she snapped her long fingers, "not that to me any more. I've told you that I'd give them all up for you if you asked me, but," and here she swept to her feet, as if upborne by a rush of earnestness so intense and deeply felt that it was in itself a passion, "but I'll give 'em up, for it's a lot to give, for the man I know you are and—and not for the man that's been shirking life."

Since the first moments after she had begun to voice her experiences, and what he called her merciless philosophy, he had crumpled down in his chair, and when she had sprung up, he had risen perfunctorily and wearily to his feet, but at her last words he had straightened up as if involuntarily every muscle grew tense, an outward and visible indication of his mental attitude. Inherited and traditional pride was in the haughty and surprised uplift of his head; a bright flush had risen on his cheek and his eyes sparkled with a thousand wounded and angry reflections.

Whether or not she had intended to produce this effect by her words, she was undaunted by it, and went on: "Jose tells me that you got a big place in England, just waiting for you to come and claim it, and you quit it and everything there because a girl turned you down. It was sure a baby act."

"I—" he began to interrupt her. There were few men who would have cared to ignore that chilled steel quality of Seagreave's voice or, for the matter of that, the chilled steel look on his face.

But there were certain emotions the Pearl had never known, and they included remorse and fear. "I ain't finished yet," the gesture with which she imposed his silence held her accustomed languor. "I got to say that the man—that's you—that fought all through the Boer war was no shirker, and the man who did some of the things you did in India—you got some kind of a medal, didn't you?—what was it Jose called you?—soldier of fortune—well, you weren't a quitter, anyway."

She stretched out her arms to him and smiled, her compelling heart-shattering smile. Ardor enveloped her like an aura; the beauty and color of her were like fragrance on the air. "That's the kind of man I want to marry, Harry, not a man that's willing to live outside of life and work, and stay dead and buried here in these mountains."

He did not bend to her by an inch. Her smiles and her ardor splintered against chilled steel and fell unheeded. "Is there anything else?" he asked, after a slight interval of silence, during which he had the appearance of waiting with a pronounced and punctilious courtesy for further words from her.

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She made no answer, merely continued to look at him, but he, apparently unmindful and indifferent to that gaze, lifted his book from the table beside him and, still standing, because she did so, began to read.

For a moment or two she seemed dazed and then, with trembling fingers, she gathered up her jewels and placed them in the little black bag.

This task accomplished, she started with all the scornful grace, the indifferent languor of a Spanish duchess to sweep from the room, but in passing him and noting him still absorbed in his book, her hot blood flushed her cheek, her eyes glittered with angry fire. Her slight pause caused him to look up and, seeing the anger on her face, he smiled amusedly, insufferably. The next second she sprang at him like a cat and slapped him across his insolently smiling face, and then flung Spanish oaths at him with such force and heat that they seemed to splutter in falling upon the chill of the air. Then she flashed from the room.

But the maddening smile still lingered on his lips as he bent to pick up the book her blow had sent flying to the floor. And, still smiling, he stood for a moment caressing the white dents her fingers had left on his cheek. Finally he replenished the fire, filled and lighted his pipe and, drawing his chair near to the hearth, sat, thinking, thinking, the greater part of the night.

Pearl was out early the next morning, and walked halfway down the hill. When she returned to the cabin she found Seagreave sitting in his chair by the hearth as if he had not moved during the night; his haggard gaze was fixed on the dead ashes of the fire. Without speaking to him, Pearl stooped down and, with some paper and bits of wood, began to build up a blaze again.

He peered at her a moment as if she were a vision, then got up very stiffly as if he had not moved for hours, and began to assist her, mechanically following the usual routine of preparing breakfast.

When it was ready they sat down opposite each other as was their custom, and made a pretense of eating. With the exception of a perfunctory remark or so the meal passed in silence. Pearl evidently had no intention of apologizing for her behavior of the night before. Her manner toward him was that of one who had relegated him to the position of the tables and chairs, and intended to take no more notice of him.

Taking it for granted that that was the relation she wished sustained between them, Seagreave gravely adopted her attitude, and for the next few days if they spoke at all it was principally about the work that was going on down at the crevasse. Never had Harry occupied himself so constantly and so feverishly, for the most part outside the cabin, chopping and sawing diligently at a huge pile of wood, and in his intervals of

leisure he spent a great deal of time down the hill by the mountain of snow, watching its almost magical vanishing.

“There is a great crowd down at the ravine to-night,” he said to Pearl, one evening at supper. “They are working with torches, and I think they will probably have some kind of a bridge swung over by midnight. I managed to signal to them a while ago, and they know that we are safe now. If—if you want to sit up to-night,” his voice sounded strained and perfunctory, “I think you could possibly get over before morning.”

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The shadow which had fallen upon her face in the last day or two deepened a little. "It will be cold out there at night." She caught at the first excuse which came into her mind. "It will be better to wait and go down after breakfast."

He acquiesced with a nod, but made no answer in words, and soon after he left the room, and she, later, peeping cautiously out from the curtain behind the window, saw him walking back and forth before the cabin.

It was an hour or two later when he opened the door and entered. She did not hear him. She was standing, her elbow on the mantel-piece and her cheek on her hand, looking down into the fire. His footsteps roused her from her reverie and she looked up, in that moment of surprise, forgetful of self and therefore self-revealing. Thus she stood for one fleeting second, holding him with her smile, her whole being seeming to rush out and meet and encompass him and embrace him. Then her eyelashes drooped long and black on her cheek, and her face was all aflame with color.

He stood still a second, breathing hard. Then from the shadow he hurled himself into that zone of glowing firelight where she stood. A white flame passed over his face and lighted his eyes with that burning, incandescent glow that only those cold, blue eyes can show. Primeval, all preliminary bowing and scraping in the minuet of wooing ignored, he saw his heart's desire and seized it, lifting the Pearl in his arms, crushing her against his breast, until she, dazed for the moment, lay captured and captive.

But her second of surprised, involuntary non-resistance served her well. Harry looked into her eyes and forgot his vigilance; and with a twist Pearl slipped through his arms and was across the room. She stood against the wall of the cabin, her head thrown back, a smile on her white lips, her eyes daring him.

Seagreave took no dares. It was a part of his creed. He was across the room in a step, his arms outstretched as if to clasp her.

But Pearl held him with her eyes until at least she covered her face with her hands and wept and leaned toward him, and again Seagreave caught her in his arms with a murmur of passionate and inarticulate words. "I love you, I love you," he whispered, his lips seeking hers.

"Pearl, forgive me. I—I—forgot myself, forgive me. Why, you are as safe here as in your father's cabin. It will never happen again. I'll never touch you again unless you let me. Why, Pearl," with a tremulous attempt at a joke, "for the rest of the time that we're here you can keep me locked up in the other room if you want to, and just pass my food through the door now and then when you feel like it."

"Oh, Harry," she was still sobbing, "I'm such a devil. All my life I've been trying to see what I could get. I set out to make everything and everybody pay me, and I never got

anything but chaff; money and jewels and applause—all chaff. The only happiness is giving, and I want to give, give, give to you. That's what I been longing to do ever since I loved you, and all I could do was to call you names—a quitter and a shirker." She wept afresh. "And the worst of it is I mean it, I wish I didn't, but I do."

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"But you were right," he said, "good and right, too. You hurt my man's vanity, and I got nasty—sarcastic, you know. I've got you to thank forever for bringing myself right home to me—showing me to myself. I was a morbid, love-sick boy, who indulged in so much self-pity that he thought he was a very fine romantic figure, running off from his responsibilities and burying himself in the ends of the earth."

"I was jealous, too, of that girl you quit things for, that girl that was like violets and white roses. I ain't like 'em."

"Jealous! You! It wasn't long that I remembered her, but you were right again—I liked that life. I'd got used to it. The other kind seemed impossible to me—I've been a quitter and a shirker—just what you called me—but I'm going back home to take it all up again, or if you would rather, I'll stay here and work mines in these mountains, or help reclaim the desert—if you'll marry me, Pearl."

"But I'm the Black Pearl—a dancer. I don't see how I can begin to be anything else now; but I will, I'll be anything you ask me, Harry," throwing her arms about his neck, "I will."

He laughed and held her closer still. "I'll never ask you to be anything else. 'The Black Pearl—a dancer,' that's enough for me. You shall have all the joy of your gift—its expression. I'm not such a selfish animal as to ask you to give that up, so that I can keep you—you beautiful, tropical bird—in a cage, just to gratify my sense of possession—and watch you mope and pine, because I've kept you from your flights. No, sweetheart, you shall dance, and have your big audiences that inspire you, and the applause you love ... and then you'll come back to me, and I'll be waiting for you and working—always working. I promise you that, Pearl. But," fixing determined eyes on her, "I'll not dangle around after you, and patch up your rows with your managers, and engage your maids, nor be known as the Black Pearl's husband, by the Lord, no! I'll do my own work in the world, and stand and fall by my own merit, if there's any in me. But kiss me, Pearl, kiss me."

"Then it's the last kiss till to-morrow," she smiled, "for it's past midnight now."

The morning dawned, a blare of sunlight. Pearl, glancing from the window just before they ate their early breakfast, could see that bridge was in place. Both she and Harry were quiet. It was the last meal together in the cabin, and more than once tears filled her eyes and ran down her cheeks as she made a pretense of eating. "They're happy tears, Harry, honest, they are," she assured him. "I guess I'm kind of locoed at the thought of seeing Pop and Bob and Hughie again. Come on, let's hurry down now and meet them." She stood up and drained her coffee cup and then threw her cape about her. "Come on." She held out her hand to him and smiled.

CHAPTER XV

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The sun-flooded hillside showed plainly the path of the avalanche; blank, featureless it lay, without sheltering tree or rock to diversify its bald monotony. But it was bare no longer, for the brown earth was covering her nakedness with a delicate mist of green. Beyond the sweep of the avalanche the maples were swinging their tassels, and the swelling buds of the oaks and aspens showed that they were almost ready to burst into leaf; the air was full of bird calls and fluttering wings, and the breeze, although chill, seemed ineffably soft in comparison with its recent rigorous blasts.

Pearl and Seagreave had gone but a short distance from the cabin when suddenly Pearl shielded her eyes with her hand. "Look," she cried excitedly, and pointed to two men who were standing down by the bridge evidently awaiting them, "I can't quite see from here, but it is, it must be, Bob and Pop."

She almost flew down the hill after that, and Seagreave, his face suddenly set in lines of determination, kept pace with her. He had noticed, even if she had not, that those two motionless figures at the bridge had not advanced one step to meet her, but were maintaining an attitude portentously watchful, it seemed to him, and boding ill for the warmth and spontaneity of the welcome she so evidently expected.

But Pearl appeared to see nothing of this, and as she drew near the two who awaited her, she would have flown like a bird into her father's arms. But before she could throw her arms about him he caught her wrists and pushed her back a step or two anything but gently.

"Why weren't you down at the bridge last night?" he asked sternly. The old man had changed since the avalanche. There were anxious deep hollows about his eyes which were at once brighter and more sunken than ever. His parchment skin looked livid and lifeless and his mouth had tightened until it was drawn in and pinched.

"Why weren't you down at the gully waiting for us?" he asked again. "The bridge was across at midnight. The boys have been working night and day to get you out, and this is the way you act, hiding up there in that cabin like you'd as lief stay there as not."

"Yes, Pearl, why weren't you down to meet us?" Bob Flick spoke for the first time, his slow, soft voice was placating and yet it was evident that his sympathies were with Gallito. "The boys had the place all lit up with torches while they worked, and your Pop and I waited half the night for you down here. Why didn't you come?" Neither of the men had so far even glanced at Seagreave, but ignored him as thoroughly as if he were not there.

Pearl looked at Flick a moment in frowning incomprehension. Petted, spoiled child that she was, she could not bear to be scolded where she had expected a rapturous welcome. From Flick to her father she glanced, and then back again. "What's the matter with you two?" she cried. "Are you mad just because I didn't come chasing down

the hill in the dead of night? How did I know that the boys were going to get the bridge across at midnight?"

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"Because, if you'd been the sort of girl you ought to be, you wouldn't have stayed a minute longer in that cabin than you could have helped. You'd have stood down by the gully all night long just to show the folks in the camp that you wouldn't stay in that cabin after there was any chance at all for you to get away," Gallito answered her before Bob Flick got a chance. "What made you stay up there? You and him, too," he pointed one, long, gnarled forefinger at Seagreave, "have got to answer me that question. And there's another one, too, and you'll answer it."

Again Pearl stared at him, and again she turned her puzzled eyes on Bob Flick. Then, as the meaning of their attitude flashed over her, she fell back a pace or two, her face grown white. "Dios!" she murmured, with stiff lips, a sob rising in her throat.

Then she tossed high her head in hot resentment. Her mouth was set in a thin scarlet line of obstinacy, her eyes burned, but their expression was unreadable. With a slow movement of her body, expressing infinite scorn, she swung away from her father and her lover and, with her eyes upon the far, blue ranges, superbly ignored them.

Bob Flick shot a warning glance at Gallito, who was about to speak, and took a hasty step forward. "Look here, Pearl," he said conciliatingly, "don't mind your Pop. The strain on him's been awful. It's been hard on all of us. You sure gave us some terrible days, not knowing whether you were alive or dead, but we all kind of figured from the direction that the snow-slide took that it missed the cabin, and we wouldn't believe anything else but that you were as much alive as ever and as anxious to see us as we were to see you. And, Pearl, listen," striving to divert her gaze from those dim, blue ranges, "we ain't been idle. There's some great news for you. You tell her, Gallito."

"Yes," the Spaniard's tone softened a little and he lifted his head with a touch of pride, "it sure is great news. I been in correspondence with Sweeney and he opened up the matter of a contract again. I been dickering with him just the same as if we knew that you were safe and alive. I wouldn't let myself think anything else; and the result, Pearl," he paused, his eyes scanning her face, "the result is that he's just doubled his offer of last year and will play you over a circuit twice as big, the cities only. How does that strike you?"

But there was no answering enthusiasm on Pearl's face, not even a gleam of interest. Gallito and Flick looked at each other in dismay. Her indifference was genuine, they saw that clearly. There was no affected disdain in her manner of receiving the news. It was simply a matter which did not touch her at all.

Seeing this, a slow, burning flush crept up into her father's face, his jaws worked. "Pearl, did you hear?" he demanded, "because if you didn't, you'd better pay attention, and pay attention quick. I've accepted for you, given my word to Sweeney that if you were alive you'd take this offer. And now you and me are going to leave Colina within a few hours, and you're going to leave for good. Understand?"

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She smiled in slow, indifferent scorn and answered nothing, and her attitude maddened Gallito. "What do you mean by acting this way?" he cried. "Let's get down to it. Why weren't you down at the gully last night? Wouldn't he let you?" Again he pointed an accusing finger at Seagreave, who stood a little apart watching the scene with folded arms. "Pearl, you answer me, for I'm going to ask you that question straight out now. Ain't you just as good as when you came?"

But Pearl's seven or seventeen devils were in full possession of her now, and one of them, the demon of silence, stood her in good stead, for she knew intuitively that this attitude of non-explanation would prove far more irritating to her inquisitors than the vials of her wrath poured freely upon them.

But Gallito was in a white fury by this time. "By God!" he cried again, "you will answer me. You will tell me, and tell me now."

"I'll be hanged first," she flashed the words at him as a snake darts its fangs.

"And I'll be hanged if you'll ask her such questions before me," cried Seagreave, speaking for the first time.

Her father looked at him with a slow and bitter smile, then he gave a little nod of acrid comprehension. "You keep out of this, Harry Seagreave," he said, in a low, cold, deadly voice. "This is between the girl and me. Pearl, you come with me—now. We leave Colina, as I told you, within a few hours. You come now." He took a step or two down the hill as if expecting that she would follow him.

A wailing wind blew down from the peaks. The mocking bark of a coyote sounded near at hand in those wild solitudes, a bird flew from one tree to another, and the sound of a breaking twig was like a pistol shot.

Moments passed and still Pearl had not obeyed her father's command. It was not repeated, which was characteristic of Gallito. He merely waited until at last she lifted her eyes and unwaveringly met his. "I'm not going," she said clearly.

Harry made a quick, impetuous step toward her, but before he could reach her, her father had caught her by the wrist again and swept her aside.

"Look here, Gallito," cried Seagreave, "since she won't explain, you've got to listen to me. I—"

"I've told you to keep out of this, Seagreave," interrupted Gallito, in his harsh, grating voice. "I'll deal with you later."

But at the sound of Seagreave's voice the color had come back to Pearl's cheek, the light to her eyes. Hands on hips, she swung her skirts and surveyed Bob Flick and her

father with a scornful, slanting gaze. "I didn't know that there was anybody in the world that would dare ask me such questions, even you, Pop. And making arrangements with Sweeney without waiting to consult me! And ordering me to leave Colina on two or three hours' notice! Dios!" She spread her hands out on either side of her as if pushing away an impossible thing. "I can hardly believe it. I didn't answer you, Pop, nor you, Bob, because I was trying hard to take things in. But now," she turned to Seagreave, her head lifted higher yet in the glory of joy and pride, "I'm not going to leave Colina—yet, and I'm not going to sign up with Sweeney; am I, Harry?"

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Seagreave passed her father and was beside her in two strides. "You're going to do as you please," he said.

She leaned toward him, smiling, her fugitively sweet, tantalizing smile; and, oblivious of the others, Seagreave caught her to him as if he would hold her against the world.

And, seeing this, Bob Flick turned and walked down the hill with never a backward glance.

Not so Gallito; his eyes had darkened, those fierce hawk's eyes; his face was livid. "Pearl," his voice grated in his throat, "you can't make a fool of both me and yourself like this. You are a fool of a woman like all the rest, and because I have the bad luck to be your father I must save you from your own madness. You've got your big chance, the chance you've been waiting for, and you're not going to throw it away now, just because you been staying up in that cabin alone with him until you've lost your wits about him." He indicated Seagreave with a contemptuous jerk of the thumb.

"Seagreave," in cold fury, "you're a damned thief to take advantage of her this way. Now, Pearl, you come on."

He seized her by the wrist and would have drawn her roughly from Harry's encircling arm. She resisted, and Harry, in the strength of his indignation, unloosed the old man's grasp and drew her hastily away. But the touch of his hands had roused in Gallito fresh rage, and with almost unbelievable quickness he lifted his heavy, gnarled stick and swung it above Seagreave's head. Harry leaped back, near, perilously near, the edge of the ravine. The soft, moist earth crumbled beneath his feet; for a second he tottered on the edge, and then went down like a shot.

Pearl stood arrested in that first, quick rush of hers, frozen, gazing in wild unbelief at the spot where Harry had disappeared. As for Gallito, he also gazed almost uncomprehendingly, until the expression of surprise on his livid face gave way to a saturnine and vindictive satisfaction.

"He did it himself," he muttered, "the fool! I never touched him." Then, shrugging his shoulders and spreading out his hands as if well content to leave the matter to fate, he turned and began to walk down the hill, still muttering as he went.

This roused Pearl from her momentary trance. "Father," she cried wildly, "you must help me. You tried to hurt him and now you've got to help me. We must get him. Father, father," she babbled, running after him, "you must stay, you must help me, you must. You can't go and leave him. Oh, stay, stay, and I'll do anything, anything in the world. I'll sign the contract. I'll do anything."

But Gallito went on as if he did not hear her. His own belief was that Harry was done for. There was not one chance in a thousand that he was alive, one chance in a million, considering the depth of the ravine. Well, better so. His conscience was clear. He had not struck him, but had merely lifted his stick in self-defense after Seagreave had laid hands on him. As for Pearl, she would eventually turn to him and agree to his wishes, there was nothing else for her to do. In the meantime, by leaving her to herself, he avoided the unpleasant sound and sight of her grief and reproaches. Therefore, in spite of her passionate pleading, he went on.

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And Pearl, finally realizing that she could hope nothing from him, turned and ran back to the ravine. There she threw herself flat on the ground and, groaning and sobbing, drew herself to the edge of the cliff and gazed down into those depths of purple shadow. Much of the snow still lingered, and for a moment in the white, dazzling glare of the sunlight on the steep walls, she could see nothing. Then, as her eye became accustomed to those flashing refractions of light, she gave a loud, sobbing cry, her whole body became strangely limp and inert. For one dreadful moment she feared that she was going to faint. Then she drew on all the strength of her will and was herself again, ready in that moment of poignant relief to dare anything, do anything to save him.

For quite plainly she saw Harry. Instead of whirling down into those impenetrable depths and being buried in the mass of snow at the bottom, he had been caught almost miraculously on the out-curving trunks of two or three young pine trees growing close together and springing from a narrow out-cropping ledge of rock. It was not so very far down, at most not more than thirty feet. "Harry," she cried, "Harry," sending her voice ringing down the chasm; but he did not even stir at the sound, only the narrow walls gave back the echoes. The silence struck the chill of a new terror to her heart, and she sprang to her feet, gazing wildly about her in every direction.

"I must have help. I must have help," she muttered. But, oh, it would take so long to get men from the camp, and all the time she would be gone he would be lying there silent and motionless, perhaps—no, she shuddered, she would not even think the word.

Once more she sent her seeking, despairing gaze over the hillside, and then uttered a sharp, muffled exclamation, for, rising above the jagged walls of the ravine, and not many feet away, climbing, agilely and rapidly, she saw a man. A moment more and she bent forward in a state half of relief and half of superstitious terror, muttering a prayer, almost believing that it was a vision; and then, with a relief beyond all speech, she saw that it was Jose. She could not be mistaken.

He had pulled himself over the cliff by this time and had cautiously risen to his feet. Up and down the hill and in every direction he sent his sweeping, careful gaze, his far-sighted eyes taking in every detail of the landscape. Then he came toward Pearl, over the bare, brown earth, running low.

"Oh, Jose, Jose," she cried, almost hysterical in her relief, "Harry is down there," pointing to the cliff, "hurt, and you must help me get him up, you must."

"Carramba! So that was the noise and screaming I heard in my rock cell yonder, just as I was about to creep out and take a little air. I would not have dared to come so far if I had not seen you here alone." He threw himself on the ground and looked over the cliff. "Saints and devils! It is true. Poor Harry! But you and I cannot get him up alone."

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"But we can, we must," she cried imperatively. "Go to his cabin quickly and bring some ropes. There is plenty of strong rope there. You can run more quickly than I. Go."

"But the risk." Jose shook his head dubiously. "I shall be in full sight all the way."

"What of it?" she cried frantically. "The moments pass and we are doing nothing. No one will see you. Oh, go." Then, as he still hesitated, a sudden thought struck her. She tore open the neck of her gown and drew out the little black leather bag of loose stones. "Look!" she pulled it open and held it out to him that he might see the gleaming jewels inside. "There, will that make it worth your while? They are yours, Jose, if you will only go."

With a low exclamation of surprise and admiration, Jose bent over them. Then he looked at Pearl, his eyes alive with darting gleams of avarice. He would have risked his life any time, almost without a thought, in order to gain them, and here without his even lifting a finger, they had fallen into his hands, straight out of heaven. It was evidently a reward for the patience with which he had borne the long days that he had lain hidden in Gallito's rock-hewn chamber in the Mont d'Or.

"It shall never be said of Crop-eared Jose that he left a friend in distress," he exclaimed virtuously, and, stuffing the little bag in his pocket, sped up the hill.

Uttering broken expressions of relief, Pearl again threw herself flat on the ground and gazed over the edge of the cliff. And, as she lay thus, moaning out passionately tender words which Harry, lying motionless and unconscious, could not hear, a sudden thought struck her. She would go to him. She looked down, far down where those rocky walls lost themselves in indefinite hazes and shuddered; but another glance at Harry and courage flowed to her again. She saw where, on the narrow projecting ledge and on the trunks of those up-springing pines, she could get a foothold near him, if it were but possible for her to climb down. Scanning the wall closely, it seemed to her rough and jagged enough for her to do so with comparative safety.

Just as she reached this decision, she heard a faint holloo from the same direction in which Jose had come and, turning her head quickly, she saw Mrs. Nitschkan hastening over the hill toward her.

"Gosh a'mighty!" exclaimed the gypsy, when she had come within speaking distance. "What kind of a howdy-do is this? I brought up a bite for Jose to eat and, although I've stood down there whistling my head off, he never poked his head out of the ground, the jack-rabbit! And the next thing I see is you lying flat in the mud."

"Oh, Nitschkan!" Tears of relief were streaming down Pearl's face. "Thank God that you've come. Harry fell over the cliff. We can see him, and Jose's gone to the cabin to get ropes."

With many exclamations of surprise Mrs. Nitschkan peered over the edge of the ravine. "Saved by them little sticks of pine trees and a piece of rock no wider than my foot! Ain't that the workings of Providence for you!"

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"Is he—is he—do you think he is—" Pearl's voice broke in anguish.

"No, I don't. He ain't lookin' that way," said Mrs. Nitschkan, with such force and heartiness that Pearl was immediately reassured. "He's jus' got the sense knocked out of him. I don't jus' see yet how we're goin' to get the ropes fastened to him, so's he can be drug up."

"I'm going down to him. I'll fasten them."

"You! And yet I don't know but what it ain't best. It'll take all the strength Jose and I've got to draw him up careful and not go bumping him too much against the rocks."

Pearl took off her shoes, then, shutting her lips tightly and reassuring herself with the knowledge that the rock was rough and she was sure-footed, she lowered herself over the side of the ravine and reached for a foothold. Presently she found it, and then another. Slowly, with cut and bleeding hands, she made her way down. Half way, perhaps, she grasped a little bush which seemed to spring securely from the cliff and held tightly to this until she could grasp another jutting point of rock and then another bush, until at last, with a great sobbing sigh, she found her feet planted on what seemed sure ground. It was the trunks and the outspreading branches of the same pine trees which held Seagreave. She took a second to draw a long breath, and then, holding cautiously to a little branch, she bent over him.

With infinite tenderness she attempted to straighten out one leg which was doubled beneath him, but he moaned and sighed so that she desisted, seeing from the limp way that it lay that it was broken. He had evidently fallen on his back; and like a dagger zig-zagging its way through her heart was the thought, "What if that, too, were broken?"

Oh, how should they get him up without injuring him further and cruelly hurting him with the ropes. And he must be so cold. She shivered herself in the damp, icy air of this ravine. She called up to Mrs. Nitschkan to swing down to her her long cape, which she had discarded before beginning her climb. The gypsy did so carefully, but just as she let the end of it go a gust of wind swept it in slow circles down the ravine.

Mrs. Nitschkan uttered more or less profane exclamations of disgust; but Pearl said nothing. After her first feeling of intense disappointment, a new idea had come to her, and she hastened to act upon it. As quickly as she could with her torn fingers she unfastened her gown and slipped out of it, and then, unheeding Mrs. Nitschkan, who was scolding her like a magpie, she threw it over Seagreave, tucking it about him as best she could. The breath of the snow-damp air upon her shoulders and arms was like a bath of ice water, but she scarcely noticed it, for she heard Mrs. Nitschkan welcoming Jose.

[Illustration: "Holding cautiously to a little branch, she bent over him."]

He and the gypsy immediately began swinging great coils of rope over the cliff.

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"Can you get the ropes under him, Pearl, and tie 'em in a kind of cradle?" called Mrs. Nitschkan.

"Of course," she answered, "if you and Jose will tell me how."

Then, under their direction, she managed to bind the ropes securely about Seagreave, moaning and weeping herself at the pain she evidently caused him, although he did not so far recover consciousness as to realize what was happening to him. When she had finished, she caught another swinging end of rope which they threw her and climbed up the cliff. She took a moment or two to get her breath, and then slowly and with all the care possible under the circumstances, they drew Seagreave up.

"Dios!" cried Jose, panting, "it is well that you two are so strong, because we have yet to get him to the cabin. Fortunately I, also, have great strength."

After some discussion it was finally decided that Pearl was to hasten on ahead and build up the fires and heat water, while Mrs. Nitschkan and Jose carried Harry up the hill.

It was for them a slow and difficult progress, but the cabin was finally reached and the gypsy and Jose laid him on his bed, undressed him and examined his injuries.

Presently Mrs. Nitschkan came into the outer room, where Pearl cowered beside the fire, her hands over her face. She caught imploringly at the other woman's skirt. "Oh, Nitschkan, what is it? Will he live? Tell me, tell me, quick."

"Things might be better and they might be worse, but," with rough good will, "you ain't no call to wear mourning yet. His back ain't hurt serious, but his left leg and his right arm are both broken and he's an awful lot cut and bruised, especially about the back and the head. I can set a leg myself, as good as most, and many a one have I done, but those that I've set 'em for don't always seem to have as good use of their limbs after as before. So if you want him as good as new again, you'd better have a doctor."

"Yes," agreed Jose, who had come into the room. "They are bad breaks. I, too, can set a leg or an arm, but, as you say, Nitschkan, those for whom I have done it have usually been ungrateful enough not to use them right."

Pearl staggered to her feet. "I will go," she said, "if you two will only stay here and look after him, while I am gone. Oh dear Jose, promise me that you will not leave Nitschkan alone. You can hide here in the cabin when you see me coming with the doctor."

Jose's fingers touched the little black bag in his pocket. "Saints and devils!" he cried, expanding his chest, "only a dog would refuse you. Of course I will stay."

CHAPTER XVI

For the first few weeks after Harry's accident Pearl's consciousness of the external events in the world beyond the confines of the four walls of the cabin seemed obliterated. She could never remember afterward whether the rain fell or the days were flooded with sunshine. All of her energies and interests were absorbed in one issue—his recovery. Fortunately, his injuries proved more painful than dangerous, and were necessarily slow in the mending; but the nursing was arduous, and Pearl might have found it difficult indeed had it not been for the assistance of the two mountain women and Jose.

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It would be another matter to define correctly the motives that impelled that debonair bandit to stand by her side so manfully in the face of Gallito's wrath and reiterated prohibitions. It might have been a conscientious wish to earn the jewels, over the possession of which he had not ceased to gloat, or it might have been an impish desire to annoy Gallito. Again, it might have been gratitude toward Seagreave, sympathy with the Pearl, or, as easily the revolt of Jose's volatile nature against the monotony of life in the narrow confines of his rock chamber.

But to Jose's danger, as to the passing days, Pearl was alike oblivious, and it was not until Harry was able to sit up again for brief periods, that she became aware of times and seasons, of other persons and of the world of human interests and reactions. She awoke to a realization of these facts with a sort of wonder. She looked abroad over the hillsides and saw a new world. The long-awaited spring had sped up from the valleys of mist, and at the wave of her white wand the mountains had bloomed with a delicate iridescence—the luster on young leaves and shining blades of grass. It was then that she also began to apprehend something of the nature of Jose's difficulties.

"I must be more virtuous than I thought," he explained to her one day, not without a touch of complacency, "for if the Devil were truly my friend, he would fly away with your father. Those hawk's eyes of his are ever on me and he orders me daily not to leave the mine. If I could but cook for him," he added mournfully, "he would soon see reason, for," with customary boastfulness, "I have yet to see the man whose opinions I could not change with a single dish. I, Crop-eared Jose, have won freedom more than once on an omelette, and have gained the sympathy and interest of those set against me, with a single sauce. See, he even threatens me because I am true to my friends, but," and here he adopted his most wheedling tone, "if you only would make up with him, and I could but cook him one supper, here in this cabin, and let him win two or three games at cards from me, all would be well again."

"Ah, if I only could," sighed Pearl, "but he wouldn't listen to me unless I consented to leave Harry and sign with Sweeney. You know how set he is, when he makes his mind up. No, he won't listen to me unless I give in about this contract."

Jose nodded without speaking. For once he appeared to be turning something over in his mind. In truth, he was; he felt now that his comfort and safety very largely depended upon a reconciliation between Pearl and her father, and he was prepared to take long chances in an attempt to effect this. Therefore he informed Gallito that from certain remarks Pearl had made from time to time, he, Jose, was convinced that her heart was greatly softened toward her father, and that for his part he was also convinced that she desired nothing more than to see Gallito again.

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The old Spaniard knew Jose too well to put much faith in any of his utterances, but, nevertheless, inspired by a vague hope that Pearl might have repented her decision and wearied of her bargain, he climbed the hill to Seagreave's cabin the next afternoon to see her.

Harry had been sitting up longer than usual that day, and Jose and Pearl had helped him back to his couch in the inner room, where he now lay asleep, and Pearl had resumed her seat in the open door, where she sat gazing out at the wonderful panorama spread before her and idly enjoying the sight, the sound, the fragrance of early summer. Blue ranges, an infinite succession of them, stretching away to an illimitable and expanding horizon, floating in faint pearl hazes, but the hills near at hand were vividly green, their varied monotony of tone broken here and there by great waves of pink and blue wild flowers. Birds were flying from tree to tree, calling and singing, and there fell pleasantly upon Pearl's ears the ripple and splash of the mountain brook. The joy in her heart at Harry's recovery mingled pleasantly with nature's joy in her prodigal, flowering summer.

But all this harmonious blending of natural sounds and sights was broken by the sudden, harsh intrusion of human discord. Hearing footsteps near at hand, Pearl turned quickly to see her father standing almost at her elbow. Lean, gnarled, grizzled and thorny as ever, he was gazing searchingly at her from under his overhanging, bushy brows.

So unexpected was the sight of him that Pearl showed plainly her uncontrollable surprise, which, courageous as she was, was not without a faint touch of fear. Her upper lip drew back from her teeth at the corners of the mouth and the frown so like his own darkened her brow. Rising, she had sprung to the doorway, stretching her arms from post to post as if to prevent him from entering, and he, noting that unconscious attitude of protection for the one within, smiled sourly.

"What are you doing here?" Her voice was harsh and so low that it was barely audible.

"No harm to you or him, either, so don't be scared. I got more important business in hand. I didn't come to quarrel with you, Pearl. I came to talk to you like you were a sensible girl." He had been rolling a cigarette between his fingers, and now he lighted it, and for a moment watched the smoke wreaths drift upward.

"Patience takes most of the tricks in life, I've learned, so I waited until I heard that he was all right again"—he jerked his thumb toward the cabin—"and then I waited until you had time to think, and that's all I'm here to ask you to do, my girl, think."

Again he gazed deeply at her, nodding his head as if to emphasize his words. Gallito could be impressive, even magnetic when he chose, and he chose now.

“I can think a-plenty,” returned Pearl curtly, “but what is it you want me to study about now? If it’s about signing up with Sweeney, I can tell you once and forever that it’s no use. You’re just wasting your breath.”

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His face darkened a little, his eyes gave one quick, wicked flash, but he controlled his temper. "Maybe, maybe," he said placatingly, "but that ain't all I came to talk about. I guess I've lived long enough to know that it's no use to talk to a woman about her interests when she's lost her head about some man." He showed his teeth in a wolfish and contemptuous smile. "No, I ain't such a fool as to waste my breath that way. You are an awful headstrong and wilful girl. Carraja! I do not know where you get such qualities. But somewhere back in your head you have inherited from me, your father, a grain of sense and reason, and because of that I come here to-day, not to try and coax you, no, I know better than that, but to talk to you as man to man." He paused here as if to let some underlying meaning in his words impress her, and she, conscious of this, felt a sudden shiver of apprehension run over her, a momentary despair, as if she were being entangled in some yet invisible net whose meshes were being drawn tight about her. A quick glance at Gallito failed to restore her confidence. There was a look upon his face which did not betoken any expectation of defeat. Again she shivered; he had spoken truly, he was not one to plead, and he would not be here unless he felt that he was in possession of certain arguments which must inevitably coerce her to yield.

"Now, Pearl," his tone was still placating, "for your own sake and for the sake of your future, I am not willing that you should miss this great offer which Sweeney has made you. You have already treated him badly once. He knows he cannot depend on you. How many times do you think he will stand that? You can't afford to do it. I have been holding him off and holding him off until I can't do it any more, and we must now come to a final agreement. And one thing more," he stopped a second to light another cigarette, "what about Hughie? You and he have worked out a lot of dances together. He's got his heart set on traveling with you and playing for you. I don't see how you got the heart to spoil all his plans." For the first time there was a touch of real emotion in his voice; it was Hughie, not Pearl, who held the first place in his heart.

A quiver passed over Pearl's face. "Oh, I am sorry about Hughie," she cried, "but what can I do? I can't leave Harry. It's no use asking me to do that." She looked up at Gallito and, in spite of her tears, there was an immovable resolve on her face and, seeing this, a slow, dark flush crept up her father's cheeks.

"Listen, Pearl," he said, and although he still held the manner of reasoning amicably with her, there was a touch of iron in his grating voice, "I'm here to make terms with you and to keep the relations which should be between father and daughter, but there are many things to consider when a girl is as obstinate as a pig. Then it is her father's duty to decide for her and to see that she does what an obedient and well-brought up girl should do, and he must use what means are in his power to make her see the right way."

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"There are no means in your power to make me see things differently," she said, "yours or anybody else's."

"So!" he said slowly, and flicked the ashes from his cigarette with a hand which trembled slightly. "But all my cards are not played yet. You think that everything shall go your way, but that is not life; no, that is not life. Since you have none of the feelings of respect and obedience which a child should have for a parent, it shall be a game between us. Now, at once, I will play my trump card." There was a grim and saturnine triumph in his voice. "Jose!"

She started and looked at him askance, puzzled and yet fearful. "Jose!" she repeated uncertainly.

"Yes, Jose. Jose has been useful to you, and Jose has spent all his time with you and him." He nodded his head in the direction of the inner room. "I have warned him." There was a quiver of passion and resentment in his voice. "I have pointed out to him again and again the risks that he was running not only for himself, but me. Yet for me—me who has befriended him at the risk of my own life, who has kept him in my cabin for many months, he has no thought, no gratitude. That all goes to Seagreave, Seagreave who stole you and who now lies strapped in his bed unable to help you or Jose or any one else. Well, let Seagreave save him now. And how?" his harsh, mirthless laughter rang out. "Yes, how? Does Seagreave know the secret trails over the mountains? Not he. Then how is our dear Jose to escape? Will you engage to get him safely out of Colina on a railroad train? I think not. Remember there is a big price on his head."

Pearl had shrunk back from him while he was speaking, both horror and fright on her face. "But you can't do that for your own sake," she cried. "It will then be known that you have kept Jose all these months, and that it was he who escaped the night I danced. Do you think the sheriff will forgive you that you lied to him and fooled him? I guess not. And then you sheltered Jose and hid him after that. On your own account you can't let him be taken."

Gallito smiled in unpleasant triumph. "If I should turn state's evidence for so notorious a criminal as Crop-eared Jose I should certainly get immunity myself. I was weak, yes, in my unfortunate desire to reform a fellow countryman, but finding all my efforts hopeless, I at last saw my duty and gave him up."

For the moment fear almost overcame Pearl, and then her high spirit flared. "And you would give poor Jose up," she said. "I would never have believed it, and yet I see you really would do it, just to have me obey your will. But you can't do it, and you won't do it. I tell you now, if you even dare threaten such a thing, I will send for the sheriff and I will tell him the whole story. I will let him know what you are. And more, too"—she made quick steps toward him—"I will have you arrested for assaulting Harry."

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"Ho, ho!" he laughed loudly. "Self-defense, my girl, self-defense. Who could prove anything else? Who would take your word under the circumstances?"

"But I will tell more, much more," she cried, all aflame now. "I will tell of all the cut-throats and thieves you have sheltered in your cabin from time to time. I know their names and I will prove what I say. I will show them the chamber in the mine where Jose is hiding. What will they think of that? You have a high standing in Colina and in other places. You are respected. Are you willing to give all that up just so you can force me to sign with Sweeney? I don't believe it, I won't believe it. But as sure as you don't help Jose to escape, so sure will I do what I say. Oh," she stopped suddenly, a sob in her voice, "oh, here comes Bob, Bob and Hughie!" For the first time she left the doorway in which she had remained protectingly, and ran forward to meet the two who were rapidly mounting the hill.

"Oh, Bob!" she cried. "Oh, Hughie! I knew you two wouldn't go back on me. I knew you'd come sooner or later, both of you."

Hughie clung to her, one arm around her, and Flick's hard and impassive face softened a little as he gazed at her. "Why, Pearl, what's the matter?" he asked. "You look pale, and tears! Why, that ain't a mite like you! Has he been cutting up rough," he glanced toward her father, "and worrying you?"

"Why didn't you come before?" She lifted her shadowed eyes to his.

He winced a little, his mouth twisting slightly. "Ain't it enough that I've come now?" Something in his voice conveyed even to her who had so long taken his unwearying devotion without question and as a matter of course what it had cost him to seek her again.

They had drawn near the cabin by this time and Flick looked at Gallito's frowning face a moment. "Are you needing me, Pearl?" His drawling voice was as lazily indifferent as ever, but his glance held an intimation of danger for Gallito which the old man did not fail to understand.

"Maybe," Pearl replied in a low voice. "You 'most always come when I need you, Bob."

"I guess your interference ain't needed now, Flick," began Gallito. "I can—"

Hughie ran his hand caressingly down the old Spaniard's sleeve. "No need to tell old Bob that we're a united family, Pop," he cried. "Why I'm already composing a wedding march." He caught his adopted father's hand in his.

At this mute expression of affection from the being who was nearest his heart Gallito's face softened a little, although he gazed back at Bob Flick with a baffled and still scornful smile.

“Well,” he said reluctantly, “it ain’t often I confess I’m beat, but I guess I’m too old to stand both Hughie and the girl taking sides against me, not to speak of you, Flick, and I know if it came to a choice between me and those two where you’d stand.”

“There ain’t going to be any sides taken,” said Flick. “We are going to give in and take what’s coming to us, Gallito, like sensible men, whether we like it or not. When’s the wedding, Pearl?”

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A great, beautiful wave of crimson swept over her face.

“Harry wants it right away,” she said.

“The sooner the better,” remarked Bob Flick dryly. “And, by the way”—he put his hand in his pocket and drew out the little black leather bag she had given Jose—“Jose sent you back this for a wedding present. Honest, he didn’t keep out more than three stones. Why,” a flash of alarm on his face, “what’s the matter, Hughie?”

The blind boy was standing a little apart from the rest. His head was thrown up and his face was pale. He was nervously clenching and unclenching his hands, but with that exception his attitude was one of tenseness and singular stillness, as if every faculty were concentrated.

“There’s something about,” he gasped, “something bad. I can’t tell what it is yet, but I’ll know in a minute. Ah-hh!” He rushed across the open space before the cabin and into the trees that grew thickly at the side.

It took Flick but a second to follow him, and the next moment Pearl and her father heard him call. “Come out. I got you covered, but I’ll thank you first for your gun.”

Gallito also started forward now, but before he had taken more than a step or two Hugh emerged first from the underbrush, followed by Hanson and then by Flick.

Seeing who it was, Pearl had shrunk back into the shadow of the room, but then, as if forcing herself to an unpleasant task, she came forward again and leaned against the door post, nonchalant and disdainful in spite of her pallor and the faint trembling of her lower lip.

Hanson swept off his hat and bowed low with exaggerated courtesy and much of his old swagger. The heavy dissipation of the last few months was evident in a marked and shocking way. His figure was gross and bloated, and his bold, ruddy good looks had vanished; his swollen face was purple and the features seemed curiously thickened. The hand which held his hat trembled constantly.

“Again we meet,” he cried. “Well, under the circumstances, I’ve no objection. You pleasant little band of thieves have got ahead of the honest man once or twice, but not for keeps. This is my day, thank you. I’m not giving away information ahead of time again, but, just between friends, I’ll mention that the sheriff is overdue at Nitschkan’s cabin, where Jose happens to be. They’ll be up after the rest of you presently.”

“Carraja!” Gallito ground his teeth, “and I left him at the mine.” Then quickly to Pearl, “Suppose he should get away from them. Are both horses in the stable?”

“Both,” she said. “Hurry, you get on one and I will have the other ready for him. Come, I will help you. Hugh, get down to Nitschkan’s and warn them if you can.”

Gallito ran through the cabin after her. This commotion roused Seagreave and after calling once or twice to Pearl and receiving no answer, he made his way to the doorway, appearing there, thin and white, still upon crutches.

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"Hello, Seagreave," called Hanson, still with his air of bravado. "You've been a long time coming to that door. I been sitting back in the bushes watching for you as patient as a cat watches a mouse-hole, with my gun all cocked and my finger on the trigger, ready to pick you off the minute you showed up. Nothing against you personally, but the Black Pearl didn't spare me, so why should I—oh, you needn't reach for your gun. Good old Bob, ain't that what the Pearl calls him, has got me covered."

"So have I for that matter," said Seagreave.

"All right, if it amuses you." Hanson shrugged his shoulders indifferently and leaned up against a tree which, growing before the cabin, had escaped the sweep of the avalanche. "Lord! Don't I know what you two cut-throats stand ready to do to me? And no one any the wiser. Well, what the hell do I care? But say, Seagreave, since we're all having this nice little afternoon tea talk together, sociable as a Sunday school, it might do you good to take some account of the has-beens. Here's Bob, he had her before I did, but that ain't taking away the fact that I had her once, by God! I guess everybody understands that there's more behind those emeralds than the pretty story we've all heard so often. The Black Pearl certainly ain't cheap."

"Let him alone, Harry." Bob Flick's voice arresting Seagreave in his swift rush toward Hanson had never been more liquid, more languid. All through Hanson's speech his face had not shown even a flicker of expression. "This is mine. It always has been mine, and I've known it ever since you and me, Mr.—, I never can recall your name, but, then, yellow dogs ain't entitled to 'em, anyway—met in the desert."

"I guess that's straight. You always had it in for me from the first night I saw her. Well, you'll only be finishing what she begun. She broke me; she drove me straight to hell. Maybe it was a mis-spent life I offered her, but when I met her I had money and success, I wasn't a soak. I still had the don't-give-a-damn snap in me, and, even if you're middle-aged, that's youth. But she's like a fever that you can't shake off. And she don't play fair. But she's the only one. You know that, Bob Flick, and she didn't have the right—"

"I ain't ever questioned her right, Hanson"—Flick used his name for the first time—"and I'm standing here to prove it now. For the sake of Miss Gallito, because she once took notice of you, I'm going to treat you like you was a gentleman. Here's your gun. Take your twenty paces. And, remember, this ain't to wound, it's to kill."

Hanson took the pistol and measured off the paces. Then he turned and looked from one man to another with a smile of triumph on his evil face. "Broke by the Black Pearl and then shot by her dog! That's a nice finish. I can shoot some myself, but I ain't in your class, Flick, and you know it. I guess not. I prefer my own route." He looked toward the cabin, where it seemed to him that Pearl or her shadow wavered a moment

in the doorway. “Here’s dying to you, honey,” and before either man could stop him he lifted his pistol and shot himself through the heart.

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In the meantime certain events of more importance than the passing of Hanson, to those involved, were taking place in Mrs. Nitschkan's cabin. As soon as Gallito had left the mine and taken his way up to Seagreave's Jose also had departed from his cell by way of the ravine and had hastened to the abode of Mrs. Nitschkan, where he and Mrs. Thomas were soon absorbed in the composition of various appetizing dishes, for with the connivance of the two women Jose hoped that evening again to subjugate Gallito with the spell of his cookery, and win back the indulgence he had been steadily losing.

The afternoon, then, was passing most pleasantly for both Mrs. Thomas and himself when suddenly the door was flung open and Mrs. Nitschkan, who had been fishing in a creek further down the hill, came dashing in.

"Jose," she cried, "the Sheriff and his boys is all out after you again. There's nobody else they'd want up this way. They couldn't keep under cover all the way, for they had to cross the bridge, and I happened to see 'em then. Get out quick through the trees for Harry's cabin."

"But I don't know the secret trail."

"Gallito does. Anyway, cut for it an' maybe I can throw them off the scent. Gosh a'mighty! Cut for it. They're here."

With one last, hasty kiss on Mrs. Thomas' cheek, Jose was out of the door like a flash.

"Now quick, Marthy." Mrs. Nitschkan had seized a pair of scissors and cut the pocket from her skirt, tucking the roll of bills which it contained into her man's boot. "Cry, Marthy, cry like you never cried before. Go on, I say. Yelpin's your strong suit. Now yelp."

With that she fell to swearing lustily herself and throwing the furniture about, even turning the stove over and sending a great shower of soot about the room.

At the height of all this noise and confusion, dominated, it must be said, by Mrs. Thomas's loud and, to do her justice, sincere weeping, there came a thunderous knocking on the door, and without waiting to have it answered the sheriff threw it open and stepped in.

"Holy smoke!" he cried. "What you knockin' down the cook-stove for?"

"Cause I'm fightin' mad, that's why," returned Mrs. Nitschkan tartly, "and I sure am glad to see you. I been robbed, that's what. Ain't that so, Marthy?"

Mrs. Thomas lifted her tear-stained face and corroborated this with mournful nods.



"Whilst I was takin' a little nap," went on Mrs. Nitschkan excitedly, "a rascal brother of Gallito's who shouldn't never have been let out of jail cut the pocket clean out of my skirt and stole my roll. Look here!" exhibiting the jagged hole, and also the empty pocket which lay upon the floor, "I just waked up to find him gone. He can't have got far, though. I guess he thinks I ain't on to that rock chamber Gallito blasted out for him in the Mont d'Or, but he showed it to Marthy here, and she showed it to me. Come on, and we'll get down there quick."

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"Some of us will." The sheriff was inclined to believe her, and yet he was still suspicious. A rock chamber in the Mont d'Or! That certainly accounted for the miraculous escape of last winter.

"Pedro?" he asked. "Are you sure it ain't Jose?"

"I ain't heard of any Jose, have you Marthy?" asked Mrs. Nitschkan innocently. "Pedro was his name. But come on quick."

"Two of you boys search this cabin and the woods around," ordered the sheriff, "and two of you go up to Seagreave's cabin. The rest come along with me."

Led by Mrs. Nitschkan, still volubly lamenting her loss, they started down the hill toward the ravine, when the sheriff suddenly looked up to see upon the crest of the hill just before it dipped into a descending slope two horsemen at full gallop, both horses and riders outlined against the sky.

"Our men are up there, boys," he cried. "Quick. I've got the fastest horse in the county, and we'll get them before they get to three rocks."

He was back to his horse again and on it and up the hill before his men were fairly in the saddle. It was a race after that, and so rapidly did he gain on Gallito and Jose that it looked as if his prediction of getting them before they reached three rocks was about to be verified. "I must do it, I must do it," he kept muttering to himself, "for it's bad going after that, and it'll take us all some time to find him."

He was lessening the distance between them with every long, powerful stride of his horse, but already the three rocks, gaunt and high, loomed before him as if forming an impassable barrier across the road. Suddenly, just as Jose and Gallito had almost reached them and the sheriff was gaining upon the fugitives in great leaps, he saw them swerve their horses aside and dash into a clump of trees to the right of the rocks.

"Oh, the fools! the fools! I got 'em now. Instead of going for the rocks, they've made for the trees."

A few minutes later he and his men found the horses ridden by Gallito and Jose blown and hard-breathing among the trees, but no trace could they discover of the men they sought. Beyond the three rocks the character of the hills changed strikingly. Instead of the wide, undulating, wooded plateau, over which riding was so easy, the mountains suddenly seemed split by mighty gashes, a great pocket of crevasses and towering cliffs.

The sheriff and his men beat about aimlessly and conscientiously for several hours, but in vain. Jose and Gallito had long before "hit" the secret trail. So finally the sheriff, who was inclined to put less faith than ever in Hanson's representations, and convinced in

his own mind that Gallito was merely conniving at the escape of an unregenerate brother, and that Mrs. Nitschkan's tale was true, called off his men and rode home. "The cuss ain't important," he remarked, "and I guess Gallito'll be glad enough to make up Nitschkan's loss to her and keep her mouth shut."

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It was evening. Pearl and Seagreave sat in the door of the cabin. Her head drooped, her hands lay listlessly in her lap, and her brooding gaze was fixed on the soft, dark night. "Oh," she cried at last, "how can I do anything but leave you? Look at the mischief I've done in the world. Look at it!"

Seagreave clasped his arms about her and laid his cheek on hers. "Let's forget it all, Pearl, forget that you've been a firebrand and I've been a quitter, and begin life all over again. There's only one thing in it, anyway, and that's love."

"Just love," she answered softly. "Well, love's enough."

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