IN A HOLLOW OF THE HILLS & STORIES

BY

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Chapter 1

It was very dark, and the wind was increasing. The last gust had been preceded by an ominous roaring down the whole mountain-side, which continued for some time after the trees in the little valley had lapsed into silence. The air was filled with a faint, cool, sodden odor, as of stirred forest depths. In those intervals of silence the darkness seemed to increase in proportion and grow almost palpable. Yet out of this sightless and soundless void now came the tinkle of a spur's rowels, the dry crackling of saddle leathers, and the muffled plunge of a hoof in the thick carpet of dust and desiccated leaves. Then a voice, which in spite of its matter-of-fact reality the obscurity lent a certain mystery to, said:

"I can't make out anything! Where the devil have we got to, anyway? It's as black as Tophet, here ahead!"

"Strike a light and make a flare with something," returned a second voice. "Look where you're shoving to—now—keep your horse off, will ye."

There was more muffled plunging, a silence, the rustle of paper, the quick spurt of a match, and then the uplifting of a flickering flame. But it revealed only the heads and shoulders of three horsemen, framed within a nebulous ring of light, that still left their horses and even their lower figures in impenetrable shadow. Then the flame leaped up and died out with a few zigzagging sparks that were falling to the ground, when a third voice, that was low but somewhat pleasant in its cadence, said:

"Be careful where you throw that. You were careless last time. With this wind and the leaves like tinder, you might send a furnace blast through the woods."

"Then at least we'd see where we were."

Nevertheless, he moved his horse, whose trampling hoofs beat out the last fallen spark. Complete darkness and silence again followed. Presently the first speaker continued:

"I reckon we'll have to wait here till the next squall clears away the scud from the sky? Hello! What's that?"

Out of the obscurity before them appeared a faint light—a dim but perfectly defined square of radiance—which, however, did not appear to illuminate anything around it. Suddenly it disappeared.

"That's a house—it's a light in a window," said the second voice.

"House be d—d!" retorted the first speaker. "A house with a window on Galloper's Ridge, fifteen miles from anywhere? You're crazy!"

Nevertheless, from the muffled plunging and tinkling that followed, they seemed to be moving in the direction where the light had appeared. Then there was a pause.

"There's nothing but a rocky outcrop here, where a house couldn't stand, and we're off the trail again," said the first speaker impatiently.

"Stop!—there it is again!"

The same square of light appeared once more, but the horsemen had evidently diverged in the darkness, for it seemed to be in a different direction. But it was more distinct, and as they gazed a shadow appeared upon its radiant surface—the profile of a human face. Then the light suddenly went out, and the face vanished with it.

"It IS a window, and there was some one behind it," said the second speaker emphatically.

"It was a woman's face," said the pleasant voice.

"Whoever it is, just hail them, so that we can get our bearings. Sing out! All together!"

The three voices rose in a prolonged shout, in which, however, the distinguishing quality of the pleasant voice was sustained. But there was no response from the darkness beyond. The shouting was repeated after an interval with the same result: the silence and obscurity remained unchanged.

"Let's get out of this," said the first speaker angrily; "house or no house, man or woman, we're not wanted, and we'll make nothing waltzing round here!"

"Hush!" said the second voice. "Sh-h! Listen."

The leaves of the nearest trees were trilling audibly. Then came a sudden gust that swept the fronds of the taller ferns into their faces, and laid the thin, lithe whips of alder over their horses' flanks sharply. It was followed by the distant sea-like roaring of the mountain-side.

"That's a little more like it!" said the first speaker joyfully. "Another blow like that and we're all right. And look! there's a lightenin' up over the trail we came by."

There was indeed a faint glow in that direction, like the first suffusion of dawn, permitting the huge shoulder of the mountain along whose flanks they had been journeying to be distinctly seen. The sodden breath of the stirred forest depths was slightly tainted with an acrid fume.

"That's the match you threw away two hours ago," said the pleasant voice deliberately. "It's caught the dry brush in the trail round the bend."

"Anyhow, it's given us our bearings, boys," said the first speaker, with satisfied accents. "We're all right now; and the wind's lifting the sky ahead there. Forward now, all together, and let's get out of this hell-hole while we can!"

It was so much lighter that the bulk of each horseman could be seen as they moved forward together. But there was no thinning of the obscurity on either side of them. Nevertheless the profile of the horseman with the pleasant voice seemed to be occasionally turned backward, and he suddenly checked his horse.

"There's the window again!" he said. "Look! There—it's gone again."

"Let it go and be d—d!" returned the leader. "Come on."

They spurred forward in silence. It was not long before the wayside trees began to dimly show spaces between them, and the ferns to give way to lower, thick-set shrubs, which in turn yielded to a velvety moss, with long quiet intervals of netted and tangled grasses. The regular fall of the horses' feet became a mere rhythmic throbbing. Then suddenly a single hoof rang out sharply on stone, and the first speaker reined in slightly.

"Thank the Lord we're on the ridge now! and the rest is easy. Tell you what, though, boys, now we're all right, I don't mind saying that I didn't take no stock in that blamed corpse light down there. If there ever was a will-o'-the-wisp on a square up mountain, that was one. It wasn't no window! Some of ye thought ye saw a face too—eh?"

"Yes, and a rather pretty one," said the pleasant voice meditatively.

"That's the way they'd build that sort of thing, of course. It's lucky ye had to satisfy yourself with looking. Gosh! I feel creepy yet, thinking of it! What are ye looking back for now like Lot's wife? Blamed if I don't think that face bewitched ye."

"I was only thinking about that fire you started," returned the other quietly. "I don't see it now."

"Well—if you did?"

"I was wondering whether it could reach that hollow."

"I reckon that hollow could take care of any casual nat'rel fire that came boomin' along, and go two better every time! Why, I don't believe there was any fire; it was all a piece of that infernal ignis fatuus phantasmagoriana that was played upon us down there!"

With the laugh that followed they started forward again, relapsing into the silence of tired men at the end of a long journey. Even their few remarks were interjectional, or reminiscent of topics whose freshness had been exhausted with the day. The gaining light which seemed to come from the ground about them rather than from the still, overcast sky

above, defined their individuality more distinctly. The man who had first spoken, and who seemed to be their leader, wore the virgin unshaven beard, mustache, and flowing hair of the Californian pioneer, and might have been the eldest; the second speaker was close shaven, thin, and energetic; the third, with the pleasant voice, in height, litheness, and suppleness of figure appeared to be the youngest of the party. The trail had now become a grayish streak along the level table-land they were following, which also had the singular effect of appearing lighter than the surrounding landscape, yet of plunging into utter darkness on either side of its precipitous walls. Nevertheless, at the end of an hour the leader rose in his stirrups with a sigh of satisfaction.

"There's the light in Collinson's Mill! There's nothing gaudy and spectacular about that, boys, eh? No, sir! it's a square, honest beacon that a man can steer by. We'll be there in twenty minutes." He was pointing into the darkness below the already descending trail. Only a pioneer's eye could have detected the few pin-pricks of light in the impenetrable distance, and it was a signal proof of his leadership that the others accepted it without seeing it. "It's just ten o'clock," he continued, holding a huge silver watch to his eye; "we've wasted an hour on those blamed spooks yonder!"

"We weren't off the trail more than ten minutes, Uncle Dick," protested the pleasant voice.

"All right, my son; go down there if you like and fetch out your Witch of Endor, but as for me, I'm going to throw myself the other side of Collinson's lights. They're good enough for me, and a blamed sight more stationary!"

The grade was very steep, but they took it, California fashion, at a gallop, being genuinely good riders, and using

their brains as well as their spurs in the understanding of their horses, and of certain natural laws, which the more artificial riders of civilization are apt to overlook. Hence there was no hesitation or indecision communicated to the nervous creatures they bestrode, who swept over crumbling stones and slippery ledges with a momentum that took away half their weight, and made a stumble or false step, or indeed anything but an actual collision, almost impossible. Closing together they avoided the latter, and holding each other well up, became one irresistible wedge-shaped mass. At times they yelled, not from consciousness nor bravado, but from the purely animal instinct of warning and to combat the breathlessness of their descent, until, reaching the level, they charged across the gravelly bed of a vanished river, and pulled up at Collinson's Mill. The mill itself had long since vanished with the river, but the building that had once stood for it was used as a rude hostelry for travelers, which, however, bore no legend or invitatory sign. Those who wanted it, knew it; those who passed it by, gave it no offense.

Collinson himself stood by the door, smoking a contemplative pipe. As they rode up, he disengaged himself from the doorpost listlessly, walked slowly towards them, said reflectively to the leader, "I've been thinking with you that a vote for Thompson is a vote thrown away," and prepared to lead the horses towards the water tank. He had parted with them over twelve hours before, but his air of simply renewing a recently interrupted conversation was too common a circumstance to attract their notice. They knew, and he knew, that no one else had passed that way since he had last spoken; that the same sun had swung silently above him and the unchanged landscape, and there had been no interruption nor diversion to his monotonous thought. The wilderness annihilates time and space with the grim pathos of patience.

Nevertheless he smiled. “Ye don’t seem to have got through coming down yet,” he continued, as a few small boulders, loosened in their rapid descent, came more deliberately rolling and plunging after the travelers along the gravelly bottom. Then he turned away with the horses, and, after they were watered, he reentered the house. His guests had evidently not waited for his ministration. They had already taken one or two bottles from the shelves behind a wide bar and helped themselves, and, glasses in hand, were now satisfying the more imminent cravings of hunger with biscuits from a barrel and slices of smoked herring from a box. Their equally singular host, accepting their conduct as not unusual, joined the circle they had comfortably drawn round the fireplace, and meditatively kicking a brand back at the fire, said, without looking at them:

“Well?”

“Well!” returned the leader, leaning back in his chair after carefully unloosing the buckle of his belt, but with his eyes also on the fire—“well! we’ve prospected every yard of outcrop along the Divide, and there ain’t the ghost of a silver indication anywhere.”

“Not a smell,” added the close-shaven guest, without raising his eyes.

They all remained silent, looking at the fire, as if it were the one thing they had taken into their confidence. Collinson also addressed himself to the blaze as he said presently: “It allus seemed to me that thar was something shiny about that ledge just round the shoulder of the spur, over the long canyon.”

The leader ejaculated a short laugh. “Shiny, eh? shiny! Ye think THAT a sign? Why, you might as well

reckon that because Key's head, over thar, is gray and silvery that he's got sabe and experience." As he spoke he looked towards the man with a pleasant voice. The fire shining full upon him revealed the singular fact that while his face was still young, and his mustache quite dark, his hair was perfectly gray. The object of this attention, far from being disconcerted by the comparison, added with a smile:

"Or that he had any silver in his pocket."

Another lapse of silence followed. The wind tore round the house and rumbled in the short, adobe chimney.

"No, gentlemen," said the leader reflectively, "this sort o' thing is played out. I don't take no more stock in that cock-and-bull story about the lost Mexican mine. I don't catch on to that Sunday-school yarn about the pious, scientific sharp who collected leaves and vegetables all over the Divide, all the while he scientifically knew that the range was solid silver, only he wouldn't soil his fingers with God-forsaken lucre. I ain't saying anything agin that fine-spun theory that Key believes in about volcanic upheavals that set up on end argentiferous rock, but I simply say that I don't see it—with the naked eye. And I reckon it's about time, boys, as the game's up, that we handed in our checks, and left the board."

There was another silence around the fire, another whirl and turmoil without. There was no attempt to combat the opinions of their leader; possibly the same sense of disappointed hopes was felt by all, only they preferred to let the man of greater experience voice it. He went on:

"We've had our little game, boys, ever since we left Rawlin's a week ago; we've had our ups and downs; we've been starved and parched, snowed up and half drowned, shot

at by road-agents and horse-thieves, kicked by mules and played with by grizzlies. We've had a heap o' fun, boys, for our money, but I reckon the picnic is about over. So we'll shake hands to-morrow all round and call it square, and go on our ways separately."

"And what do you think you'll do, Uncle Dick?" said his close- shaven companion listlessly.

"I'll make tracks for a square meal, a bed that a man can comfortably take off his boots and die in, and some violet-scented soap. Civilization's good enough for me! I even reckon I wouldn't mind 'the sound of the church-going bell' ef there was a theatre handy, as there likely would be. But the wilderness is played out."

"You'll be back to it again in six months, Uncle Dick," retorted the other quickly.

Uncle Dick did not reply. It was a peculiarity of the party that in their isolated companionship they had already exhausted discussion and argument. A silence followed, in which they all looked at the fire as if it was its turn to make a suggestion.

"Collinson," said the pleasant voice abruptly, "who lives in the hollow this side of the Divide, about two miles from the first spur above the big canyon?"

"Nary soul!"

"Are you sure?"

"Sartin! Thar ain't no one but me betwixt Bald Top and Skinner's— twenty-five miles."

"Of course, YOU'D know if any one had come there lately?" persisted the pleasant voice.

"I reckon. It ain't a week ago that I tramped the whole distance that you fellers just rode over."

"There ain't," said the leader deliberately, "any enchanted castle or cabin that goes waltzing round the road with revolving windows and fairy princesses looking out of 'em?"

But Collinson, recognizing this as purely irrelevant humor, with possibly a trap or pitfall in it, moved away from the fireplace without a word, and retired to the adjoining kitchen to prepare supper. Presently he reappeared.

"The pork bar'l's empty, boys, so I'll hev to fix ye up with jerked beef, potatoes, and flapjacks. Ye see, thar ain't anybody ben over from Skinner's store for a week."

"All right; only hurry up!" said Uncle Dick cheerfully, settling himself back in his chair, "I reckon to turn in as soon as I've rastled with your hash, for I've got to turn out agin and be off at sun-up."

They were all very quiet again—so quiet that they could not help noticing that the sound of Collinson's preparations for their supper had ceased too. Uncle Dick arose softly and walked to the kitchen door. Collinson was sitting before a small kitchen stove, with a fork in his hand, gazing abstractedly before him. At the sound of his guest's footsteps he started, and the noise of preparation recommenced. Uncle Dick returned to his chair by the fire. Leaning towards the chair of the close-shaven man, he said in a lower voice:

"He was off agin!"

"What?"

"Thinkin' of that wife of his."

"What about his wife?" asked Key, lowering his voice also.

The three men's heads were close together.

"When Collinson fixed up this mill he sent for his wife in the States," said Uncle Dick, in a half whisper, "waited a year for her, hanging round and boarding every emigrant wagon that came through the Pass. She didn't come—only the news that she was dead." He paused and nudged his chair still closer—the heads were almost touching. "They say, over in the Bar"—his voice had sunk to a complete whisper—"that it was a lie! That she ran away with the man that was fetchin' her out. Three thousand miles and three weeks with another man upsets some women. But HE knows nothing about it, only he sometimes kinder goes off looney-like, thinking of her." He stopped, the heads separated; Collinson had appeared at the doorway, his melancholy patience apparently unchanged.

"Grub's on, gentlemen; sit by and eat."

The humble meal was dispatched with zest and silence. A few interjectional remarks about the uncertainties of prospecting only accented the other pauses. In ten minutes they were out again by the fireplace with their lit pipes. As there were only three chairs, Collinson stood beside the chimney.

"Collinson," said Uncle Dick, after the usual pause, taking his pipe from his lips, "as we've got to get up and get at sun-up, we might as well tell you now that we're dead broke. We've been living for the last few weeks on Preble Key's loose change—and that's gone. You'll have to let this little account and damage stand over."

Collinson's brow slightly contracted, without, however, altering his general expression of resigned patience.

"I'm sorry for you, boys," he said slowly, "and" (diffidently) "kinder sorry for myself, too. You see, I reckoned on goin' over to Skinner's to-morrow, to fill up the pork bar'l and vote for Mesick and the wagon-road. But Skinner can't let me have anything more until I've paid suthin' on account, as he calls it."

"D'ye mean to say thar's any mountain man as low flung and mean as that?" said Uncle Dick indignantly.

"But it isn't HIS fault," said Collinson gently; "you see, they won't send him goods from Sacramento if he don't pay up, and he CAN'T if I DON'T. Sabe?"

"Ah! that's another thing. They ARE mean—in Sacramento," said Uncle Dick, somewhat mollified.

The other guests murmured an assent to this general proposition. Suddenly Uncle Dick's face brightened.

"Look here! I know Skinner, and I'll stop there—No, blank it all! I can't, for it's off my route! Well, then, we'll fix it this way. Key will go there and tell Skinner that I say that I'LL send the money to that Sacramento hound. That'll fix it!"

Collinson's brow cleared; the solution of the difficulty seemed to satisfy everybody, and the close-shaven man smiled.

"And I'll secure it," he said, "and give Collinson a sight draft on myself at San Francisco."

"What's that for?" said Collinson, with a sudden suffusion on each cheek.

"In case of accident."

"Wot accident?" persisted Collinson, with a dark look of suspicion on his usually placid face.

"In case we should forget it," said the close-shaven man, with a laugh.

"And do you suppose that if you boys went and forgot it that I'd have anything to do with your d—d paper?" said Collinson, a murky cloud coming into his eyes.

"Why, that's only business, Colly," interposed Uncle Dick quickly; "that's all Jim Parker means; he's a business man, don't you see. Suppose we got killed! You've that draft to show."

"Show who?" growled Collinson.

"Why—hang it!—our friends, our heirs, our relations—to get your money, hesitated Uncle Dick.

"And do you kalkilate," said Collinson, with deeply laboring breath, "that if you got killed, that I'd be coming on your folks for the worth of the d—d truck I giv ye? Go 'way! Lemme git out o' this. You're makin' me tired." He stalked

to the door, lit his pipe, and began to walk up and down the gravelly river-bed. Uncle Dick followed him. From time to time the two other guests heard the sounds of alternate protest and explanation as they passed and repassed the windows. Preble Key smiled, Parker shrugged his shoulders.

"He'll be thinkin' you've begrudged him your grub if you don't— that's the way with these business men," said Uncle Dick's voice in one of these intervals. Presently they reentered the house, Uncle Dick saying casually to Parker, "You can leave that draft on the bar when you're ready to go to-morrow;" and the incident was presumed to have ended. But Collinson did not glance in the direction of Parker for the rest of the evening; and, indeed, standing with his back to the chimney, more than once fell into that stolid abstraction which was supposed to be the contemplation of his absent wife.

From this silence, which became infectious, the three guests were suddenly aroused by a furious clattering down the steep descent of the mountain, along the trail they had just ridden! It came near, increasing in sound, until it even seemed to scatter the fine gravel of the river-bed against the sides of the house, and then passed in a gust of wind that shook the roof and roared in the chimney. With one common impulse the three travelers rose and went to the door. They opened it to a blackness that seemed to stand as another and an iron door before them, but to nothing else.

"Somebody went by then," said Uncle Dick, turning to Collinson. "Didn't you hear it?"

"Nary," said Collinson patiently, without moving from the chimney.

"What in God's name was it, then?"

"Only some of them boulders you loosed coming down. It's touch and go with them for days after. When I first came here I used to start up and rush out into the road—like as you would—yellin' and screechin' after folks that never was there and never went by. Then it got kinder monotonous, and I'd lie still and let 'em slide. Why, one night I'd a'sworn that some one pulled up with a yell and shook the door. But I sort of allowed to myself that whatever it was, it wasn't wantin' to eat, drink, sleep, or it would come in, and I hadn't any call to interfere. And in the mornin' I found a rock as big as that box, lying chock-a-block agin the door. Then I knowed I was right."

Preble Key remained looking from the door.

"There's a glow in the sky over Big Canyon," he said, with a meaning glance at Uncle Dick.

"Saw it an hour ago," said Collinson. "It must be the woods afire just round the bend above the canyon. Whoever goes to Skinner's had better give it a wide berth."

Key turned towards Collinson as if to speak, but apparently changed his mind, and presently joined his companions, who were already rolling themselves in their blankets, in a series of wooden bunks or berths, ranged as in a ship's cabin, around the walls of a resinous, sawdusty apartment that had been the measuring room of the mill. Collinson disappeared—no one knew or seemed to care where—and, in less than ten minutes from the time that they had returned from the door, the hush of sleep and rest seemed to possess the whole house. There was no light but that of the fire in the front room, which threw flickering and gigantic shadows on the walls of the three empty chairs before it. An hour later it seemed as if one of the chairs were occupied, and a grotesque profile of Collinson's

slumbering—or meditating—face and figure was projected grimly on the rafters as though it were the hovering guardian spirit of the house. But even that passed presently and faded out, and the beleaguering darkness that had encompassed the house all the evening began to slowly creep in through every chink and cranny of the rambling, ill-jointed structure, until it at last obliterated even the faint embers on the hearth. The cool fragrance of the woodland depths crept in with it until the steep of human warmth, the reek of human clothing, and the lingering odors of stale human victual were swept away in that incorruptible and omnipotent breath. An hour later—and the wilderness had repossessed itself of all.

Key, the lightest sleeper, awoke early—so early that the dawn announced itself only in two dim squares of light that seemed to grow out of the darkness at the end of the room where the windows looked out upon the valley. This reminded him of his woodland vision of the night before, and he lay and watched them until they brightened and began to outline the figures of his still sleeping companions. But there were faint stirrings elsewhere—the soft brushing of a squirrel across the shingled roof, the tiny flutter of invisible wings in the rafters, the "peep" and "squeak" of baby life below the floor. And then he fell into a deeper sleep, and awoke only when it was broad day.

The sun was shining upon the empty bunks; his companions were already up and gone. They had separated as they had come together—with the light-hearted irresponsibility of animals— without regret, and scarcely reminiscence; bearing, with cheerful philosophy and the hopefulness of a future unfettered by their past, the final disappointment of their quest. If they ever met again, they would laugh and remember; if they did not, they would forget without a sigh. He hurriedly dressed himself, and went outside to dip his face and hands in the bucket that stood

beside the door; but the clear air, the dazzling sunshine, and the unexpected prospect half intoxicated him.

The abandoned mill stretched beside him in all the pathos of its premature decay. The ribs of the water-wheel appeared amid a tangle of shrubs and driftwood, and were twined with long grasses and straggling vines; mounds of sawdust and heaps of "brush" had taken upon themselves a velvety moss where the trickling slime of the vanished river lost itself in sluggish pools, discolored with the dyes of redwood. But on the other side of the rocky ledge dropped the whole length of the valley, alternately bathed in sunshine or hidden in drifts of white and clinging smoke. The upper end of the long canyon, and the crests of the ridge above him, were lost in this fleecy cloud, which at times seemed to overflow the summits and fall in slow leaps like lazy cataracts down the mountain-side. Only the range before the ledge was clear; there the green pines seemed to swell onward and upward in long mounting billows, until at last they broke against the sky.

In the keen stimulus of the hour and the air Key felt the mountaineer's longing for action, and scarcely noticed that Collinson had pathetically brought out his pork barrel to scrape together a few remnants for his last meal. It was not until he had finished his coffee, and Collinson had brought up his horse, that a slight sense of shame at his own and his comrades' selfishness embarrassed his parting with his patient host. He himself was going to Skinner's to plead for him; he knew that Parker had left the draft—he had seen it lying in the bar—but a new sense of delicacy kept him from alluding to it now. It was better to leave Collinson with his own peculiar ideas of the responsibilities of hospitality unchanged. Key shook his hand warmly, and galloped up the rocky slope. But when he had finally reached the higher level, and fancied he could even now see the dust raised by

his departing comrades on their two diverging paths, although he knew that they had already gone their different ways—perhaps never to meet again—his thoughts and his eyes reverted only to the ruined mill below him and its lonely occupant.

He could see him quite distinctly in that clear air, still standing before his door. And then he appeared to make a parting gesture with his hand, and something like snow fluttered in the air above his head. It was only the torn fragments of Parker's draft, which this homely gentleman of the Sierras, standing beside his empty pork barrel, had scattered to the four winds.

Chapter 2

Key's attention was presently directed to something more important to his present purpose. The keen wind which he had faced in mounting the grade had changed, and was now blowing at his back. His experience of forest fires had already taught him that this was too often only the cold air rushing in to fill the vacuum made by the conflagration, and it needed not his sensation of an acrid smarting in his eyes, and an unaccountable dryness in the air which he was now facing, to convince him that the fire was approaching him. It had evidently traveled faster than he had expected, or had diverged from its course. He was disappointed, not because it would oblige him to take another route to Skinner's, as Collinson had suggested, but for a very different reason. Ever since his vision of the preceding night, he had resolved to revisit the hollow and discover the mystery. He had kept his purpose a secret—partly because he wished to avoid the jesting remarks of his companions, but particularly because he wished to go alone, from a very singular impression that although they had witnessed the incident he had really seen more than they did. To this was also added the haunting fear he had felt during the night that this mysterious habitation and its occupants were in the track of the conflagration. He had not dared to dwell upon it openly on account of Uncle Dick's evident responsibility for the origin of the fire; he appeased his conscience with the reflection that the inmates of the dwelling no doubt had ample warning in time to escape. But still, he and his companions ought to have stopped to help them, and then—but here he paused, conscious of another reason he could scarcely voice then, or even now. Preble Key had not passed the age of romance,

but like other romancists he thought he had evaded it by treating it practically.

Meantime he had reached the fork where the trail diverged to the right, and he must take that direction if he wished to make a detour of the burning woods to reach Skinner's. His momentary indecision communicated itself to his horse, who halted. Recalled to himself, he looked down mechanically, when his attention was attracted by an unfamiliar object lying in the dust of the trail. It was a small slipper—so small that at first he thought it must have belonged to some child. He dismounted and picked it up. It was worn and shaped to the foot. It could not have lain there long, for it was not filled nor discolored by the wind-blown dust of the trail, as all other adjacent objects were. If it had been dropped by a passing traveler, that traveler must have passed Collinson's, going or coming, within the last twelve hours. It was scarcely possible that the shoe could have dropped from the foot without the wearer's knowing it, and it must have been dropped in an urgent flight, or it would have been recovered. Thus practically Key treated his romance. And having done so, he instantly wheeled his horse and plunged into the road in the direction of the fire.

But he was surprised after twenty minutes' riding to find that the course of the fire had evidently changed. It was growing clearer before him; the dry heat seemed to come more from the right, in the direction of the detour he should have taken to Skinner's. This seemed almost providential, and in keeping with his practical treatment of his romance, as was also the fact that in all probability the fire had not yet visited the little hollow which he intended to explore. He knew he was nearing it now; the locality had been strongly impressed upon him even in the darkness of the previous evening. He had passed the rocky ledge; his horse's hoofs no longer rang out clearly; slowly and perceptibly they grew

deadened in the springy mosses, and were finally lost in the netted grasses and tangled vines that indicated the vicinity of the densely wooded hollow. Here were already some of the wider spaced vanguards of that wood; but here, too, a peculiar circumstance struck him. He was already descending the slight declivity; but the distance, instead of deepening in leafy shadow, was actually growing lighter. Here were the outskirting sentinels of the wood— but the wood itself was gone! He spurred his horse through the tall arch between the opened columns, and pulled up in amazement.

The wood, indeed, was gone, and the whole hollow filled with the already black and dead stumps of the utterly consumed forest! More than that, from the indications before him, the catastrophe must have almost immediately followed his retreat from the hollow on the preceding night. It was evident that the fire had leaped the intervening shoulder of the spur in one of the unaccountable, but by no means rare, phenomena of this kind of disaster. The circling heights around were yet untouched; only the hollow, and the ledge of rock against which they had blundered with their horses when they were seeking the mysterious window in last evening's darkness, were calcined and destroyed. He dismounted and climbed the ledge, still warm from the spent fire. A large mass of grayish outcrop had evidently been the focus of the furnace blast of heat which must have raged for hours in this spot. He was skirting its crumbling debris when he started suddenly at a discovery which made everything else fade into utter insignificance. Before him, in a slight depression formed by a fault or lapse in the upheaved strata, lay the charred and incinerated remains of a dwelling-house leveled to the earth! Originally half hidden by a natural abattis of growing myrtle and ceanothus which covered this counter-scarp of rock towards the trail, it must have stood within a hundred feet of them during their halt!

Even in its utter and complete obliteration by the furious furnace blast that had swept across it, there was still to be seen an unmistakable ground plan and outline of a four-roomed house. While everything that was combustible had succumbed to that intense heat, there was still enough half-fused and warped metal, fractured iron plate, and twisted and broken bars to indicate the kitchen and tool shed. Very little had, evidently, been taken away; the house and its contents were consumed where they stood. With a feeling of horror and desperation Key at last ventured to disturb two or three of the blackened heaps that lay before him. But they were only vestiges of clothing, bedding, and crockery—there was no human trace that he could detect. Nor was there any suggestion of the original condition and quality of the house, except its size: whether the ordinary unsightly cabin of frontier "partners," or some sylvan cottage—there was nothing left but the usual ignoble and unsavory ruins of burnt-out human habitation.

And yet its very existence was a mystery. It had been unknown at Collinson's, its nearest neighbor, and it was presumable that it was equally unknown at Skinner's. Neither he nor his companions had detected it in their first journey by day through the hollow, and only the tell-tale window at night had been a hint of what was even then so successfully concealed that they could not discover it when they had blundered against its rock foundation. For concealed it certainly was, and intentionally so. But for what purpose?

He gave his romance full play for a few minutes with this question. Some recluse, preferring the absolute simplicity of nature, or perhaps wearied with the artificialities of society, had secluded himself here with the company of his only daughter. Proficient as a pathfinder, he had easily discovered some other way of provisioning his

house from the settlements than by the ordinary trails past Collinson's or Skinner's, which would have betrayed his vicinity. But recluses are not usually accompanied by young daughters, whose relations with the world, not being as antagonistic, would make them uncertain companions. Why not a wife? His presumption of the extreme youth of the face he had seen at the window was after all only based upon the slipper he had found. And if a wife, whose absolute acceptance of such confined seclusion might be equally uncertain, why not somebody else's wife? Here was a reason for concealment, and the end of an episode, not unknown even in the wilderness. And here was the work of the Nemesis who had overtaken them in their guilty contentment! The story, even to its moral, was complete. And yet it did not entirely satisfy him, so superior is the absolutely unknown to the most elaborate theory.

His attention had been once or twice drawn towards the crumbling wall of outcrop, which during the conflagration must have felt the full force of the fiery blast that had swept through the hollow and spent its fury upon it. It bore evidence of the intense heat in cracked fissures and the crumbling debris that lay at its feet. Key picked up some of the still warm fragments, and was not surprised that they easily broke in a gritty, grayish powder in his hands. In spite of his preoccupation with the human interest, the instinct of the prospector was still strong upon him, and he almost mechanically put some of the pieces in his pockets. Then after another careful survey of the locality for any further record of its vanished tenants, he returned to his horse. Here he took from his saddle-bags, half listlessly, a precious phial encased in wood, and, opening it, poured into another thick glass vessel part of a smoking fluid; he then crumbled some of the calcined fragments into the glass, and watched the ebullition that followed with mechanical gravity. When it had almost ceased he drained off the contents into another

glass, which he set down, and then proceeded to pour some water from his drinking-flask into the ordinary tin cup which formed part of his culinary traveling-kit. Into this he put three or four pinches of salt from his provision store. Then dipping his fingers into the salt and water, he allowed a drop to fall into the glass. A white cloud instantly gathered in the colorless fluid, and then fell in a fine film to the bottom of the glass. Key's eyes concentrated suddenly, the listless look left his face. His fingers trembled lightly as he again let the salt water fall into the solution, with exactly the same result! Again and again he repeated it, until the bottom of the glass was quite gray with the fallen precipitate. And his own face grew as gray.

His hand trembled no longer as he carefully poured off the solution so as not to disturb the precipitate at the bottom. Then he drew out his knife, scooped a little of the gray sediment upon its point, and emptying his tin cup, turned it upside down upon his knee, placed the sediment upon it, and began to spread it over the dull surface of its bottom with his knife. He had intended to rub it briskly with his knife blade. But in the very action of spreading it, the first stroke of his knife left upon the sediment and the cup the luminous streak of burnished silver!

He stood up and drew a long breath to still the beatings of his heart. Then he rapidly re-climbed the rock, and passed over the ruins again, this time plunging hurriedly through, and kicking aside the charred heaps without a thought of what they had contained. Key was not an unfeeling man, he was not an unrefined one: he was a gentleman by instinct, and had an intuitive sympathy for others; but in that instant his whole mind was concentrated upon the calcined outcrop! And his first impulse was to see if it bore any evidence of previous examination, prospecting, or working by its suddenly evicted neighbors and owners.

There was none: they had evidently not known it. Nor was there any reason to suppose that they would ever return to their hidden home, now devastated and laid bare to the open sunlight and open trail. They were already far away; their guilty personal secret would keep them from revisiting it. An immense feeling of relief came over the soul of this moral romancer; a momentary recognition of the Most High in this perfect poetical retribution. He ran back quickly to his saddle-bags, drew out one or two carefully written, formal notices of preemption and claim, which he and his former companions had carried in their brief partnership, erased their signatures and left only his own name, with another grateful sense of Divine interference, as he thought of them speeding far away in the distance, and returned to the ruins. With unconscious irony, he selected a charred post from the embers, stuck it in the ground a few feet from the debris of outcrop, and finally affixed his "Notice." Then, with a conscientiousness born possibly of his new religious convictions, he dislodged with his pickaxe enough of the brittle outcrop to constitute that presumption of "actual work" upon the claim which was legally required for its maintenance, and returned to his horse. In replacing his things in his saddle-bags he came upon the slipper, and for an instant so complete was his preoccupation in his later discovery, that he was about to throw it away as useless impedimenta, until it occurred to him, albeit vaguely, that it might be of service to him in its connection with that discovery, in the way of refuting possible false claimants. He was not aware of any faithlessness to his momentary romance, any more than he was conscious of any disloyalty to his old companions, in his gratification that his good fortune had come to him alone. This singular selection was a common experience of prospecting. And there was something about the magnitude of his discovery that seemed to point to an individual achievement. He had made a rough calculation of the richness of the lode from the quantity of

precipitate in his rude experiment; he had estimated its length, breadth, and thickness from his slight knowledge of geology and the theories then ripe; and the yield would be colossal! Of course, he would require capital to work it, he would have to "let in" others to his scheme and his prosperity; but the control of it would always be HIS OWN.

Then he suddenly started as he had never in his life before started at the foot of man! For there was a footfall in the charred brush; and not twenty yards from him stood Collinson, who had just dismounted from a mule. The blood rushed to Key's pale face.

"Prospectin' agin?" said the proprietor of the mill, with his weary smile.

"No," said Key quickly, "only straightening my pack." The blood deepened in his cheek at his instinctive lie. Had he carefully thought it out before, he would have welcomed Collinson, and told him all. But now a quick, uneasy suspicion flashed upon him. Perhaps his late host had lied, and knew of the existence of the hidden house. Perhaps—he had spoken of some "silvery rock" the night before—he even knew something of the lode itself. He turned upon him with an aggressive face. But Collinson's next words dissipated the thought.

"I'm glad I found ye, anyhow," he said. "Ye see, arter you left, I saw ye turn off the trail and make for the burning woods instead o' goin' round. I sez to myself, 'That fellow is making straight for Skinner's. He's sorter worried about me and that empty pork bar'l,'—I hadn't oughter spoke that away afore you boys, anyhow— 'and he's takin' risks to help me.' So I reckoned I'd throw my leg over Jenny here, and look arter ye—and go over to Skinner's myself—and vote."

"Certainly," said Key with cheerful alacrity, and the one thought of getting Collinson away; "we'll go together, and we'll see that that pork barrel is filled!" He glowed quite honestly with this sudden idea of remembering Collinson through his good fortune. "Let's get on quickly, for we may find the fire between us on the outer trail." He hastily mounted his horse.

"Then you didn't take this as a short cut," said Collinson, with dull perseverance in his idea. "Why not? It looks all clear ahead."

"Yes," said Key hurriedly, "but it's been only a leap of the fire, it's still raging round the bend. We must go back to the cross- trail." His face was still flushing with his very equivocating, and his anxiety to get his companion away. Only a few steps further might bring Collinson before the ruins and the "Notice," and that discovery must not be made by him until Key's plans were perfected. A sudden aversion to the man he had a moment before wished to reward began to take possession of him. "Come on," he added almost roughly.

But to his surprise, Collinson yielded with his usual grim patience, and even a slight look of sympathy with his friend's annoyance. "I reckon you're right, and mebbee you're in a hurry to get to Skinner's all along o' MY business, I oughtn't hev told you boys what I did." As they rode rapidly away he took occasion to add, when Key had reined in slightly, with a feeling of relief at being out of the hollow, "I was thinkin', too, of what you'd asked about any one livin' here unbeknownst to me."

"Well," said Key, with a new nervousness.

"Well; I only had an idea o' proposin' that you and me just took a look around that holler whar you thought you saw suthin'!" said Collinson tentatively.

"Nonsense," said Key hurriedly. "We really saw nothing—it was all a fancy; and Uncle Dick was joking me because I said I thought I saw a woman's face," he added with a forced laugh.

Collinson glanced at him, half sadly. "Oh! You were only funnin', then. I oughter guessed that. I oughter have knowed it from Uncle Dick's talk!" They rode for some moments in silence; Key preoccupied and feverish, and eager only to reach Skinner's. Skinner was not only postmaster but "registrar" of the district, and the new discoverer did not feel entirely safe until he had put his formal notification and claims "on record." This was no publication of his actual secret, nor any indication of success, but was only a record that would in all probability remain unnoticed and unchallenged amidst the many other hopeful dreams of sanguine prospectors. But he was suddenly startled from his preoccupation.

"Ye said ye war straightenin' up yer pack just now," said Collinson slowly.

"Yes!" said Key almost angrily, "and I was."

"Ye didn't stop to straighten it up down at the forks of the trail, did ye?"

"I may have," said Key nervously. "But why?"

"Ye won't mind my axin' ye another question, will ye? Ye ain't carryin' round with ye no woman's shoe?"

Key felt the blood drop from his cheeks. “What do you mean?” he stammered, scarcely daring to lift his conscious eyelids to his companion’s glance. But when he did so he was amazed to find that Collinson’s face was almost as much disturbed as his own.

“I know it ain’t the square thing to ask ye, but this is how it is,” said Collinson hesitatingly. “Ye see just down by the fork of the trail where you came I picked up a woman’s shoe. It sorter got me! For I sez to myself, ‘Thar ain’t no one bin by my shanty, comin’ or goin’, for weeks but you boys, and that shoe, from the looks of it, ain’t bin there as many hours.’ I knew there wasn’t any wimin hereabouts. I reckoned it couldn’t hev bin dropped by Uncle Dick or that other man, for you would have seen it on the road. So I allowed it might have bin YOU. And yer it is.” He slowly drew from his pocket—what Key was fully prepared to see— the mate of the slipper Key had in his saddle-bags! The fair fugitive had evidently lost them both.

But Key was better prepared now (perhaps this kind of dissimulation is progressive), and quickly alive to the necessity of throwing Collinson off this unexpected scent. And his companion’s own suggestion was right to his hand, and, as it seemed, again quite providential! He laughed, with a quick color, which, however, appeared to help his lie, as he replied half hysterically, “You’re right, old man, I own up, it’s mine! It’s d—d silly, I know—but then, we’re all fools where women are concerned—and I wouldn’t have lost that slipper for a mint of money.”

He held out his hand gayly, but Collinson retained the slipper while he gravely examined it.

“You wouldn’t mind telling me where you mought hev got that?” he said meditatively.

"Of course I should mind," said Key with a well-affected mingling of mirth and indignation. "What are you thinking of, you old rascal? What do you take me for?"

But Collinson did not laugh. "You wouldn't mind givin' me the size and shape and general heft of her as wore that shoe?"

"Most decidedly I should do nothing of the kind!" said Key half impatiently. "Enough, that it was given to me by a very pretty girl. There! that's all you will know."

"GIVEN to you?" said Collinson, lifting his eyes.

"Yes," returned Key sharply.

Collinson handed him the slipper gravely. "I only asked you," he said slowly, but with a certain quiet dignity which Key had never before seen in his face, "because thar was suthin' about the size, and shape, and fillin' out o' that shoe that kinder reminded me of some 'un; but that some 'un—her as mought hev stood up in that shoe—ain't o' that kind as would ever stand in the shoes of her as YOU know at all." The rebuke, if such were intended, lay quite as much in the utter ignoring of Key's airy gallantry and levity as in any conscious slur upon the fair fame of his invented Dulcinea. Yet Key oddly felt a strong inclination to resent the aspersion as well as Collinson's gratuitous morality; and with a mean recollection of Uncle Dick's last evening's scandalous gossip, he said sarcastically, "And, of course, that some one YOU were thinking of was your lawful wife."

"It war!" said Collinson gravely.

Perhaps it was something in Collinson's manner, or his own preoccupation, but he did not pursue the subject, and

the conversation lagged. They were nearing, too, the outer edge of the present conflagration, and the smoke, lying low in the unburnt woods, or creeping like an actual exhalation of the soil, blinded them so that at times they lost the trail completely. At other times, from the intense heat, it seemed as if they were momentarily impinging upon the burning area, or were being caught in a closing circle. It was remarkable that with his sudden accession of fortune Key seemed to lose his usual frank and careless fearlessness, and impatiently questioned his companion's woodcraft. There were intervals when he regretted his haste to reach Skinner's by this shorter cut, and began to bitterly attribute it to his desire to serve Collinson. Ah, yes! it would be fine indeed, if just as he were about to clutch the prize he should be sacrificed through the ignorance and stupidity of this heavy-handed moralist at his side! But it was not until, through that moralist's guidance, they climbed a steep acclivity to a second ridge, and were comparatively safe, that he began to feel ashamed of his surly silence or surlier interruptions. And Collinson, either through his unconquerable patience, or possibly in a fit of his usual uxorious abstraction, appeared to take no notice of it.

A sloping table-land of weather-beaten boulders now effectually separated them from the fire on the lower ridge. They presently began to descend on the further side of the crest, and at last dropped upon a wagon-road, and the first track of wheels that Key had seen for a fortnight. Rude as it was, it seemed to him the highway to fortune, for he knew that it passed Skinner's and then joined the great stage-road to Marysville—now his ultimate destination. A few rods further on they came in view of Skinner's, lying like a dingy forgotten winter snowdrift on the mountain shelf.

It contained a post-office, tavern, blacksmith's shop, "general store," and express-office, scarcely a dozen

buildings in all, but all differing from Collinson's Mill in some vague suggestion of vitality, as if the daily regular pulse of civilization still beat, albeit languidly, in that remote extremity. There was anticipation and accomplishment twice a day; and as Key and Collinson rode up to the express-office, the express-wagon was standing before the door ready to start to meet the stagecoach at the cross-roads three miles away. This again seemed a special providence to Key. He had a brief official communication with Skinner as registrar, and duly recorded his claim; he had a hasty and confidential aside with Skinner as general storekeeper, and such was the unconscious magnetism developed by this embryo millionaire that Skinner extended the necessary credit to Collinson on Key's word alone. That done, he rejoined Collinson in high spirits with the news, adding cheerfully, "And I dare say, if you want any further advances Skinner will give them to you on Parker's draft."

"You mean that bit o' paper that chap left," said Collinson gravely.

"Yes."

"I tore it up."

"You tore it up?" ejaculated Key.

"You hear me? Yes!" said Collinson.

Key stared at him. Surely it was again providential that he had not intrusted his secret to this utterly ignorant and prejudiced man! The slight twinges of conscience that his lie about the slippers had caused him disappeared at once. He could not have trusted him even in that; it would have been like this stupid fanatic to have prevented Key's preemption of that claim, until he, Collinson, had satisfied himself of the

whereabouts of the missing proprietor. Was he quite sure that Collinson would not revisit the spot when he had gone? But he was ready for the emergency.

He had intended to leave his horse with Skinner as security for Collinson's provisions, but Skinner's liberality had made this unnecessary, and he now offered it to Collinson to use and keep for him until called for. This would enable his companion to "pack" his goods on the mule, and oblige him to return to the mill by the wagon-road and "outside trail," as more commodious for the two animals.

"Ye ain't afeared o' the road agents?" suggested a bystander; "they just swarm on galloper's Ridge, and they 'held up' the down stage only last week."

"They're not so lively since the deputy-sheriff's got a new idea about them, and has been lying low in the brush near Bald Top," returned Skinner. "Anyhow, they don't stop teams nor 'packs' unless there's a chance of their getting some fancy horseflesh by it; and I reckon thar ain't much to tempt them thar," he added, with a satirical side glance at his customer's cattle. But Key was already standing in the express-wagon, giving a farewell shake to his patient companion's hand, and this ingenuous pleasantry passed unnoticed. Nevertheless, as the express-wagon rolled away, his active fancy began to consider this new danger that might threaten the hidden wealth of his claim. But he reflected that for a time, at least, only the crude ore would be taken out and shipped to Marysville in a shape that offered no profit to the highwaymen. Had it been a gold mine!—but here again was the interposition of Providence!

A week later Preble Key returned to Skinner's with a foreman and ten men, and an unlimited credit to draw upon

at Marysville! Expeditions of this kind created no surprise at Skinner's. Parties had before this entered the wilderness gayly, none knew where or what for; the sedate and silent woods had kept their secret while there; they had evaporated, none knew when or where—often, alas! with an unpaid account at Skinner's. Consequently, there was nothing in Key's party to challenge curiosity. In another week a rambling, one-storied shed of pine logs occupied the site of the mysterious ruins, and contained the party; in two weeks excavations had been made, and the whole face of the outcrop was exposed; in three weeks every vestige of former tenancy which the fire had not consumed was trampled out by the alien feet of these toilers of the "Sylvan Silver Hollow Company." None of Key's former companions would have recognized the hollow in its blackened leveling and rocky foundation; even Collinson would not have remembered this stripped and splintered rock, with its heaps of fresh debris, as the place where he had overtaken Key. And Key himself had forgotten, in his triumph, everything but the chance experiment that had led to his success.

Perhaps it was well, therefore, that one night, when the darkness had mercifully fallen upon this scene of sylvan desolation, and its still more incongruous and unsavory human restoration, and the low murmur of the pines occasionally swelled up from the unscathed mountain-side, a loud shout and the trampling of horses' feet awoke the dwellers in the shanty. Springing to their feet, they hurriedly seized their weapons and rushed out, only to be confronted by a dark, motionless ring of horsemen, two flaming torches of pine knots, and a low but distinct voice of authority. In their excitement, half-awakened suspicion, and confusion, they were affected by its note of calm preparation and conscious power.

"Drop those guns—hold up your hands! We've got every man of you covered."

Key was no coward; the men, though flustered, were not cravens: but they obeyed. "Trot out your leader! Let him stand out there, clear, beside that torch!"

One of the gleaming pine knots disengaged itself from the dark circle and moved to the centre, as Preble Key, cool and confident, stepped beside it.

"That will do," said the immutable voice. "Now, we want Jack Riggs, Sydney Jack, French Pete, and One-eyed Charley."

A vivid reminiscence of the former night scene in the hollow—of his own and his companions voices raised in the darkness—flashed across Key. With an instinctive premonition that this invasion had something to do with the former tenant, he said calmly:

"Who wants them?"

"The State of California," said the voice.

"The State of California must look further," returned Key in his old pleasant voice; "there are no such names among my party."

"Who are you?"

"The manager of the 'Sylvan Silver Hollow Company,' and these are my workmen.

There was a hurried movement, and the sound of whispering in the hitherto dark and silent circle, and then the voice rose again:

"You have the papers to prove that?"

"Yes, in the cabin. And you?"

"I've a warrant to the sheriff of Sierra."

There was a pause, and the voice went on less confidently:

"How long have you been here?"

"Three weeks. I came here the day of the fire and took up this claim."

"There was no other house here?"

"There were ruins—you can see them still. It may have been a burnt-up cabin."

The voice disengaged itself from the vague background and came slowly forwards:

"It was a den of thieves. It was the hiding-place of Jack Riggs and his gang of road agents. I've been hunting this spot for three weeks. And now the whole thing's up!"

There was a laugh from Key's men, but it was checked as the owner of the voice slowly ranged up beside the burning torch and they saw his face. It was dark and set with the defeat of a brave man.

"Won't you come in and take something?" said Key kindly.

"No. It's enough fool work for me to have routed ye out already. But I suppose it's all in my d—d day's work! Good-night! Forward there! Get!"

The two torches danced forwards, with the trailing off of vague shadows in dim procession; there was a clatter over the rocks and they were gone. Then, as Preble Key gazed after them, he felt that with them had passed the only shadow that lay upon his great fortune; and with the last tenant of the hollow a proscribed outlaw and fugitive, he was henceforth forever safe in his claim and his discovery. And yet, oddly enough, at that moment, as he turned away, for the first time in three weeks there passed before his fancy with a stirring of reproach a vision of the face that he had seen at the window.

Chapter 3

Of the great discovery in Sylvan Silver Hollow it would seem that Collinson as yet knew nothing. In spite of Key's fears that he might stray there on his return from Skinner's, he did not, nor did he afterwards revisit the locality. Neither the news of the registry of the claim nor the arrival of Key's workmen ever reached him. The few travelers who passed his mill came from the valley to cross the Divide on their way to Skinner's, and returned by the longer but easier detour of the stage-road over Galloper's Ridge. He had no chance to participate in the prosperity that flowed from the opening of the mine, which plentifully besprinkled Skinner's settlement; he was too far away to profit even by the chance custom of Key's Sabbath wandering workmen. His isolation from civilization (for those who came to him from the valley were rude Western emigrants like himself) remained undisturbed. The return of the prospecting party to his humble hospitality that night had been an exceptional case; in his characteristic simplicity he did not dream that it was because they had nowhere else to go in their penniless condition. It was an incident to be pleasantly remembered, but whose nonrecurrence did not disturb his infinite patience. His pork barrel and flour sack had been replenished for other travelers; his own wants were few.

It was a day or two after the midnight visit of the sheriff to Silver Hollow that Key galloped down the steep grade to Collinson's. He was amused, albeit, in his new importance, a little aggrieved also, to find that Collinson had as usual confounded his descent with that of the generally

detached boulder, and that he was obliged to add his voice to the general uproar. This brought Collinson to his door.

"I've had your hoss hobbled out among the chickweed and clover in the green pasture back o' the mill, and he's picked up that much that he's lookin' fat and sassy," he said quietly, beginning to mechanically unstrap Key's bridle, even while his guest was in the act of dismounting. "His back's quite healed up."

Key could not restrain a shrug of impatience. It was three weeks since they had met—three weeks crammed with excitement, energy, achievement, and fortune to Key; and yet this place and this man were as stupidly unchanged as when he had left them. A momentary fancy that this was the reality, that he himself was only awakening from some delusive dream, came over him. But Collinson's next words were practical.

"I reckoned that maybe you'd write from Marysville to Skinner to send for the hoss, and forward him to ye, for I never kalkilated you'd come back."

It was quite plain from this that Collinson had heard nothing. But it was also awkward, as Key would now have to tell the whole story, and reveal the fact that he had been really experimenting when Collinson overtook him in the hollow. He evaded this by post- dating his discovery of the richness of the ore until he had reached Marysville. But he found some difficulty in recounting his good fortune: he was naturally no boaster, he had no desire to impress Collinson with his penetration, nor the undaunted energy he had displayed in getting up his company and opening the mine, so that he was actually embarrassed by his own understatement; and under the grave, patient eyes of his companion, told his story at best lamely. Collinson's face

betrayed neither profound interest nor the slightest resentment. When Key had ended his awkward recital, Collinson said slowly:

"Then Uncle Dick and that other Parker feller ain't got no show in this yer find."

"No," said Key quickly. "Don't you remember we broke up our partnership that morning and went off our own ways. You don't suppose," he added with a forced half-laugh, "that if Uncle Dick or Parker had struck a lead after they left me, they'd have put me in it?"

"Wouldn't they?" asked Collinson gravely.

"Of course not." He laughed a little more naturally, but presently added, with an uneasy smile, "What makes you think they would?"

"Nuthin'!" said Collinson promptly.

Nevertheless, when they were seated before the fire, with glasses in their hands, Collinson returned patiently to the subject:

"You wuz saying they went their way, and you went yours. But your way was back on the old way that you'd all gone together."

But Key felt himself on firmer ground here, and answered deliberately and truthfully, "Yes, but I only went back to the hollow to satisfy myself if there really was any house there, and if there was, to warn the occupants of the approaching fire."

"And there was a house there," said Collinson thoughtfully.

"Only the ruins." He stopped and flushed quickly, for he remembered that he had denied its existence at their former meeting. "That is," he went on hurriedly, "I found out from the sheriff, you know, that there had been a house there. But," he added, reverting to his stronger position, "my going back there was an accident, and my picking up the outcrop was an accident, and had no more to do with our partnership prospecting than you had. In fact," he said, with a reassuring laugh, "you'd have had a better right to share in my claim, coming there as you did at that moment, than they. Why, if I'd have known what the thing was worth, I might have put you in—only it wanted capital and some experience." He was glad that he had pitched upon that excuse (it had only just occurred to him), and glanced affably at Collinson. But that gentleman said soberly:

"No, you wouldn't nuther."

"Why not?" said Key half angrily.

Collinson paused. After a moment he said, "'Cos I wouldn't hev took anything outer thet place."

Key felt relieved. From what he knew of Collinson's vagaries he believed him. He was wise in not admitting him to his confidences at the beginning; he might have thought it his duty to tell others.

"I'm not so particular," he returned laughingly, "but the silver in that hole was never touched, nor I dare say even imagined by mortal man before. However, there is something else about the hollow that I want to tell you. You remember the slipper that you picked up?"

"Yes."

"Well, I lied to you about that; I never dropped it. On the contrary, I had picked up the mate of it very near where you found yours, and I wanted to know to whom it belonged. For I don't mind telling you now, Collinson, that I believe there WAS a woman in that house, and the same woman whose face I saw at the window. You remember how the boys joked me about it—well, perhaps I didn't care that you should laugh at me too, but I've had a sore conscience over my lie, for I remembered that you seemed to have some interest in the matter too, and I thought that maybe I might have thrown you off the scent. It seemed to me that if you had any idea who it was, we might now talk the matter over and compare notes. I think you said—at least, I gathered the idea from a remark of yours," he added hastily, as he remembered that the suggestion was his own, and a satirical one—"that it reminded you of your wife's slipper. Of course, as your wife is dead, that would offer no clue, and can only be a chance resemblance, unless"— He stopped.

"Have you got 'em yet?"

"Yes, both." He took them from the pocket of his riding-jacket.

As Collinson received them, his face took upon itself an even graver expression. "It's mighty cur'ous," he said reflectively, "but looking at the two of 'em the likeness is more fetchin'. Ye see, my wife had a STRAIGHT foot, and never wore reg'lar rights and lefts like other women, but kinder changed about; ye see, these shoes is reg'lar rights and lefts, but never was worn as sich!"

"There may be other women as peculiar," suggested Key.

"There MUST be," said Collinson quietly.

For an instant Key was touched with the manly security of the reply, for, remembering Uncle Dick's scandal, it had occurred to him that the unknown tenant of the robbers' den might be Collinson's wife. He was glad to be relieved on that point, and went on more confidently:

"So, you see, this woman was undoubtedly in that house on the night of the fire. She escaped, and in a mighty hurry too, for she had not time to change her slippers for shoes; she escaped on horseback, for that is how she lost them. Now what was she doing there with those rascals, for the face I saw looked as innocent as a saint's."

"Seemed to ye sort o' contrairy, jist as I reckoned my wife's foot would have looked in a slipper that you said was GIV to ye," suggested Collinson pointedly, but with no implication of reproach in his voice.

"Yes," said Key impatiently.

"I've read yarns afore now about them Eyetalian brigands stealin' women," said Collinson reflectively, "but that ain't California road-agent style. Great Scott! if one even so much as spoke to a woman, they'd have been wiped outer the State long ago. No! the woman as WAS there came there to STAY!"

As Key's face did not seem to express either assent or satisfaction at this last statement, Collinson, after a glance at it, went on with a somewhat gentler gravity: "I see wot's troublin' YOU, Mr. Key; you've bin thinkin' that mebbee that poor woman might hev bin the better for a bit o' that fortin' that you discovered under the very spot where them

slippers of hers had often trod. You're thinkin' that mebbee it might hev turned her and those men from their evil ways."

Mr. Key had been thinking nothing of the kind, but for some obscure reason the skeptical jeer that had risen to his lips remained unsaid. He rose impatiently. "Well, there seems to be no chance of discovering anything now; the house is burnt, the gang dispersed, and she has probably gone with them." He paused, and then laid three or four large gold pieces on the table. "It's for that old bill of our party, Collinson," he said. "I'll settle and collect from each. Some time when you come over to the mine, and I hope you'll give us a call, you can bring the horse. Meanwhile you can use him; you'll find he's a little quicker than the mule. How is business?" he added, with a perfunctory glance around the vacant room and dusty bar.

"Thar ain't much passin' this way," said Collinson with equal carelessness, as he gathered up the money, "'cept those boys from the valley, and they're most always strapped when they come here."

Key smiled as he observed that Collinson offered him no receipt, and, moreover, as he remembered that he had only Collinson's word for the destruction of Parker's draft. But he merely glanced at his unconscious host, and said nothing. After a pause he returned in a lighter tone: "I suppose you are rather out of the world here. Indeed, I had an idea at first of buying out your mill, Collinson, and putting in steam power to get out timber for our new buildings, but you see you are so far away from the wagon-road, that we couldn't haul the timber away. That was the trouble, or I'd have made you a fair offer."

"I don't reckon to ever sell the mill," said Collinson simply. Then observing the look of suspicion in his

companion's face, he added gravely, "You see, I rigged up the whole thing when I expected my wife out from the States, and I calkilate to keep it in memory of her."

Key slightly lifted his brows. "But you never told us, by the way, HOW you ever came to put up a mill here with such an uncertain water-supply."

"It wasn't onsartin when I came here, Mr. Key; it was a full-fed stream straight from them snow peaks. It was the earthquake did it."

"The earthquake!" repeated Key.

"Yes. Ef the earthquake kin heave up that silver-bearing rock that you told us about the first day you kem here, and that you found t'other day, it could play roots with a mere mill-stream, I reckon."

"But the convulsion I spoke of happened ages on ages ago, when this whole mountain range was being fashioned," said Key with a laugh.

"Well, this yer earthquake was ten years ago, just after I came. I reckon I oughter remember it. It was a queer sort o' day in the fall, dry and hot as if thar might hev bin a fire in the woods, only thar wasn't no wind. Not a breath of air anywhar. The leaves of them alders hung straight as a plumb-line. Except for that thar stream and that thar wheel, nuthin' moved. Thar wasn't a bird on the wing over that canyon; thar wasn't a squirrel skirmishin' in the hull wood; even the lizards in the rocks stiffened like stone Chinese idols. It kept gettin' quieter and quieter, ontil I walked out on that ledge and felt as if I'd have to give a yell just to hear my own voice. Thar was a thin veil over everything, and betwixt and between everything, and the sun was rooted in

the middle of it as if it couldn't move neither. Everythin' seemed to be waitin', waitin', waitin'. Then all of a suddin suthin' seemed to give somewhar! Suthin' fetched away with a queer sort of rumblin', as if the peg had slipped outer creation. I looked up and kalkilated to see half a dozen of them boulders come, lickity switch, down the grade. But, darn my skin, if one of 'em stirred! and yet while I was looking, the whole face o' that bluff bowed over softly, as if saying 'Good-by,' and got clean away somewhar before I knowed it. Why, you see that pile agin the side o' the canyon! Well, a thousand feet under that there's trees, three hundred feet high, still upright and standin'. You know how them pines over on that far mountain-side always seem to be climbin' up, up, up, over each other's heads to the very top? Well, Mr. Key, I SAW 'EM climbin'! And when I pulled myself together and got back to the mill, everything was quiet; and, by G—d, so was the mill- wheel, and there wasn't two inches of water in the river!"

"And what did you think of it?" said Key, interested in spite of his impatience.

"I thought, Mr. Key— No! I mustn't say I thought, for I knowed it. I knowed that suthin' had happened to my wife!"

Key did not smile, but even felt a faint superstitious thrill as he gazed at him. After a pause Collinson resumed: "I heard a month after that she had died about that time o' yaller fever in Texas with the party she was comin' with. Her folks wrote that they died like flies, and wuz all buried together, unbeknownst and promiscuous, and thar wasn't no remains. She slipped away from me like that bluff over that canyon, and that was the end of it."

"But she might have escaped," said Key quickly, forgetting himself in his eagerness.

But Collinson only shook his head. "Then she'd have been here," he said gravely.

Key moved towards the door still abstractedly, held out his hand, shook that of his companion warmly, and then, saddling his horse himself, departed. A sense of disappointment—in which a vague dissatisfaction with himself was mingled—was all that had come of his interview. He took himself severely to task for following his romantic quest so far. It was unworthy of the president of the Sylvan Silver Hollow Company, and he was not quite sure but that his confidences with Collinson might have imperiled even the interests of the company. To atone for this momentary aberration, and correct his dismal fancies, he resolved to attend to some business at Skinner's before returning, and branched off on a long detour that would intersect the traveled stage-road. But here a singular incident overtook him. As he wheeled into the turnpike, he heard the trampling hoof-beats and jingling harness of the oncoming coach behind him. He had barely time to draw up against the bank before the six galloping horses and swinging vehicle swept heavily by. He had a quick impression of the heat and steam of sweating horse-hide, the reek of varnish and leather, and the momentary vision of a female face silhouetted against the glass window of the coach! But even in that flash of perception he recognized the profile that he had seen at the window of the mysterious hut!

He halted for an instant dazed and bewildered in the dust of the departing wheels. Then, as the bulk of the vehicle reappeared, already narrowing in the distance, without a second thought he dashed after it. His disappointment, his self-criticism, his practical resolutions were forgotten. He

had but one idea now—the vision was providential! The clue to the mystery was before him— he MUST follow it!

Yet he had sense enough to realize that the coach would not stop to take up a passenger between stations, and that the next station was the one three miles below Skinner's. It would not be difficult to reach this by a cut-off in time, and although the vehicle had appeared to be crowded, he could no doubt obtain a seat on top.

His eager curiosity, however, led him to put spurs to his horse, and range up alongside of the coach as if passing it, while he examined the stranger more closely. Her face was bent listlessly over a book; there was unmistakably the same profile that he had seen, but the full face was different in outline and expression. A strange sense of disappointment that was almost a revulsion of feeling came over him; he lingered, he glanced again; she was certainly a very pretty woman: there was the beautifully rounded chin, the short straight nose, and delicately curved upper lip, that he had seen in the profile—and yet—yet it was not the same face he had dreamt of. With an odd, provoking sense of disillusion, he swept ahead of the coach, and again slackened his speed to let it pass. This time the fair unknown raised her long lashes and gazed suddenly at this persistent horseman at her side, and an odd expression, it seemed to him almost a glance of recognition and expectation, came into her dark, languid eyes. The pupils concentrated upon him with a singular significance, that was almost, he even thought, a reply to his glance, and yet it was as utterly unintelligible. A moment later, however, it was explained. He had fallen slightly behind in a new confusion of hesitation, wonder, and embarrassment, when from a wooded trail to the right, another horseman suddenly swept into the road before him. He was a powerfully built man, mounted on a thoroughbred horse of a quality far superior to the ordinary roadster.

Without looking at Key he easily ranged up beside the coach as if to pass it, but Key, with a sudden resolution, put spurs to his own horse and ranged also abreast of him, in time to see his fair unknown start at the apparition of this second horseman and unmistakably convey some signal to him—a signal that to Key's fancy now betrayed some warning of himself. He was the more convinced as the stranger, after continuing a few paces ahead of the coach, allowed it to pass him at a curve of the road, and slackened his pace to permit Key to do the same. Instinctively conscious that the stranger's object was to scrutinize or identify him, he determined to take the initiative, and fixed his eyes upon him as they approached. But the stranger, who wore a loose brown linen duster over clothes that appeared to be superior in fashion and material, also had part of his face and head draped by a white silk handkerchief worn under his hat, ostensibly to keep the sun and dust from his head and neck—and had the advantage of him. He only caught the flash of a pair of steel-gray eyes, as the newcomer, apparently having satisfied himself, gave rein to his spirited steed and easily repassed the coach, disappearing in a cloud of dust before it. But Key had by this time reached the "cut-off," which the stranger, if he intended to follow the coach, either disdained or was ignorant of, and he urged his horse to its utmost speed. Even with the stranger's advantages it would be a close race to the station.

Nevertheless, as he dashed on, he was by no means insensible to the somewhat quixotic nature of his undertaking. If he was right in his suspicion that a signal had been given by the lady to the stranger, it was exceedingly probable that he had discovered not only the fair inmate of the robbers' den, but one of the gang itself, or at least a confederate and ally. Yet far from deterring him, in that ingenious sophistry with which he was apt to treat his romance, he now looked upon his adventure as a practical

pursuit in the interests of law and justice. It was true that it was said that the band of road agents had been dispersed; it was a fact that there had been no spoliation of coach or teams for three weeks; but none of the depredators had ever been caught, and their booty, which was considerable, was known to be still intact. It was to the interest of the mine, his partners, and his workmen that this clue to a danger which threatened the locality should be followed to the end. As to the lady, in spite of the disappointment that still rankled in his breast, he could be magnanimous! She might be the paramour of the strange horseman, she might be only escaping from some hateful companionship by his aid. And yet one thing puzzled him: she was evidently not acquainted with the personality of the active gang, for she had, without doubt, at first mistaken HIM for one of them, and after recognizing her real accomplice had communicated her mistake to him.

It was a great relief to him when the rough and tangled "cut-off" at last broadened and lightened into the turnpike road again, and he beheld, scarcely a quarter of a mile before him, the dust cloud that overhung the coach as it drew up at the lonely wayside station. He was in time, for he knew that the horses were changed there; but a sudden fear that the fair unknown might alight, or take some other conveyance, made him still spur his jaded steed forward. As he neared the station he glanced eagerly around for the other horseman, but he was nowhere to be seen. He had evidently either abandoned the chase or ridden ahead.

It seemed equally a part of what he believed was a providential intercession, that on arriving at the station he found there was a vacant seat inside the coach. It was diagonally opposite that occupied by the lady, and he was thus enabled to study her face as it was bent over her book, whose pages, however, she scarcely turned. After her first

casual glance of curiosity at the new passenger, she seemed to take no more notice of him, and Key began to wonder if he had not mistaken her previous interrogating look. Nor was it his only disturbing query; he was conscious of the same disappointment now that he could examine her face more attentively, as in his first cursory glance. She was certainly handsome; if there was no longer the freshness of youth, there was still the indefinable charm of the woman of thirty, and with it the delicate curves of matured muliebrity and repose. There were lines, particularly around the mouth and fringed eyelids, that were deepened as by pain; and the chin, even in its rounded fullness, had the angle of determination. From what was visible, below the brown linen duster that she wore, she appeared to be tastefully although not richly dressed.

As the coach at last drove away from the station, a grizzled, farmer-looking man seated beside her uttered a sigh of relief, so palpable as to attract the general attention. Turning to his fair neighbor with a smile of uncouth but good-humored apology, he said in explanation:

"You'll excuse me, miss! I don't know ezactly how YOU'RE feelin'— for judging from your looks and gin'ral gait, you're a stranger in these parts—but ez for ME, I don't mind sayin' that I never feel ezactly safe from these yer road agents and stage robbers ontil arter we pass Skinner's station. All along thet Galloper's Ridge it's jest tech and go like; the woods is swarmin' with 'em. But once past Skinner's, you're all right. They never dare go below that. So ef you don't mind, miss, for it's bein' in your presence, I'll jest pull off my butes and ease my feet for a spell."

Neither the inconsequence of this singular request, nor the smile it evoked on the faces of the other passengers,

seemed to disturb the lady's abstraction. Scarcely lifting her eyes from her book, she bowed a grave assent.

"You see, miss," he continued, "and you gents," he added, taking the whole coach into his confidence, "I've got over forty ounces of clean gold dust in them butes, between the upper and lower sole— and it's mighty tight packing for my feet. Ye kin heft it," he said, as he removed one boot and held it up before them. "I put the dust there for safety—kalkilatin' that while these road gentry allus goes for a man's pockets and his body belt, they never thinks of his butes, or haven't time to go through 'em." He looked around him with a smile of self-satisfaction.

The murmur of admiring comment was, however, broken by a burly- bearded miner who sat in the middle seat. "Thet's pretty fair, as far as it goes," he said smilingly, "but I reckon it wouldn't go far ef you started to run. I've got a simpler game than that, gentlemen, and ez we're all friends here, and the danger's over, I don't mind tellin' ye. The first thing these yer road agents do, after they've covered the driver with their shot guns, is to make the passengers get out and hold up their hands. That, ma'am,"— explanatorily to the lady, who betrayed only a languid interest— "is to keep 'em from drawing their revolvers. A revolver is the last thing a road agent wants, either in a man's hand or in his holster. So I sez to myself, 'Ef a six-shooter ain't of no account, wet's the use of carryin' it?' So I just put my shooting- iron in my valise when I travel, and fill my holster with my gold dust, so! It's a deuced sight heavier than a revolver, but they don't feel its weight, and don't keer to come nigh it. And I've been 'held up' twice on t'other side of the Divide this year, and I passed free every time!"

The applause that followed this revelation and the exhibition of the holster not only threw the farmer's exploits

into the shade, but seemed to excite an emulation among the passengers. Other methods of securing their property were freely discussed; but the excitement culminated in the leaning forward of a passenger who had, up to that moment, maintained a reserve almost equal to the fair unknown. His dress and general appearance were those of a professional man; his voice and manner corroborated the presumption.

"I don't think, gentlemen," he began with a pleasant smile, "that any man of us here would like to be called a coward; but in fighting with an enemy who never attacks, or even appears, except with a deliberately prepared advantage on his side, it is my opinion that a man is not only justified in avoiding an unequal encounter with him, but in circumventing by every means the object of his attack. You have all been frank in telling your methods. I will be equally so in telling mine, even if I have perhaps to confess to a little more than you have; for I have not only availed myself of a well-known rule of the robbers who infest these mountains, to exempt all women and children from their spoliation— a rule which, of course, they perfectly understand gives them a sentimental consideration with all Californians—but I have, I confess, also availed myself of the innocent kindness of one of that charming and justly exempted sex." He paused and bowed courteously to the fair unknown. "When I entered this coach I had with me a bulky parcel which was manifestly too large for my pockets, yet as evidently too small and too valuable to be intrusted to the ordinary luggage. Seeing my difficulty, our charming companion opposite, out of the very kindness and innocence of her heart, offered to make a place for it in her satchel, which was not full. I accepted the offer joyfully. When I state to you, gentlemen, that that package contained valuable government bonds to a considerable amount, I do so, not to claim your praise for any originality of my own, but to make this public avowal to our fair fellow

passenger for securing to me this most perfect security and immunity from the road agent that has been yet recorded."

With his eyes riveted on the lady's face, Key saw a faint color rise to her otherwise impassive face, which might have been called out by the enthusiastic praise that followed the lawyer's confession. But he was painfully conscious of what now seemed to him a monstrous situation! Here was, he believed, the actual accomplice of the road agents calmly receiving the complacent and puerile confessions of the men who were seeking to outwit them. Could he, in ordinary justice to them, to himself, or the mission he conceived he was pursuing, refrain from exposing her, or warning them privately? But was he certain? Was a vague remembrance of a profile momentarily seen—and, as he must even now admit, inconsistent with the full face he was gazing at—sufficient for such an accusation? More than that, was the protection she had apparently afforded the lawyer consistent with the function of an accomplice!

"Then if the danger's over," said the lady gently, reaching down to draw her satchel from under the seat, "I suppose I may return it to you."

"By no means! Don't trouble yourself! Pray allow me to still remain your debtor—at least as far as the next station," said the lawyer gallantly.

The lady uttered a languid sigh, sank back in her seat, and calmly settled herself to the perusal of her book. Key felt his cheeks beginning to burn with the embarrassment and shame of his evident misconception. And here he was on his way to Marysville, to follow a woman for whom he felt he no longer cared, and for whose pursuit he had no longer the excuse of justice.

"Then I understand that you have twice seen these road agents," said the professional man, turning to the miner. "Of course, you could be able to identify them?"

"Nary a man! You see they're all masked, and only one of 'em ever speaks."

"The leader or chief?"

"No, the orator."

"The orator?" repeated the professional man in amazement.

"Well, you see, I call him the orator, for he's mighty glib with his tongue, and reels off all he has to say like as if he had it by heart. He's mighty rough on you, too, sometimes, for all his high- toned style. Ef he thinks a man is hidin' anything he jest scalps him with his tongue, and blamed if I don't think he likes the chance of doin' it. He's got a regular set speech, and he's bound to go through it all, even if he makes everything wait, and runs the risk of capture. Yet he ain't the chief—and even I've heard folks say ain't got any responsibility if he is took, for he don't tech anybody or anybody's money, and couldn't be prosecuted. I reckon he's some sort of a broken-down lawyer—d'ye see?"

"Not much of a lawyer, I imagine," said the professional man, smiling, "for he'll find himself quite mistaken as to his share of responsibility. But it's a rather clever way of concealing the identity of the real leader."

"It's the smartest gang that was ever started in the Sierras. They fooled the sheriff of Sierra the other day. They gave him a sort of idea that they had a kind of hidin'-place in the woods whar they met and kept their booty, and, by

jinks! he goes down thar with his hull posse—just spilin' for a fight—and only lights upon a gang of innocent greenhorns, who were boring for silver on the very spot where he allowed the robbers had their den! He ain't held up his head since."

Key cast a quick glance at the lady to see the effect of this revelation. But her face—if the same profile he had seen at the window—betrayed neither concern nor curiosity. He let his eyes drop to the smart boot that peeped from below her gown, and the thought of his trying to identify it with the slipper he had picked up seemed to him as ridiculous as his other misconceptions. He sank back gloomily in his seat; by degrees the fatigue and excitement of the day began to mercifully benumb his senses; twilight had fallen and the talk had ceased. The lady had allowed her book to drop in her lap as the darkness gathered, and had closed her eyes; he closed his own, and slipped away presently into a dream, in which he saw the profile again as he had seen it in the darkness of the hollow, only that this time it changed to a full face, unlike the lady's or any one he had ever seen. Then the window seemed to open with a rattle, and he again felt the cool odors of the forest; but he awoke to find that the lady had only opened her window for a breath of fresh air. It was nearly eight o' clock; it would be an hour yet before the coach stopped at the next station for supper; the passengers were drowsily nodding; he closed his eyes and fell into a deeper sleep, from which he awoke with a start.

The coach had stopped!

Chapter 4

"It can't be Three Pines yet," said a passenger's voice, in which the laziness of sleep still lingered, "or else we've snoozed over five mile. I don't see no lights; wot are we stoppin' for?" The other passengers struggled to an upright position. One nearest the window opened it; its place was instantly occupied by the double muzzle of a shot-gun! No one moved. In the awestricken silence the voice of the driver rose in drawling protestation.

"It ain't no business o' mine, but it sorter strikes me that you chaps are a-playin' it just a little too fine this time! It ain't three miles from Three Pine Station and forty men. Of course, that's your lookout—not mine!"

The audacity of the thing had evidently struck even the usually taciturn and phlegmatic driver into his first expostulation on record.

"Your thoughtful consideration does you great credit," said a voice from the darkness, "and shall be properly presented to our manager; but at the same time we wish it understood that we do not hesitate to take any risks in strict attention to our business and our clients. In the mean time you will expedite matters, and give your passengers a chance to get an early tea at Three Pines, by handing down that treasure-box and mail-pouch. Be careful in handling that blunderbuss you keep beside it; the last time it unfortunately went off, and I regret to say slightly wounded one of your passengers. Accidents of this kind, interfering, as they do,

with the harmony and pleasure of our chance meetings, cannot be too highly deplored."

"By gosh!" ejaculated an outside passenger in an audible whisper.

"Thank you, sir," said the voice quietly; "but as I overlooked you, I will trouble you now to descend with the others."

The voice moved nearer; and, by the light of a flaming bull's-eye cast upon the coach, it could be seen to come from a stout, medium- sized man with a black mask, which, however, showed half of a smooth, beardless face, and an affable yet satirical mouth. The speaker cleared his throat with the slight preparatory cough of the practiced orator, and, approaching the window, to Key's intense surprise, actually began in the identical professional and rhetorical style previously indicated by the miner.

"Circumstances over which we have no control, gentlemen, compel us to oblige you to alight, stand in a row on one side, and hold up your hands. You will find the attitude not unpleasant after your cramped position in the coach, while the change from its confined air to the wholesome night-breeze of the Sierras cannot but prove salutary and refreshing. It will also enable us to relieve you of such so-called valuables and treasures in the way of gold dust and coin, which I regret to say too often are misapplied in careless hands, and which the teachings of the highest morality distinctly denominate as the root of all evil! I need not inform you, gentlemen, as business men, that promptitude and celerity of compliance will insure dispatch, and shorten an interview which has been sometimes needlessly, and, I regret to say, painfully protracted."

He drew back deliberately with the same monotonous precision of habit, and disclosed the muzzles of his confederates' weapons still leveled at the passengers. In spite of their astonishment, indignation, and discomfiture, his practiced effrontery and deliberate display appeared in some way to touch their humorous sense, and one or two smiled hysterically, as they rose and hesitatingly filed out of the vehicle. It is possible, however, that the leveled shot-guns contributed more or less directly to this result.

Two masks began to search the passengers under the combined focus of the bull's-eyes, the shining gun-barrels, and a running but still carefully prepared commentary from the spokesman. "It is to be regretted that business men, instead of intrusting their property to the custody of the regularly constituted express agent, still continue to secrete it on their persons; a custom that, without enhancing its security, is not only an injustice to the express company, but a great detriment to dispatch. We also wish to point out that while we do not as a rule interfere with the possession of articles of ordinary personal use or adornment, such as simple jewelry or watches, we reserve our right to restrict by confiscation the vulgarity and unmanliness of diamonds and enormous fob chains."

The act of spoliation was apparently complete, yet it was evident that the orator was restraining himself for a more effective climax. Clearing his throat again and stepping before the impatient but still mystified file of passengers, he reviewed them gravely. Then in a perfectly pitched tone of mingled pain and apology, he said slowly:

"It would seem that, from no wish of our own, we are obliged on this present occasion to suspend one or two of our usual rules. We are not in the habit of interfering with the wearing apparel of our esteemed clients; but in the interests

of ordinary humanity we are obliged to remove the boots of the gentleman on the extreme left, which evidently give him great pain and impede his locomotion. We also seldom deviate from our rule of obliging our clients to hold up their hands during this examination; but we gladly make an exception in favor of the gentleman next to him, and permit him to hand us the altogether too heavily weighted holster which presses upon his hip. Gentlemen," said the orator, slightly raising his voice, with a deprecating gesture, "you need not be alarmed! The indignant movement of our friend, just now, was not to draw his revolver—for it isn't there!" He paused while his companions speedily removed the farmer's boots and the miner's holster, and with a still more apologetic air approached the coach, where only the lady remained erect and rigid in her corner. "And now," he said with simulated hesitation, "we come to the last and to us the most painful suspension of our rules. On these very rare occasions, when we have been honored with the presence of the fair sex, it has been our invariable custom not only to leave them in the undisturbed possession of their property, but even of their privacy as well. It is with deep regret that on this occasion we are obliged to make an exception. For in the present instance, the lady, out of the gentleness of her heart and the politeness of her sex, has burdened herself not only with the weight but the responsibility of a package forced upon her by one of the passengers. We feel, and we believe, gentlemen, that most of you will agree with us, that so scandalous and unmanly an attempt to evade our rules and violate the sanctity of the lady's immunity will never be permitted. For your own sake, madam, we are compelled to ask you for the satchel under your seat. It will be returned to you when the package is removed."

"One moment," said the professional man indignantly, "there is a man here whom you have spared—a

man who lately joined us. Is that man," pointing to the astonished Key, "one of your confederates?"

"That man," returned the spokesman with a laugh, "is the owner of the Sylvan Hollow Mine. We have spared him because we owe him some consideration for having been turned out of his house at the dead of night while the sheriff of Sierra was seeking us." He stopped, and then in an entirely different voice, and in a totally changed manner, said roughly, "Tumble in there, all of you, quick! And you, sir" (to Key)—"I'd advise you to ride outside. Now, driver, raise so much as a rein or a whiplash until you hear the signal—and by God! you'll know what next." He stepped back, and seemed to be instantly swallowed up in the darkness; but the light of a solitary bull's-eye—the holder himself invisible—still showed the muzzles of the guns covering the driver. There was a momentary stir of voices within the closed coach, but an angry roar of "Silence!" from the darkness hushed it.

The moments crept slowly by; all now were breathless. Then a clear whistle rang from the distance, the light suddenly was extinguished, the leveled muzzles vanished with it, the driver's lash fell simultaneously on the backs of his horses, and the coach leaped forward.

The jolt nearly threw Key from the top, but a moment later it was still more difficult to keep his seat in the headlong fury of their progress. Again and again the lash descended upon the maddened horses, until the whole coach seemed to leap, bound, and swerve with every stroke. Cries of protest and even distress began to come from the interior, but the driver heeded it not. A window was suddenly let down; the voice of the professional man saying, "What's the matter? We're not followed. You are imperiling our lives by this speed," was answered only by, "Will some of ye throttle that

d——d fool?" from the driver, and the renewed fall of the lash. The wayside trees appeared a solid plateau before them, opened, danced at their side, closed up again behind them—but still they sped along. Rushing down grades with the speed of an avalanche, they ascended again without drawing rein, and as if by sheer momentum; for the heavy vehicle now seemed to have a diabolical energy of its own. It ground scattered rocks to powder with its crushing wheels, it swayed heavily on ticklish corners, recovering itself with the resistless forward propulsion of the straining teams, until the lights of Three Pine Station began to glitter through the trees. Then a succession of yells broke from the driver, so strong and dominant that they seemed to outstrip even the speed of the unabated cattle. Lesser lights were presently seen running to and fro, and on the outermost fringe of the settlement the stage pulled up before a crowd of wondering faces, and the driver spoke.

"We've been held up on the open road, by G—d, not THREE MILES from whar ye men are sittin' here yawpin'! If thar's a man among ye that hasn't got the soul of a skunk, he'll foller and close in upon 'em before they have a chance to get into the brush." Having thus relieved himself of his duty as an enforced noncombatant, and allowed all further responsibility to devolve upon his recreant fellow employees, he relapsed into his usual taciturnity, and drove a trifle less recklessly to the station, where he grimly set down his bruised and discomfited passengers. As Key mingled with them, he could not help perceiving that neither the late "orator's" explanation of his exemption from their fate, nor the driver's surly corroboration of his respectability, had pacified them. For a time this amused him, particularly as he could not help remembering that he first appeared to them beside the mysterious horseman who some one thought had been identified as one of the masks. But he was not a little piqued to find that the fair unknown appeared to

participate in their feelings, and his first civility to her met with a chilling response. Even then, in the general disillusion of his romance regarding her, this would have been only a momentary annoyance; but it strangely revived all his previous suspicions, and set him to thinking. Was the singular sagacity displayed by the orator in his search purely intuitive? Could any one have disclosed to him the secret of the passengers' hoards? Was it possible for HER while sitting alone in the coach to have communicated with the band? Suddenly the remembrance flashed across him of her opening the window for fresh air! She could have easily then dropped some signal. If this were so, and she really was the culprit, it was quite natural for her own safety that she should encourage the passengers in the absurd suspicion of himself! His dying interest revived; a few moments ago he had half resolved to abandon his quest and turn back at Three Pines. Now he determined to follow her to the end. But he did not indulge in any further sophistry regarding his duty; yet, in a new sense of honor, he did not dream of retaliating upon her by communicating his suspicions to his fellow passengers. When the coach started again, he took his seat on the top, and remained there until they reached Jamestown in the early evening. Here a number of his despoiled companions were obliged to wait, to communicate with their friends. Happily, the exemption that had made them indignant enabled him to continue his journey with a full purse. But he was content with a modest surveillance of the lady from the top of the coach.

On arriving at Stockton this surveillance became less easy. It was the terminus of the stage-route, and the divergence of others by boat and rail. If he were lucky enough to discover which one the lady took, his presence now would be more marked, and might excite her suspicion. But here a circumstance, which he also believed to be providential, determined him. As the luggage was being

removed from the top of the coach, he overheard the agent tell the expressman to check the "lady's" trunk to San Luis. Key was seized with an idea which seemed to solve the difficulty, although it involved a risk of losing the clue entirely. There were two routes to San Luis, one was by stage, and direct, though slower; the other by steamboat and rail, via San Francisco. If he took the boat, there was less danger of her discovering him, even if she chose the same conveyance; if she took the direct stage—and he trusted to a woman's avoidance of the hurry of change and transshipment for that choice—he would still arrive at San Luis, via San Francisco, an hour before her. He resolved to take the boat; a careful scrutiny from a stateroom window of the arriving passengers on the gangplank satisfied him that she had preferred the stage. There was still the chance that in losing sight of her she might escape him, but the risk seemed small. And a trifling circumstance had almost unconsciously influenced him—after his romantic and superstitious fashion—as to this final step.

He had been singularly moved when he heard that San Luis was the lady's probable destination. It did not seem to bear any relation to the mountain wilderness and the wild life she had just quitted; it was apparently the most antipathic, incongruous, and inconsistent refuge she could have taken. It offered no opportunity for the disposal of booty, or for communication with the gang. It was less secure than a crowded town. An old Spanish mission and monastery college in a sleepy pastoral plain—it had even retained its old-world flavor amidst American improvements and social revolution. He knew it well. From the quaint college cloisters, where the only reposeful years of his adventurous youth had been spent, to the long Alameda, or double avenues of ancient trees, which connected it with the convent of Santa Luisa, and some of his youthful "devotions,"—it had been the nursery of his romance. He

was amused at what seemed to be the irony of fate, in now linking it with this folly of his maturer manhood; and yet he was uneasily conscious of being more seriously affected by it. And it was with a greater anxiety than this adventure had ever yet cost him that he at last arrived at the San Jose hotel, and from a balcony corner awaited the coming of the coach. His heart beat rapidly as it approached. She was there! But at her side, as she descended from the coach, was the mysterious horseman of the Sierra road. Key could not mistake the well-built figure, whatever doubt there had been about the features, which had been so carefully concealed. With the astonishment of this rediscovery, there flashed across him again the fatefulness of the inspiration which had decided him not to go in the coach. His presence there would have no doubt warned the stranger, and so estopped this convincing denouement. It was quite possible that her companion, by relays of horses and the advantage of bridle cut-offs, could have easily followed the Three Pine coach and joined her at Stockton. But for what purpose? The lady's trunk, which had not been disturbed during the first part of the journey, and had been forwarded at Stockton untouched before Key's eyes, could not have contained booty to be disposed of in this forgotten old town.

The register of the hotel bore simply the name of "Mrs. Barker," of Stockton, but no record of her companion, who seemed to have disappeared as mysteriously as he came. That she occupied a sitting-room on the same floor as his own—in which she was apparently secluded during the rest of the day—was all he knew. Nobody else seemed to know her. Key felt an odd hesitation, that might have been the result of some vague fear of implicating her prematurely, in making any marked inquiry, or imperiling his secret by the bribed espionage of servants. Once when he was passing her door he heard the sounds of laughter—albeit innocent and heart- free—which seemed so inconsistent with the gravity

of the situation and his own thoughts that he was strangely shocked. But he was still more disturbed by a later occurrence. In his watchfulness of the movements of his neighbor he had been equally careful of his own, and had not only refrained from registering his name, but had enjoined secrecy upon the landlord, whom he knew. Yet the next morning after his arrival, the porter not answering his bell promptly enough, he so far forgot himself as to walk to the staircase, which was near the lady's room, and call to the employee over the balustrade. As he was still leaning over the railing, the faint creak of a door, and a singular magnetic consciousness of being overlooked, caused him to turn slowly, but only in time to hear the rustle of a withdrawing skirt as the door was quickly closed. In an instant he felt the full force of his foolish heedlessness, but it was too late. Had the mysterious fugitive recognized him? Perhaps not; their eyes had not met, and his face had been turned away.

He varied his espionage by subterfuges, which his knowledge of the old town made easy. He watched the door of the hotel, himself unseen, from the windows of a billiard saloon opposite, which he had frequented in former days. Yet he was surprised the same afternoon to see her, from his coigne of vantage, reentering the hotel, where he was sure he had left her a few moments ago. Had she gone out by some other exit—or had she been disguised? But on entering his room that evening he was confounded by an incident that seemed to him as convincing of her identity as it was audacious. Lying on his pillow were a few dead leaves of an odorous mountain fern, known only to the Sierras. They were tied together by a narrow blue ribbon, and had evidently been intended to attract his attention. As he took them in his hand, the distinguishing subtle aroma of the little sylvan hollow in the hills came to him like a memory and a revelation! He summoned the chambermaid; she knew nothing of them, or indeed of any one who had entered his

room. He walked cautiously into the hall; the lady's sitting-room door was open, the room was empty. "The occupant," said the chambermaid, "had left that afternoon." He held the proof of her identity in his hand, but she herself had vanished! That she had recognized him there was now no doubt: had she divined the real object of his quest, or had she accepted it as a mere sentimental gallantry at the moment when she knew it was hopeless, and she herself was perfectly safe from pursuit? In either event he had been duped. He did not know whether to be piqued, angry— or relieved of his irresolute quest.

Nevertheless, he spent the rest of the twilight and the early evening in fruitlessly wandering through the one long thoroughfare of the town, until it merged into the bosky Alameda, or spacious grove, that connected it with Santa Luisa. By degrees his chagrin and disappointment were forgotten in the memories of the past, evoked by the familiar pathway. The moon was slowly riding overhead, and silvering the carriage-way between the straight ebony lines of trees, while the footpaths were diapered with black and white checkers. The faint tinkling of a tram-car bell in the distance apprised him of one of the few innovations of the past. The car was approaching him, overtook him, and was passing, with its faintly illuminated windows, when, glancing carelessly up, he beheld at one of them the profile of the face which he had just thought he had lost forever!

He stopped for an instant, not in indecision this time, but in a grim resolution to let no chance escape him now. The car was going slowly; it was easy to board it now, but again the tinkle of the bell indicated that it was stopping at the corner of a road beyond. He checked his pace—a lady alighted—it was she! She turned into the cross-street, darkened with the shadows of some low suburban tenement houses, and he boldly followed. He was fully determined to

find out her secret, and even, if necessary, to accost her for that purpose. He was perfectly aware what he was doing, and all its risks and penalties; he knew the audacity of such an introduction, but he felt in his left-hand pocket for the sprig of fern which was an excuse for it; he knew the danger of following a possible confidante of desperadoes, but he felt in his right-hand pocket for the derringer that was equal to it. They were both there; he was ready.

He was nearing the convent and the oldest and most ruinous part of the town. He did not disguise from himself the gloomy significance of this; even in the old days the crumbling adobe buildings that abutted on the old garden wall of the convent were the haunts of lawless Mexicans and vagabond peons. As the roadway began to be rough and uneven, and the gaunt outlines of the sagging roofs of tiles stood out against the sky above the lurking shadows of ruined doorways, he was prepared for the worst. As the crumbling but still massive walls of the convent garden loomed ahead, the tall, graceful, black-gowned figure he was following presently turned into the shadow of the wall itself. He quickened his pace, lest it should again escape him. Suddenly it stopped, and remained motionless. He stopped, too. At the same moment it vanished!

He ran quickly forward to where it had stood, and found himself before a large iron gate, with a smaller one in the centre, that had just clanged to on its rusty hinges. He rubbed his eyes!—the place, the gate, the wall, were all strangely familiar! Then he stepped back into the roadway, and looked at it again. He was not mistaken.

He was standing before the porter's lodge of the Convent of the Sacred Heart.

Chapter 5

The day following the great stagecoach robbery found the patient proprietor of Collinson's Mill calm and untroubled in his usual seclusion. The news that had thrilled the length and breadth of Galloper's Ridge had not touched the leafy banks of the dried-up river; the hue and cry had followed the stage-road, and no courier had deemed it worth his while to diverge as far as the rocky ridge which formed the only pathway to the mill. That day Collinson's solitude had been unbroken even by the haggard emigrant from the valley, with his old monotonous story of hardship and privation. The birds had flown nearer to the old mill, as if emboldened by the unwonted quiet. That morning there had been the half human imprint of a bear's foot in the ooze beside the mill-wheel; and coming home with his scant stock from the woodland pasture, he had found a golden squirrel—a beautiful, airy embodiment of the brown woods itself—calmly seated on his bar-counter, with a biscuit between its baby hands. He was full of his characteristic reveries and abstractions that afternoon; falling into them even at his wood- pile, leaning on his axe—so still that an emerald-throated lizard, who had slid upon the log, went to sleep under the forgotten stroke.

But at nightfall the wind arose—at first as a distant murmur along the hillside, that died away before it reached the rocky ledge; then it rocked the tops of the tall redwoods behind the mill, but left the mill and the dried leaves that lay in the river- bed undisturbed. Then the murmur was prolonged, until it became the continuous trouble of some far-off sea, and at last the wind possessed the ledge itself;

driving the smoke down the stumpy chimney of the mill, rattling the sun-warped shingles on the roof, stirring the inside rafters with cool breaths, and singing over the rough projections of the outside eaves. At nine o'clock he rolled himself up in his blankets before the fire, as was his wont, and fell asleep.

It was past midnight when he was awakened by the familiar clatter of boulders down the grade, the usual simulation of a wild rush from without that encompassed the whole mill, even to that heavy impact against the door, which he had heard once before. In this he recognized merely the ordinary phenomena of his experience, and only turned over to sleep again. But this time the door rudely fell in upon him, and a figure strode over his prostrate body, with a gun leveled at his head.

He sprang sideways for his own weapon, which stood by the hearth. In another second that action would have been his last, and the solitude of Seth Collinson might have remained henceforward unbroken by any mortal. But the gun of the first figure was knocked sharply upward by a second man, and the one and only shot fired that night sped harmlessly to the roof. With the report he felt his arms gripped tightly behind him; through the smoke he saw dimly that the room was filled with masked and armed men, and in another moment he was pinioned and thrust into his empty armchair. At a signal three of the men left the room, and he could hear them exploring the other rooms and outhouses. Then the two men who had been standing beside him fell back with a certain disciplined precision, as a smooth-chinned man advanced from the open door. Going to the bar, he poured out a glass of whiskey, tossed it off deliberately, and, standing in front of Collinson, with his shoulder against the chimney and his hand resting lightly on his hip, cleared his throat. Had Collinson been an observant man, he would

have noticed that the two men dropped their eyes and moved their feet with a half impatient, perfunctory air of waiting. Had he witnessed the stage-robbery, he would have recognized in the smooth-faced man the presence of "the orator." But he only gazed at him with his dull, imperturbable patience.

"We regret exceedingly to have to use force to a gentleman in his own house," began the orator blandly; "but we feel it our duty to prevent a repetition of the unhappy incident which occurred as we entered. We desire that you should answer a few questions, and are deeply grateful that you are still able to do so—which seemed extremely improbable a moment or two ago." He paused, coughed, and leaned back against the chimney. "How many men have you here besides yourself?"

"Nary one," said Collinson.

The interrogator glanced at the other men, who had reentered. They nodded significantly.

"Good!" he resumed. "You have told the truth—an excellent habit, and one that expedites business. Now, is there a room in this house with a door that locks? Your front door DOESN'T."

"No."

"No cellar nor outhouse?"

"No."

"We regret that; for it will compel us, much against our wishes, to keep you bound as you are for the present. The matter is simply this: circumstances of a very pressing nature

oblige us to occupy this house for a few days—possibly for an indefinite period. We respect the sacred rites of hospitality too much to turn you out of it; indeed, nothing could be more distasteful to our feelings than to have you, in your own person, spread such a disgraceful report through the chivalrous Sierras. We must therefore keep you a close prisoner—open, however, to an offer. It is this: we propose to give you five hundred dollars for this property as it stands, provided that you leave it, and accompany a pack-train which will start to-morrow morning for the lower valley as far as Thompson's Pass, binding yourself to quit the State for three months and keep this matter a secret. Three of these gentlemen will go with you. They will point out to you your duty; their shotguns will apprise you of any dereliction from it. What do you say?"

"Who yer talking to?" said Collinson in a dull voice.

"You remind us," said the orator suavely, "that we have not yet the pleasure of knowing."

"My name's Seth Collinson."

There was a dead silence in the room, and every eye was fixed upon the two men. The orator's smile slightly stiffened.

"Where from?" he continued blandly.

"Mizzouri."

"A very good place to go back to—through Thompson's Pass. But you haven't answered our proposal."

"I reckon I don't intend to sell this house, or leave it," said Collinson simply.

"I trust you will not make us regret the fortunate termination of your little accident, Mr. Collinson," said the orator with a singular smile. "May I ask why you object to selling out? Is it the figure?"

"The house isn't mine," said Collinson deliberately. "I built this yer house for my wife wot I left in Mizzouri. It's hers. I kalkilate to keep it, and live in it ontil she comes fur it! And when I tell ye that she is dead, ye kin reckon just what chance ye have of ever gettin' it."

There was an unmistakable start of sensation in the room, followed by a silence so profound that the moaning of the wind on the mountain-side was distinctly heard. A well-built man, with a mask that scarcely concealed his heavy mustachios, who had been standing with his back to the orator in half contemptuous patience, faced around suddenly and made a step forward as if to come between the questioner and questioned. A voice from the corner ejaculated, "By G—d!"

"Silence," said the orator sharply. Then still more harshly he turned to the others "Pick him up, and stand him outside with a guard; and then clear out, all of you!"

The prisoner was lifted up and carried out; the room was instantly cleared; only the orator and the man who had stepped forward remained. Simultaneously they drew the masks from their faces, and stood looking at each other. The orator's face was smooth and corrupt; the full, sensual lips wrinkled at the corners with a sardonic humor; the man who confronted him appeared to be physically and even morally his superior, albeit gloomy and discontented in expression. He cast a rapid glance around the room, to assure himself that they were alone; and then, straightening his eyebrows as he backed against the chimney, said:

"D—d if I like this, Chivers! It's your affair; but it's mighty low-down work for a man!"

"You might have made it easier if you hadn't knocked up Bryce's gun. That would have settled it, though no one guessed that the cur was her husband," said Chivers hotly.

"If you want it settled THAT WAY, there's still time," returned the other with a slight sneer. "You've only to tell him that you're the man that ran away with his wife, and you'll have it out together, right on the ledge at twelve paces. The boys will see you through. In fact," he added, his sneer deepening, "I rather think it's what they're expecting."

"Thank you, Mr. Jack Riggs," said Chivers sardonically. "I dare say it would be more convenient to some people, just before our booty is divided, if I were drilled through by a blundering shot from that hayseed; or it would seem right to your high-toned chivalry if a dead-shot as I am knocked over a man who may have never fired a revolver before; but I don't exactly see it in that light, either as a man or as your equal partner. I don't think you quite understand me, my dear Jack. If you don't value the only man who is identified in all California as the leader of this gang (the man whose style and address has made it popular—yes, POPULAR, by G—d!—to every man, woman, and child who has heard of him; whose sayings and doings are quoted by the newspapers; whom people run risks to see; who has got the sympathy of the crowd, so that judges hesitate to issue warrants and constables to serve them)—if YOU don't see the use of such a man, I do. Why, there's a column and a half in the 'Sacramento Union' about our last job, calling me the 'Claude Duval' of the Sierras, and speaking of my courtesy to a lady! A LADY!—HIS wife, by G—d! our confederate! My dear Jack, you not only don't

know business values, but, ‘pon my soul, you don’t seem to understand humor! Ha, ha!”

For all his cynical levity, for all his affected exaggeration, there was the ring of an unmistakable and even pitiable vanity in his voice, and a self-consciousness that suffused his broad cheeks and writhed his full mouth, but seemed to deepen the frown on Riggs’ face.

“You know the woman hates it, and would bolt if she could—even from you,” said Riggs gloomily. “Think what she might do if she knew her husband were here. I tell you she holds our lives in the hollow of her hand.”

“That’s your fault, Mr. Jack Riggs; you would bring your sister with her infernal convent innocence and simplicity into our hut in the hollow. She was meek enough before that. But this is sheer nonsense. I have no fear of her. The woman don’t live who would go back on Godfrey Chivers—for a husband! Besides, she went off to see your sister at the convent at Santa Clara as soon as she passed those bonds off on Charley to get rid of! Think of her traveling with that d—d fool lawyer all the way to Stockton, and his bonds (which we had put back in her bag) alongside of them all the time, and he telling her he was going to stop their payment, and giving her the letter to mail for him!—eh? Well, we’ll have time to get rid of her husband before she gets back. If he don’t go easy—well”—

“None of that, Chivers, you understand, once for all!” interrupted Riggs peremptorily. “If you cannot see that your making away with that woman’s husband would damn that boasted reputation you make so much of and set every man’s hand against us, I do, and I won’t permit it. It’s a rotten business enough—our coming on him as we have; and if this wasn’t the only God-forsaken place where we could

divide our stuff without danger and get it away off the highroads, I'd pull up stakes at once."

"Let her stay at the convent, then, and be d—d to her," said Chivers roughly. "She'll be glad enough to be with your sister again; and there's no fear of her being touched there."

"But I want to put an end to that, too," returned Riggs sharply. "I do not choose to have my sister any longer implicated with OUR confederate or YOUR mistress. No more of that—you understand me?"

The two men had been standing side by side, leaning against the chimney. Chivers now faced his companion, his full lips wreathed into an evil smile.

"I think I understand you, Mr. Jack Riggs, or—I beg your pardon— Rivers, or whatever your real name may be," he began slowly. "Sadie Collinson, the mistress of Judge Godfrey Chivers, formerly of Kentucky, was good enough company for you the day you dropped down upon us in our little house in the hollow of Galloper's Ridge. We were living quite an idyllic, pastoral life there, weren't we?— she and me; hidden from the censorious eye of society and— Collinson, obeying only the voice of Nature and the little birds. It was a happy time," he went on with a grimly affected sigh, disregarding his companion's impatient gesture. "You were young then, waging YOUR fight against society, and fresh—uncommonly fresh, I may say—from your first exploit. And a very stupid, clumsy, awkward exploit, too, Mr. Riggs, if you will pardon my freedom. You wanted money, and you had an ugly temper, and you had lost both to a gambler; so you stopped the coach to rob him, and had to kill two men to get back your paltry thousand dollars, after frightening a whole coach-load of passengers, and

letting Wells, Fargo, & Company's treasure-box with fifty thousand dollars in it slide. It was a stupid, a blundering, a CRUEL act, Mr. Riggs, and I think I told you so at the time. It was a waste of energy and material, and made you, not a hero, but a stupid outcast! I think I proved this to you, and showed you how it might have been done."

"Dry up on that," interrupted Riggs impatiently. "You offered to become my partner, and you did."

"Pardon me. Observe, my impetuous friend, that my contention is that you—YOU—poisoned our blameless Eden in the hollow; that YOU were our serpent, and that this Sadie Collinson, over whom you have become so fastidious, whom you knew as my mistress, was obliged to become our confederate. You did not object to her when we formed our gang, and her house became our hiding-place and refuge. You took advantage of her woman's wit and fine address in disposing of our booty; you availed yourself, with the rest, of the secrets she gathered as MY mistress, just as you were willing to profit by the superior address of her paramour—your humble servant—when your own face was known to the sheriff, and your old methods pronounced brutal and vulgar. Excuse me, but I must insist upon THIS, and that you dropped down upon me and Sadie Collinson exactly as you have dropped down here upon her husband."

"Enough of this!" said Riggs angrily. "I admit the woman is part and parcel of the gang, and gets her share—or you get it for her," he added sneeringly; "but that doesn't permit her to mix herself with my family affairs."

"Pardon me again," interrupted Chivers softly. "Your memory, my dear Riggs, is absurdly defective. We knew that you had a young sister in the mountains, from whom you discreetly wished to conceal your real position.

We respected, and I trust shall always respect, your noble reticence. But do you remember the night you were taking her to school at Santa Clara—two nights before the fire—when you were recognized on the road near Skinner's, and had to fly with her for your life, and brought her to us—your two dear old friends, 'Mr. and Mrs. Barker of Chicago,' who had a pastoral home in the forest? You remember how we took her in— yes, doubly took her in—and kept your secret from her? And do you remember how this woman (this mistress of MINE and OUR confederate), while we were away, saved her from the fire on our only horse, caught the stage-coach, and brought her to the convent?"

Riggs walked towards the window, turned, and coming back, held out his hand. "Yes, she did it; and I thanked her, as I thank you." He stopped and hesitated, as the other took his hand. "But, blank it all, Chivers, don't you see that Alice is a young girl, and this woman is—you know what I mean. Somebody might recognize HER, and that would be worse for Alice than even if it were known what Alice's BROTHER was. G—d! if these two things were put together, the girl would be ruined forever."

"Jack," said Chivers suddenly, "you want this woman out of the way. Well—dash it all!—she nearly separated us, and I'll be frank with you as between man and man. I'll give her up! There are women enough in the world, and hang it, we're partners, after all!"

"Then you abandon her?" said Riggs slowly, his eyes fixed on his companion.

"Yes. She's getting a little too maundering lately. It will be a ticklish job to manage, for she knows too much; but it will be done. There's my hand on it."

Riggs not only took no notice of the proffered hand, but his former look of discontent came back with an ill-concealed addition of loathing and contempt.

"We'll drop that now," he said shortly; "we've talked here alone long enough already. The men are waiting for us." He turned on his heel into the inner room. Chivers remained standing by the chimney until his stiffened smile gave way under the working of his writhing lips; then he turned to the bar, poured out and swallowed another glass of whiskey at a single gulp, and followed his partner with half-closed lids that scarcely veiled his ominous eyes.

The men, with the exception of the sentinels stationed on the rocky ledge and the one who was guarding the unfortunate Collinson, were drinking and gambling away their perspective gains around a small pile of portmanteaus and saddle-bags, heaped in the centre of the room. They contained the results of their last successes, but one pair of saddle-bags bore the mildewed appearance of having been cached, or buried, some time before. Most of their treasure was in packages of gold dust; and from the conversation that ensued, it appeared that, owing to the difficulties of disposing of it in the mountain towns, the plan was to convey it by ordinary pack mule to the unfrequented valley, and thence by an emigrant wagon, on the old emigrant trail, to the southern counties, where it could be no longer traced. Since the recent robberies, the local express companies and bankers had refused to receive it, except the owners were known and identified. There had been but one box of coin, which had already been speedily divided up among the band. Drafts, bills, bonds, and valuable papers had been usually intrusted to one "Charley," who acted as a flying messenger to a corrupt broker in Sacramento, who played the role of the band's "fence." It had been the duty of Chivers to control this delicate business, even as it had been his peculiar

function to open all the letters and documents. This he had always lightened by characteristic levity and sarcastic comments on the private revelations of the contents. The rough, ill-spelt letter of the miner to his wife, inclosing a draft, or the more sentimental effusion of an emigrant swain to his sweetheart, with the gift of a "specimen," had always received due attention at the hands of this elegant humorist. But the operation was conducted to-night with business severity and silence. The two leaders sat opposite to each other, in what might have appeared to the rest of the band a scarcely veiled surveillance of each other's actions. When the examination was concluded, and, the more valuable inclosures put aside, the despoiled letters were carried to the fire and heaped upon the coals. Presently the chimney added its roar to the moaning of the distant hillside, a few sparks leaped up and died out in the midnight air, as if the pathos and sentiment of the unconscious correspondents had exhaled with them.

"That's a d—d foolish thing to do," growled French Pete over his cards.

"Why?" demanded Chivers sharply.

"Why?—why, it makes a flare in the sky that any scout can see, and a scent for him to follow."

"We're four miles from any traveled road," returned Chivers contemptuously, "and the man who could see that glare and smell that smoke would be on his way here already."

"That reminds me that that chap you've tied up—that Collinson— allows he wants to see you," continued French Pete.

"To see ME!" repeated Chivers. "You mean the Captain?"

"I reckon he means YOU," returned French Pete; "he said the man who talked so purty."

The men looked at each other with a smile of anticipation, and put down their cards. Chivers walked towards the door; one or two rose to their feet as if to follow, but Riggs stopped them peremptorily. "Sit down," he said roughly; then, as Chivers passed him, he added to him in a lower tone, "Remember."

Slightly squaring his shoulders and opening his coat, to permit a rhetorical freedom, which did not, however, prevent him from keeping touch with the butt of his revolver, Chivers stepped into the open air. Collinson had been moved to the shelter of an overhang of the roof, probably more for the comfort of the guard, who sat cross-legged on the ground near him, than for his own. Dismissing the man with a gesture, Chivers straightened himself before his captive.

"We deeply regret that your unfortunate determination, my dear sir, has been the means of depriving US of the pleasure of your company, and YOU of your absolute freedom; but may we cherish the hope that your desire to see me may indicate some change in your opinion?"

By the light of the sentry's lantern left upon the ground, Chivers could see that Collinson's face wore a slightly troubled and even apologetic expression.

"I've bin thinkin'," said Collinson, raising his eyes to his captor with a singularly new and shy admiration in them, "mebbee not so much of WOT you said, ez HOW you said it, and it's kinder bothered me, sittin' here, that I ain't

bin actin' to you boys quite on the square. I've said to myself, 'Collinson, thar ain't another house betwixt Bald Top and Skinner's whar them fellows kin get a bite or a drink to help themselves, and you ain't offered 'em neither. It ain't no matter who they are or how they came: whether they came crawling along the road from the valley, or dropped down upon you like them rocks from the grade; yere they are, and it's your duty, ez long ez you keep this yer house for your wife in trust, so to speak, for wanderers.' And I ain't forgettin' yer ginerel soft style and easy gait with me when you kem here. It ain't every man as could walk into another man's house arter the owner of it had grabbed a gun, ez soft-speakin', ez overlookin', and ez perlite ez you. I've acted mighty rough and low-down, and I know it. And I sent for you to say that you and your folks kin use this house and all that's in it ez long ez you're in trouble. I've told you why I couldn't sell the house to ye, and why I couldn't leave it. But ye kin use it, and while ye're here, and when you go, Collinson don't tell nobody. I don't know what ye mean by 'binding myself' to keep your secret; when Collinson says a thing he sticks to it, and when he passes his word with a man, or a man passes his word with him, it don't need no bit of paper."

There was no doubt of its truth. In the grave, upraised eyes of his prisoner, Chivers saw the certainty that he could trust him, even far more than he could trust any one within the house he had just quitted. But this very certainty, for all its assurance of safety to himself, filled him, not with remorse, which might have been an evanescent emotion, but with a sudden alarming and terrible consciousness of being in the presence of a hitherto unknown and immeasurable power! He had no pity for man who trusted him; he had no sense of shame in taking advantage of it; he even felt an intellectual superiority in this want of sagacity in his dupe; but he still felt in some way defeated, insulted, shocked, and

frightened. At first, like all scoundrels, he had measured the man by himself; was suspicious and prepared for rivalry; but the grave truthfulness of Collinson's eyes left him helpless. He was terrified by this unknown factor. The right that contends and fights often stimulates its adversary; the right that yields leaves the victor vanquished. Chivers could even have killed Collinson in his vague discomfiture, but he had a terrible consciousness that there was something behind him that he could not make way with. That was why this accomplished rascal felt his flaccid cheeks grow purple and his glib tongue trip before his captive.

But Collinson, more occupied with his own shortcomings, took no note of this, and Chivers quickly recovered his wits, if not his former artificiality. "All right," he said quickly, with a hurried glance at the door behind him. "Now that you think better of it, I'll be frank with you, and tell you I'm your friend. You understand—your friend. Don't talk much to those men—don't give yourself away to them;" he laughed this time in absolute natural embarrassment. "Don't talk about your wife, and this house, but just say you've made the thing up with me—with ME, you know, and I'll see you through." An idea, as yet vague, that he could turn Collinson's unexpected docility to his own purposes, possessed him even in his embarrassment, and he was still more strangely conscious of his inordinate vanity gathering a fearful joy from Collinson's evident admiration. It was heightened by his captive's next words.

"Ef I wasn't tied I'd shake hands with ye on that. You're the kind o' man, Mr. Chivers, that I cottoned to from the first. Ef this house wasn't HERS, I'd a' bin tempted to cotton to yer offer, too, and mebbee made yer one myself, for it seems to me your style and mine would sorter jibe together. But I see you sabe what's in my mind, and make allowance. WE don't want no bit o' paper to shake hands on

that. Your secret and your folk's secret is mine, and I don't blab that any more than I'd blab to them wot you've just told me."

Under a sudden impulse, Chivers leaned forward, and, albeit with somewhat unsteady hands and an embarrassed will, untied the cords that held Collinson in his chair. As the freed man stretched himself to his full height, he looked gravely down into the bleared eyes of his captor, and held out his strong right hand. Chivers took it. Whether there was some occult power in Collinson's honest grasp, I know not; but there sprang up in Chivers' agile mind the idea that a good way to get rid of Mrs. Collinson was to put her in the way of her husband's finding her, and for an instant, in the contemplation of that idea, this supreme rascal absolutely felt an embarrassing glow of virtue.

Chapter 6

The astonishment of Preble Key on recognizing the gateway into which the mysterious lady had vanished was so great that he was at first inclined to believe her entry THERE a mere trick of his fancy. That the confederate of a gang of robbers should be admitted to the austere recesses of the convent, with a celerity that bespoke familiarity, was incredible. He again glanced up and down the length of the shadowed but still visible wall. There was no one there. The wall itself contained no break or recess in which one could hide, and this was the only gateway. The opposite side of the street in the full moonlight stared emptily. No! Unless she were an illusion herself and his whole chase a dream, she MUST have entered here.

But the chase was not hopeless. He had at least tracked her to a place where she could be identified. It was not a hotel, which she could leave at any moment unobserved. Though he could not follow her and penetrate its seclusion now, he could later—thanks to his old associations with the padres of the contiguous college—gain an introduction to the Lady Superior on some pretext. She was safe there that night. He turned away with a feeling of relief. The incongruity of her retreat assumed a more favorable aspect to his hopes. He looked at the hallowed walls and the slumbering peacefulness of the gnarled old trees that hid the convent, and a gentle reminiscence of his youth stole over him. It was not the first time that he had gazed wistfully upon that chaste refuge where, perhaps, the bright eyes that he had followed in the quaint school procession under the leafy Alameda in the afternoon, were

at last closed in gentle slumber. There was the very grille through which the wicked Conchita—or, was it Dolores?—had shot her Parthian glance at the lingering student. And the man of thirty- five, prematurely gray and settled in fortune, smiled as he turned away, and forgot the adventuress of thirty who had brought him there.

The next morning he was up betimes and at the college of San Jose. Father Cipriano, a trifle more snuffy and aged, remembered with delight his old pupil. Ah! it was true, then, that he had become a mining president, and that was why his hair was gray; but he trusted that Don Preble had not forgot that this was not all of life, and that fortune brought great responsibilities and cares. But what was this, then? He HAD thought of bringing out some of his relations from the States, and placing a niece in the convent. That was good and wise. Ah, yes. For education in this new country, one must turn to the church. And he would see the Lady Superior? Ah! that was but the twist of one's finger and the lifting of a latch to a grave superintendent and a gray head like that. Of course, he had not forgotten the convent and the young senoritas, nor the discipline and the suspended holidays. Ah! it was a special grace of our Lady that he, Father Cipriano, had not been worried into his grave by those foolish muchachos. Yet, when he had extinguished a snuffy chuckle in his red bandana handkerchief, Key knew that he would accompany him to the convent that noon.

It was with a slight stirring of shame over his elaborate pretext that he passed the gate of the Sacred Heart with the good father. But it is to be feared that he speedily forgot that in the unexpected information that it elicited. The Lady Superior was gracious, and even enthusiastic. Ah, yes, it was a growing custom of the American caballeros—who had no homes, nor yet time to create any—to bring their sisters, wards, and nieces here, and— with a dove-like side-

glance towards Key—even the young senoritas they wished to fit for their Christian brides! Unlike the caballero, there were many business men so immersed in their affairs that they could not find time for a personal examination of the convent—which was to be regretted—but who, trusting to the reputation of the Sacred Heart and its good friends, simply sent the young lady there by some trusted female companion. Notably this was the case of the Senor Rivers—did Don Preble ever know him?—a great capitalist in the Sierras, whose sweet young sister, a naive, ingenuous creature, was the pride of the convent. Of course, it was better that it was so. Discipline and seclusion had to be maintained. The young girl should look upon this as her home. The rules for visitors were necessarily severe. It was rare indeed—except in a case of urgency, such as happened last night— that even a lady, unless the parent of a scholar, was admitted to the hospitality of the convent. And this lady was only the friend of that same sister of the American capitalist, although she was the one who had brought her there. No, she was not a relation. Perhaps Don Preble had heard of a Mrs. Barker—the friend of Rivers of the Sierras. It was a queer combination of names. But what will you? The names of Americanos mean nothing. And Don Preble knows them not. Ah! possibly?—good! The lady would be remembered, being tall, dark, and of fine presence, though sad. A few hours earlier and Don Preble could have judged for himself, for, as it were, she might have passed through this visitors' room. But she was gone—departed by the coach. It was from a telegram— those heathen contrivances that blurt out things to you, with never an excuse, nor a smile, nor a kiss of the hand! For her part, she never let her scholars receive them, but opened them herself, and translated them in a Christian spirit, after due preparation, at her leisure. And it was this telegram that made the Senora Barker go, or, without doubt, she would have of herself told to the Don

Preble, her compatriot of the Sierras, how good the convent was for his niece.

Stung by the thought that this woman had again evaded him, and disconcerted and confused by the scarcely intelligible information he had acquired, Key could with difficulty maintain his composure. “The caballero is tired of his long pasear,” said the Lady Superior gently. “We will have a glass of wine in the lodge waiting-room.” She led the way from the reception room to the outer door, but stopped at the sound of approaching footsteps and rustling muslin along the gravel walk. “The second class are going out,” she said, as a gentle procession of white frocks, led by two nuns, filed before the gateway. “We will wait until they have passed. But the senor can see that my children do not look unhappy.”

They certainly looked very cheerful, although they had halted before the gateway with a little of the demureness of young people who know they are overlooked by authority, and had bumped against each other with affected gravity. Somewhat ashamed of his useless deception, and the guileless simplicity of the good Lady Superior, Key hesitated and began: “I am afraid that I am really giving you too much trouble,” and suddenly stopped.

For as his voice broke the demure silence, one of the nearest—a young girl of apparently seventeen—turned towards him with a quick and an apparently irresistible impulse, and as quickly turned away again. But in that instant Key caught a glimpse of a face that might not only have thrilled him in its beauty, its freshness, but in some vague suggestiveness. Yet it was not that which set his pulses beating; it was the look of joyous recognition set in the parted lips and sparkling eyes, the glow of childlike innocent pleasure that mantled the sweet young face, the

frank confusion of suddenly realized expectancy and longing. A great truth gripped his throbbing heart, and held it still. It was the face that he had seen in the hollow!

The movement of the young girl was too marked to escape the eye of the Lady Superior, though she had translated it differently. “You must not believe our young ladies are all so rude, Don Preble,” she said dryly; “though our dear child has still some of the mountain freedom. And this is the Senor Rivers’ sister. But possibly—who knows?” she said gently, yet with a sudden sharpness in her clear eyes—“perhaps she recognized in your voice a companion of her brother.”

Luckily for Key, the shock had been so sudden and overpowering that he showed none of the lesser symptoms of agitation or embarrassment. In this revelation of a secret, that he now instinctively felt was bound up with his own future happiness, he exhibited none of the signs of a discovered intriguer or unmasked Lothario. He said quietly and coldly: “I am afraid I have not the pleasure of knowing the young lady, and certainly have never before addressed her.” Yet he scarcely heard his companion’s voice, and answered mechanically, seeing only before him the vision of the girl’s bewitching face, in its still more bewitching consciousness of his presence. With all that he now knew, or thought he knew, came a strange delicacy of asking further questions, a vague fear of compromising HER, a quick impatience of his present deception; even his whole quest of her seemed now to be a profanation, for which he must ask her forgiveness. He longed to be alone to recover himself. Even the temptation to linger on some pretext, and wait for her return and another glance from her joyous eyes, was not as strong as his conviction of the necessity of cooler thought and action. He had met his fate that morning, for good or ill; that was all he knew. As soon as he could decently retire, he

thanked the Lady Superior, promised to communicate with her later, and taking leave of Father Cipriano, found himself again in the street.

Who was she, what was she, and what meant her joyous recognition of him? It is to be feared that it was the last question that affected him most, now that he felt that he must have really loved her from the first. Had she really seen him before, and had been as mysteriously impressed as he was? It was not the reflection of a conceited man, for Key had not that kind of vanity, and he had already touched the humility that is at the base of any genuine passion. But he would not think of that now. He had established the identity of the other woman, as being her companion in the house in the hollow on that eventful night; but it was HER profile that he had seen at the window. The mysterious brother Rivers might have been one of the robbers—perhaps the one who accompanied Mrs. Barker to San Jose. But it was plain that the young girl had no complicity with the actions of the gang, whatever might have been her companion's confederation. In the prescience of a true lover, he knew that she must have been deceived and kept in utter ignorance of it. There was no look of it in her lovely, guileless eyes; her very impulsiveness and ingenuousness would have long since betrayed the secret. Was it left for him, at this very outset of his passion, to be the one to tell her? Could he bear to see those frank, beautiful eyes dimmed with shame and sorrow? His own grew moist. Another idea began to haunt him. Would it not be wiser, even more manly, for him—a man over twice her years—to leave her alone with her secret, and so pass out of her innocent young life as chancefully as he had entered it? But was it altogether chanceful? Was there not in her innocent happiness in him a recognition of something in him better than he had dared to think himself? It was the last conceit of the humility of love.

He reached his hotel at last, unresolved, perplexed, yet singularly happy. The clerk handed him, in passing, a business-looking letter, formally addressed. Without opening it, he took it to his room, and throwing himself listlessly on a chair by the window again tried to think. But the atmosphere of his room only recalled to him the mysterious gift he had found the day before on his pillow. He felt now with a thrill that it must have been from HER. How did she convey it there? She would not have intrusted it to Mrs. Barker. The idea struck him now as distastefully as it seemed improbable. Perhaps she had been here herself with her companion— the convent sometimes made that concession to a relative or well- known friend. He recalled the fact that he had seen Mrs. Barker enter the hotel alone, after the incident of the opening door, while he was leaning over the balustrade. It was SHE who was alone THEN, and had recognized his voice; and he had not known it. She was out again to-day with the procession. A sudden idea struck him. He glanced quickly at the letter in his hand, and hurriedly opened it. It contained only three lines, in a large formal hand, but they sent the swift blood to his cheeks.

"I heard your voice to-day for the third time. I want to hear it again. I will come at dusk. Do not go out until then."

He sat stupefied. Was it madness, audacity, or a trick? He summoned the waiter. The letter had been left by a boy from the confectioner's shop in the next block. He remembered it of old—a resort for the young ladies of the convent. Nothing was easier than conveying a letter in that way. He remembered with a shock of disillusion and disgust that it was a common device of silly but innocent assignation. Was he to be the ridiculous accomplice of a schoolgirl's extravagant escapade, or the deluded victim of some infamous plot of her infamous companion? He could

not believe either; yet he could not check a certain revulsion of feeling towards her, which only a moment ago he would have believed impossible.

Yet whatever was her purpose, he must prevent her coming there at any hazard. Her visit would be the culmination of her folly, or the success of any plot. Even while he was fully conscious of the material effect of any scandal and exposure to her, even while he was incensed and disillusionized at her unexpected audacity, he was unusually stirred with the conviction that she was wronging herself, and that more than ever she demanded his help and his consideration. Still she must not come. But how was he to prevent her? It wanted but an hour of dusk. Even if he could again penetrate the convent on some pretext at that inaccessible hour for visitors—twilight—how could he communicate with her? He might intercept her on the way, and persuade her to return; but she must be kept from entering the hotel.

He seized his hat and rushed downstairs. But here another difficulty beset him. It was easy enough to take the ordinary road to the convent, but would SHE follow that public one in what must be a surreptitious escape? And might she not have eluded the procession that morning, and even now be concealed somewhere, waiting for the darkness to make her visit. He concluded to patrol the block next to the hotel, yet near enough to intercept her before she reached it, until the hour came. The time passed slowly. He loitered before shop windows, or entered and made purchases, with his eye on the street. The figure of a pretty girl—and there were many—the fluttering ribbons on a distant hat, or the flashing of a cambric skirt around the corner sent a nervous thrill through him. The reflection of his grave, abstracted face against a shop window, or the announcement of the workings of his own mine on a bulletin board, in its

incongruity with his present occupation, gave him an hysterical impulse to laugh. The shadows were already gathering, when he saw a slender, graceful figure disappear in the confectioner's shop on the block below. In his elaborate precautions, he had overlooked that common trysting spot. He hurried thither, and entered. The object of his search was not there, and he was compelled to make a shamefaced, awkward survey of the tables in an inner refreshment saloon to satisfy himself. Any one of the pretty girls seated there might have been the one who had just entered, but none was the one he sought. He hurried into the street again—he had wasted a precious moment—and resumed his watch. The sun had sunk, the Angelus had rung out of a chapel belfry, and shadows were darkening the vista of the Alameda. She had not come. Perhaps she had thought better of it; perhaps she had been prevented; perhaps the whole appointment had been only a trick of some day-scholars, who were laughing at him behind some window. In proportion as he became convinced that she was not coming, he was conscious of a keen despair growing in his heart, and a sickening remorse that he had ever thought of preventing her. And when he at last reluctantly reentered the hotel, he was as miserable over the conviction that she was not coming as he had been at her expected arrival. The porter met him hurriedly in the hall.

"Sister Seraphina of the Sacred Heart has been here, in a hurry to see you on a matter of importance," he said, eyeing Key somewhat curiously. "She would not wait in the public parlor, as she said her business was confidential, so I have put her in a private sitting-room on your floor."

Key felt the blood leave his cheeks. The secret was out for all his precaution. The Lady Superior had discovered the girl's flight—or her attempt. One of the governing sisterhood was here to arraign him for it, or at least prevent

an open scandal. Yet he was resolved; and seizing this last straw, he hurriedly mounted the stairs, determined to do battle at any risk for the girl's safety, and to perjure himself to any extent.

She was standing in the room by the window. The light fell upon the coarse serge dress with its white facings, on the single girdle that scarcely defined the formless waist, on the huge crucifix that dangled ungracefully almost to her knees, on the hideous, white- winged coif that, with the coarse but dense white veil, was itself a renunciation of all human vanity. It was a figure he remembered well as a boy, and even in his excitement and half resentment touched him now, as when a boy, with a sense of its pathetic isolation. His head bowed with boyish deference as she approached gently, passed him a slight salutation, and closed the door that he had forgotten to shut behind him.

Then, with a rapid movement, so quick that he could scarcely follow it, the coif, veil, rosary, and crucifix were swept off, and the young pupil of the convent stood before him.

For all the sombre suggestiveness of her disguise and its ungraceful contour, there was no mistaking the adorable little head, tumbled all over with silky tendrils of hair from the hasty withdrawal of her coif, or the blue eyes that sparkled with frank delight beneath them. Key thought her more beautiful than ever. Yet the very effect of her frankness and beauty was to recall him to all the danger and incongruity of her position.

"This is madness," he said quickly. "You may be followed here and discovered in this costume at any moment!" Nevertheless, he caught the two little hands that had been extended to him, and held them tightly, and with a

frank familiarity that he would have wondered at an instant before.

"But I won't," she said simply. "You see I'm doing a 'half- retreat'; and I stay with Sister Seraphina in her room; and she always sleeps two hours after the Angelus; and I got out without anybody knowing me, in her clothes. I see what it is," she said, suddenly bending a reproachful glance upon him, "you don't like me in them. I know they're just horrid; but it was the only way I could get out."

"You don't understand me," he said eagerly. "I don't like you to run these dreadful risks and dangers for"—He would have said "for me," but added with sudden humility—"for nothing. Had I dreamed that you cared to see me, I would have arranged it easily without this indiscretion, which might make others misjudge you. Every instant that you remain here—worse, every moment that you are away from the convent in that disguise, is fraught with danger. I know you never thought of it."

"But I did," she said quietly; "I thought of it, and thought that if Sister Seraphina woke up, and they sent for me, you would take me away with you to that dear little hollow in the hills, where I first heard your voice. You remember it, don't you? You were lost, I think, in the darkness, and I used to say to myself afterwards that I found you. That was the first time. Then the second time I heard you, was here in the hall. I was alone in the other room, for Mrs. Barker had gone out. I did not know you were here, but I knew your voice. And the third time was before the convent gate, and then I knew you knew me. And after that I didn't think of anything but coming to you; for I knew that if I was found out, you would take me back with you, and perhaps send word to my brother where we were, and then"— She stopped suddenly, with her eyes fixed on Key's blank face.

Her own grew blank, the joy faded out of her clear eyes, she gently withdrew her hand from his, and without a word began to resume her disguise.

"Listen to me," said Key passionately. "I am thinking only of YOU. I want to, and WILL, save you from any blame—blame you do not understand even now. There is still time. I will go back to the convent with you at once. You shall tell me everything; I will tell you everything on the way."

She had already completely resumed her austere garb, and drew the veil across her face. With the putting on her coif she seemed to have extinguished all the joyous youthfulness of her spirit, and moved with the deliberateness of renunciation towards the door. They descended the staircase without a word. Those who saw them pass made way for them with formal respect.

When they were in the street, she said quietly, "Don't give me your arm—Sisters don't take it." When they had reached the street corner, she turned it, saying, "This is the shortest way."

It was Key who was now restrained, awkward, and embarrassed. The fire of his spirit, the passion he had felt a moment before, had gone out of him, as if she were really the character she had assumed. He said at last desperately:

"How long did you live in the hollow?"

"Only two days. My brother was bringing me here to school, but in the stage coach there was some one with whom he had quarreled, and he didn't want to meet him with me. So we got out at Skinner's, and came to the hollow, where his old friends, Mr. and Mrs. Barker, lived."

There was no hesitation nor affectation in her voice. Again he felt that he would as soon have doubted the words of the Sister she represented as her own.

"And your brother—did you live with him?"

"No. I was at school at Marysville until he took me away. I saw little of him for the past two years, for he had business in the mountains—very rough business, where he couldn't take me, for it kept him away from the settlements for weeks. I think it had something to do with cattle, for he was always having a new horse. I was all alone before that, too; I had no other relations; I had no friends. We had always been moving about so much, my brother and I. I never saw any one that I liked, except you, and until yesterday I had only HEARD you."

Her perfect naivete alternately thrilled him with pain and doubt. In his awkwardness and uneasiness he was brutal.

"Yes, but you must have met somebody—other men—here even, when you were out with your schoolfellows, or perhaps on an adventure like this."

Her white coif turned towards him quickly. "I never wanted to know anybody else. I never cared to see anybody else. I never would have gone out in this way but for you," she said hurriedly. After a pause she added in a frightened tone: "That didn't sound like your voice then. It didn't sound like it a moment ago either."

"But you are sure that you know my voice," he said, with affected gayety. "There were two others in the hollow with me that night."

"I know that, too. But I know even what you said. You reproved them for throwing a lighted match in the dry grass. You were thinking of us then. I know it."

"Of US?" said Key quickly.

"Of Mrs. Barker and myself. We were alone in the house, for my brother and her husband were both away. What you said seemed to forewarn me, and I told her. So we were prepared when the fire came nearer, and we both escaped on the same horse."

"And you dropped your shoes in your flight," said Key laughingly, "and I picked them up the next day, when I came to search for you. I have kept them still."

"They were HER shoes," said the girl quickly, "I couldn't find mine in our hurry, and hers were too large for me, and dropped off." She stopped, and with a faint return of her old gladness said, "Then you DID come back? I KNEW you would."

"I should have stayed THEN, but we got no reply when we shouted. Why was that?" he demanded suddenly.

"Oh, we were warned against speaking to any stranger, or even being seen by any one while we were alone," returned the girl simply.

"But why?" persisted Key.

"Oh, because there were so many highwaymen and horse-stealers in the woods. Why, they had stopped the coach only a few weeks before, and only a day or two ago, when Mrs. Barker came down. SHE saw them!"

Key with difficulty suppressed a groan. They walked on in silence for some moments, he scarcely daring to lift his eyes to the decorous little figure hastening by his side. Alternately touched by mistrust and pain, at last an infinite pity, not unmingled with a desperate resolution, took possession of him.

"I must make a confession to you, Miss Rivers," he began with the bashful haste of a very boy, "that is"—he stammered with a half hysteric laugh—"that is—a confession as if you were really a sister or a priest, you know—a sort of confidence to you—to your dress. I HAVE seen you, or THOUGHT I saw you before. It was that which brought me here, that which made me follow Mrs. Barker—my only clue to you—to the door of that convent. That night, in the hollow, I saw a profile at the lighted window, which I thought was yours."

"I never was near the window," said the young girl quickly. "It must have been Mrs. Barker."

"I know that now," returned Key. "But remember, it was my only clue to you. I mean," he added awkwardly, "it was the means of my finding you."

"I don't see how it made you think of me, whom you never saw, to see another woman's profile," she retorted, with the faintest touch of asperity in her childlike voice. "But," she added, more gently and with a relapse into her adorable naivete, "most people's profiles look alike."

"It was not that," protested Key, still awkwardly, "it was only that I realized something—only a dream, perhaps."

She did not reply, and they continued on in silence. The gray wall of the convent was already in sight. Key felt

he had achieved nothing. Except for information that was hopeless, he had come to no nearer understanding of the beautiful girl beside him, and his future appeared as vague as before; and, above all, he was conscious of an inferiority of character and purpose to this simple creature, who had obeyed him so submissively. Had he acted wisely? Would it not have been better if he had followed her own frankness, and—

"Then it was Mrs. Barker's profile that brought you here?" resumed the voice beneath the coif. "You know she has gone back. I suppose you will follow?"

"You will not understand me," said Key desperately. "But," he added in a lower voice, "I shall remain here until you do."

He drew a little closer to her side.

"Then you must not begin by walking so close to me," she said, moving slightly away; "they may see you from the gate. And you must not go with me beyond that corner. If I have been missed already they will suspect you."

"But how shall I know?" he said, attempting to take her hand. "Let me walk past the gate. I cannot leave you in this uncertainty."

"You will know soon enough," she said gravely, evading his hand. "You must not go further now. Good-night."

She had stopped at the corner of the wall. He again held out his hand. Her little fingers slid coldly between his.

"Good-night, Miss Rivers."

"Stop!" she said suddenly, withdrawing her veil and lifting her clear eyes to his in the moonlight. "You must not say THAT—it isn't the truth. I can't bear to hear it from YOUR lips, in YOUR voice. My name is NOT Rivers!"

"Not Rivers—why?" said Key, astounded.

"Oh, I don't know why," she said half despairingly; "only my brother didn't want me to use my name and his here, and I promised. My name is 'Riggs'—there! It's a secret—you mustn't tell it; but I could not bear to hear YOU say a lie."

"Good-night, Miss Riggs," said Key sadly.

"No, nor that either," she said softly. "Say Alice."

"Good-night, Alice."

She moved on before him. She reached the gate. For a moment her figure, in its austere, formless garments, seemed to him to even stoop and bend forward in the humility of age and self- renunciation, and she vanished within as into a living tomb.

Forgetting all precaution, he pressed eagerly forward, and stopped before the gate. There was no sound from within; there had evidently been no challenge nor interruption. She was safe.

Chapter 7

The reappearance of Chivers in the mill with Collinson, and the brief announcement that the prisoner had consented to a satisfactory compromise, were received at first with a half contemptuous smile by the party; but for the commands of their leaders, and possibly a conviction that Collinson's fatuous cooperation with Chivers would be safer than his wrath, which might not expend itself only on Chivers, but imperil the safety of all, it is probable that they would have informed the unfortunate prisoner of his real relations to his captor. In these circumstances, Chivers' half satirical suggestion that Collinson should be added to the sentries outside, and guard his own property, was surlily assented to by Riggs, and complacently accepted by the others. Chivers offered to post him himself—not without an interchange of meaning glances with Riggs—Collinson's own gun was returned to him, and the strangely assorted pair left the mill amicably together.

But however humanly confident Chivers was in his companion's faithfulness, he was not without a rascal's precaution, and determined to select a position for Collinson where he could do the least damage in any aberration of trust. At the top of the grade, above the mill, was the only trail by which a party in force could approach it. This was to Chivers obviously too strategic a position to intrust to his prisoner, and the sentry who guarded its approach, five hundred yards away, was left unchanged. But there was another "blind" trail, or cut-off, to the left, through the thickest undergrowth of the woods, known only to his party. To place Collinson there was to insure him perfect immunity from the approach

of an enemy, as well as from any confidential advances of his fellow sentry. This done, he drew a cigar from his pocket, and handing it to Collinson, lighted another for himself, and leaning back comfortably against a large boulder, glanced complacently at his companion.

"You may smoke until I go, Mr. Collinson, and even afterwards, if you keep the bowl of your pipe behind a rock, so as to be out of sight of your fellow sentry, whose advances, by the way, if I were you, I should not encourage. Your position here, you see, is a rather peculiar one. You were saying, I think, that a lingering affection for your wife impelled you to keep this place for her, although you were convinced of her death?"

Collinson's unaffected delight in Chivers' kindliness had made his eyes shine in the moonlight with a doglike wistfulness. "I reckon I did say that, Mr. Chivers," he said apologetically, "though it ain't goin' to interfere with you usin' the shanty jest now."

"I wasn't alluding to that, Collinson," returned Chivers, with a large rhetorical wave of the hand, and an equal enjoyment in his companion's evident admiration of him, "but it struck me that your remark, nevertheless, implied some doubt of your wife's death, and I don't know but that your doubts are right."

"Wot's that?" said Collinson, with a dull glow in his face.

Chivers blew the smoke of his cigar lazily in the still air. "Listen," he said. "Since your miraculous conversion a few moments ago, I have made some friendly inquiries about you, and I find that you lost all trace of your wife in Texas

in ‘52, where a number of her fellow emigrants died of yellow fever. Is that so?”

“Yes,” said Collinson quickly.

“Well, it so happens that a friend of mine,” continued Chivers slowly, “was in a train which followed that one, and picked up and brought on some of the survivors.”

“That was the train wot brought the news,” said Collinson, relapsing into his old patience. “That’s how I knowed she hadn’t come.”

“Did you ever hear the names of any of its passengers?” said Chivers, with a keen glance at his companion.

“Nary one! I only got to know it was a small train of only two wagons, and it sorter melted into Californy through a southern pass, and kinder petered out, and no one ever heard of it agin, and that was all.”

“That was NOT all, Collinson,” said Chivers lazily. “I saw the train arrive at South Pass. I was awaiting a friend and his wife. There was a lady with them, one of the survivors. I didn’t hear her name, but I think my friend’s wife called her ‘Sadie.’ I remember her as a rather pretty woman—tall, fair, with a straight nose and a full chin, and small slim feet. I saw her only a moment, for she was on her way to Los Angeles, and was, I believe, going to join her husband somewhere in the Sierras.”

The rascal had been enjoying with intense satisfaction the return of the dull glow in Collinson’s face, that even seemed to animate the whole length of his angular frame as it turned eagerly towards him. So he went on,

experiencing a devilish zest in this description of his mistress to her husband, apart from the pleasure of noting the slow awakening of this apathetic giant, with a sensation akin to having warmed him into life. Yet his triumph was of short duration. The fire dropped suddenly out of Collinson's eyes, the glow from his face, and the dull look of unwearied patience returned.

"That's all very kind and purty of yer, Mr. Chivers," he said gravely; "you've got all my wife's pints thar to a dot, and it seems to fit her jest like a shoe I picked up t'other day. But it wasn't my Sadie, for ef she's living or had lived, she'd bin just yere!"

The same fear and recognition of some unknown reserve in this trustful man came over Chivers as before. In his angry resentment of it he would have liked to blurt out the infidelity of the wife before her husband, but he knew Collinson would not believe him, and he had another purpose now. His full lips twisted into a suave smile.

"While I would not give you false hopes, Mr. Collinson," he said, with a bland smile, "my interest in you compels me to say that you may be over confident and wrong. There are a thousand things that may have prevented your wife from coming to you—illness, possibly the result of her exposure, poverty, misapprehension of your place of meeting, and, above all, perhaps some false report of your own death. Has it ever occurred to you that it is as possible for her to have been deceived in that way as for you?"

"Wot yer say?" said Collinson, with a vague suspicion.

"What I mean. You think yourself justified in believing your wife dead, because she did not seek you here;

may she not feel herself equally justified in believing the same of you, because you had not sought her elsewhere?"

"But it was writ that she was comin' yere, and—I boarded every train that come in that fall," said Collinson, with a new irritation, unlike his usual calm.

"Except one, my dear Collinson—except one," returned Chivers, holding up a fat forefinger smilingly. "And that may be the clue. Now, listen! There is still a chance of following it, if you will. The name of my friends were Mr. and Mrs. Barker. I regret," he added, with a perfunctory cough, "that poor Barker is dead. He was not such an exemplary husband as you are, my dear Collinson, and I fear was not all that Mrs. Barker could have wished; enough that he succumbed from various excesses, and did not leave me Mrs. Barker's present address. But she has a young friend, a ward, living at the convent of Santa Luisa, whose name is Miss Rivers, who can put you in communication with her. Now, one thing more: I can understand your feelings, and that you would wish at once to satisfy your mind. It is not, perhaps, to my interest nor the interest of my party to advise you, but," he continued, glancing around him, "you have an admirably secluded position here, on the edge of the trail, and if you are missing from your post to-morrow morning, I shall respect your feelings, trust to your honor to keep this secret, and—consider it useless to pursue you!"

There was neither shame nor pity in his heart, as the deceived man turned towards him with tremulous eagerness, and grasped his hand in silent gratitude. But the old rage and fear returned, as Collinson said gravely:

"You kinder put a new life inter me, Mr. Chivers, and I wish I had yer gift o' speech to tell ye so. But I've passed my word to the Capting thar and to the rest o' you folks that

I'd stand guard out yere, and I don't go back o' my word. I mout, and I moutn't find my Sadie; but she wouldn't think the less o' me, arter these years o' waitin', ef I stayed here another night, to guard the house I keep in trust for her, and the strangers I've took in on her account."

"As you like, then," said Chivers, contracting his lips, "but keep your own counsel to-night. There may be those who would like to deter you from your search. And now I will leave you alone in this delightful moonlight. I quite envy you your unrestricted communion with Nature. Adios, amigo, adios!"

He leaped lightly on a large rock that overhung the edge of the grade, and waved his hand.

"I wouldn't do that, Mr. Chivers," said Collinson, with a concerned face; "them rocks are mighty ticklish, and that one in partiklar. A tech sometimes sends 'em scooting."

Mr. Chivers leaped quickly to the ground, turned, waved his hand again, and disappeared down the grade.

But Collinson was no longer alone. Hitherto his characteristic reveries had been of the past—reminiscences in which there was only recollection, no imagination, and very little hope. Under the spell of Chivers' words his fancy seemed to expand; he began to think of his wife as she might be now—perhaps ill, despairing, wandering hopelessly, even ragged and footsore, or—believing HIM dead—relapsing into the resigned patience that had been his own; but always a new Sadie, whom he had never seen or known before. A faint dread, the lightest of misgivings (perhaps coming from his very ignorance), for the first time touched his steadfast heart, and sent a chill through it. He shouldered his weapon, and walked briskly towards the edge of the thick-set woods.

There were the fragrant essences of the laurel and spruce—baked in the long-day sunshine that had encompassed their recesses—still coming warm to his face; there were the strange shiftings of temperature throughout the openings, that alternately warmed and chilled him as he walked. It seemed so odd that he should now have to seek her instead of her coming to him; it would never be the same meeting to him, away from the house that he had built for her! He strolled back, and looked down upon it, nestling on the ledge. The white moonlight that lay upon it dulled the glitter of lights in its windows, but the sounds of laughter and singing came to even his unfastidious ears with a sense of vague discord. He walked back again, and began to pace before the thick-set wood. Suddenly he stopped and listened.

To any other ears but those accustomed to mountain solitude it would have seemed nothing. But, familiar as he was with all the infinite disturbances of the woodland, and even the simulation of intrusion caused by a falling branch or lapsing pine-cone, he was arrested now by a recurring sound, unlike any other. It was an occasional muffled beat—interrupted at uncertain intervals, but always returning in regular rhythm, whenever it was audible. He knew it was made by a cantering horse; that the intervals were due to the patches of dead leaves in its course, and that the varying movement was the effect of its progress through obstacles and underbrush. It was therefore coming through some "blind" cutoff in the thick-set wood. The shifting of the sound also showed that the rider was unfamiliar with the locality, and sometimes wandered from the direct course; but the unfailing and accelerating persistency of the sound, in spite of these difficulties, indicated haste and determination.

He swung his gun from his shoulder, and examined its caps. As the sound came nearer, he drew up beside a young spruce at the entrance of the thicket. There was no

necessity to alarm the house, or call the other sentry. It was a single horse and rider, and he was equal to that. He waited quietly, and with his usual fateful patience. Even then his thoughts still reverted to his wife; and it was with a singular feeling that he, at last, saw the thick underbrush give way before a woman, mounted on a sweating but still spirited horse, who swept out into the open. Nevertheless, he stopped in front of her, and called:

"Hold up thar!"

The horse recoiled, nearly unseating her. Collinson caught the reins. She lifted her whip mechanically, yet remained holding it in the air, trembling, until she slipped, half struggling, half helplessly, from the saddle to the ground. Here she would have again fallen, but Collinson caught her sharply by the waist. At his touch she started and uttered a frightened "No!" At her voice Collinson started.

"Sadie!" he gasped.

"Seth!" she half whispered.

They stood looking at each other. But Collinson was already himself again. The man of simple directness and no imagination saw only his wife before him—a little breathless, a little flurried, a little disheveled from rapid riding, as he had sometimes seen her before, but otherwise unchanged. Nor had HE changed; he took her up where he had left her years ago. His grave face only broadened into a smile, as he held both her hands in his.

"Yes, it's me—Lordy! Why, I was comin' only to-morrow to find ye, Sade!"

She glanced hurriedly around her, "To—to find me," she said incredulously.

"Sartain! That ez, I was goin' to ask about ye—goin' to ask about ye at the convent."

"At the convent?" she echoed with a frightened amazement.

"Yes, why, Lordy Sade—don't you see? You thought I was dead, and I thought you was dead—that's what's the matter. But I never reckoned that you'd think me dead until Chivers allowed that it must be so."

Her face whitened in the moonlight "Chivers?" she said blankly.

"In course; but nat'rally you don't know him, honey. He only saw you onc't. But it was along o' that, Sade, that he told me he reckoned you wasn't dead, and told me how to find you. He was mighty kind and consarned about it, and he even allowed I'd better slip off to you this very night."

"Chivers," she repeated, gazing at her husband with bloodless lips.

"Yes, an awful purty-spoken man. Ye'll have to get to know him Sade. He's here with some of his folks az hez got inter trouble— I'm forgettin' to tell ye. You see"—

"Yes, yes, yes!" she interrupted hysterically; "and this is the Mill?"

"Yes, lovey, the Mill—my mill—YOUR mill—the house I built for you, dear. I'd show it to you now, but you see, Sade, I'm out here standin' guard."

"Are YOU one of them?" she said, clutching his hand desperately.

"No, dear," he said soothingly—"no; only, you see, I giv' my word to 'em as I giv' my house to-night, and I'm bound to protect them and see 'em through. Why, Lordy! Sade, you'd have done the same— for Chivers."

"Yes, yes," she said, beating her hands together strangely, "of course. He was so kind to bring me back to you. And you might have never found me but for him."

She burst into an hysterical laugh, which the simple-minded man might have overlooked but for the tears that coursed down her bloodless face.

"What's gone o' ye, Sadie," he said in a sudden fear, grasping her hands; "that laugh ain't your'n—that voice ain't your'n. You're the old Sadie, ain't ye?" He stopped. For a moment his face blanched as he glanced towards the mill, from which the faint sound of bacchanalian voices came to his quick ear. "Sadie, dear, ye ain't thinkin' anything agin' me? Ye ain't allowin' I'm keeping anythin' back from ye?"

Her face stiffened into rigidity; she dashed the tears from her eyes. "No," she said quickly. Then after a moment she added, with a faint laugh, "You see we haven't seen each other for so long— it's all so sudden—so unexpected."

"But you kem here, just now, calkilatin' to find me?" said Collinson gravely.

"Yes, yes," she said quickly, still grasping both his hands, but with her head slightly turned in the direction of the mill.

"But who told ye where to find the mill?" he said, with gentle patience.

"A friend," she said hurriedly. "Perhaps," she added, with a singular smile, "a friend of the friend who told you."

"I see," said Collinson, with a relieved face and a broadening smile, "it's a sort of fairy story. I'll bet, now, it was that old Barker woman that Chivers knows."

Her teeth gleamed rigidly together in the moonlight, like a death's-head. "Yes," she said dryly, "it was that old Barker woman. Say, Seth," she continued, moistening her lips slowly, "you're guarding this place alone?"

"Thar's another feller up the trail—a sentry—but don't you be afeard, he can't hear us, Sade."

"On this side of the mill?"

"Yes! Why, Lord love ye, Sadie! t'other side o' the mill it drops down straight to the valley; nobody comes yer that way but poor low-down emigrants. And it's miles round to come by the valley from the summit."

"You didn't hear your friend Chivers say that the sheriff was out with his posse to-night hunting them?"

"No. Did you?"

"I think I heard something of that kind at Skinner's, but it may have been only a warning to me, traveling alone."

"Thet's so," said Collinson, with a tender solicitude, "but none o' these yer road-agents would have teched a

woman. And this yer Chivers ain't the man to insult one, either."

"No," she said, with a return of her hysteric laugh. But it was overlooked by Collinson, who was taking his gun from beside the tree where he had placed it, "Where are you going?" she said suddenly.

"I reckon them fellers ought to be warned o' what you heard. I'll be back in a minit."

"And you're going to leave me now—when—when we've only just met after these years," she said, with a faint attempt at a smile, which, however, did not reach the cold glitter of her eyes.

"Just for a little, honey. Besides, don't you see, I've got to get excused; for we'll have to go off to Skinner's or somewhere, Sadie, for we can't stay in thar along o' them."

"So you and your wife are turned out of your home to please Chivers," she said, still smiling.

"That's whar you slip up, Sadie," said Collinson, with a troubled face; "for he's that kind of a man thet if I jest as much as hinted you was here, he'd turn 'em all out o' the house for a lady. Thet's why I don't propose to let on anything about you till to- morrow."

"To-morrow will do," she said, still smiling, but with a singular abstraction in her face. "Pray don't disturb them now. You say there is another sentinel beyond. He is enough to warn them of any approach from the trail. I'm tired and ill—very ill! Sit by me here, Seth, and wait! We can wait here together—we have waited so long, Seth—and the end has come now."

She suddenly lapsed against the tree, and slipped in a sitting posture to the ground. Collinson cast himself at her side, and put his arm round her.

"Wot's gone o' ye, Sade? You're cold and sick. Listen. Your hoss is just over thar feedin'. I'll put you back on him, run in and tell 'em I'm off, and be with ye in a jiffy, and take ye back to Skinner's."

"Wait," she said softly. "Wait."

"Or to the Silver Hollow—it's not so far."

She had caught his hands again, her rigid face close to his, "What hollow?—speak!" she said breathlessly.

"The hollow whar a friend o' mine struck silver. He'll take yur in."

Her head sank against his shoulder. "Let me stay here," she answered, "and wait."

He supported her tenderly, feeling the gentle brushing of her hair against his cheek as in the old days. He was content to wait, holding her thus. They were very silent; her eyes half closed, as if in exhaustion, yet with the strange suggestion of listening in the vacant pupils.

"Ye ain't hearin' anythin', deary?" he said, with a troubled face.

"No; but everything is so deathly still," she said in a frightened whisper.

It certainly was very still. A singular hush seemed to have slid over the landscape; there was no longer any sound

from the mill; there was an ominous rest in the woodland, so perfect that the tiny rustle of an uneasy wing in the tree above them had made them start; even the moonlight seemed to hang suspended in the air.

"It's like the lull before the storm," she said with her strange laugh.

But the non-imaginative Collinson was more practical. "It's mighty like that earthquake weather before the big shake thet dried up the river and stopped the mill. That was just the time I got the news o' your bein' dead with yellow fever. Lord! honey, I allus allowed to myself thet suthin' was happenin' to ye then."

She did not reply; but he, holding her figure closer to him, felt it trembling with a nervous expectation. Suddenly she threw him off, and rose to her feet with a cry. "There!" she screamed frantically, "they've come! they've come!"

A rabbit had run out into the moonlight before them, a gray fox had dashed from the thicket into the wood, but nothing else.

"Who's come?" said Collinson, staring at her.

"The sheriff and his posse! They're surrounding them now. Don't you hear?" she gasped.

There was a strange rattling in the direction of the mill, a dull rumble, with wild shouts and outcries, and the trampling of feet on its wooden platform. Collinson staggered to his feet; but at the same moment he was thrown violently against his wife, and they both clung helplessly to the tree, with their eyes turned toward the ledge. There was a dense cloud of dust and haze hanging over it.

She uttered another cry, and ran swiftly towards the rocky grade. Collinson ran quickly after her, but as she reached the grade he suddenly shouted, with an awful revelation in his voice, “Come back! Stop, Sadie, for God’s sake!” But it was too late. She had already disappeared; and as he reached the rock on which Chivers had leaped, he felt it give way beneath him.

But there was no sound, only a rush of wind from the valley below. Everything lapsed again into its awful stillness. As the cloud lifted from where the mill had stood, the moon shone only upon empty space. There was a singular murmuring and whispering from the woods beyond that increased in sound, and an hour later the dry bed of the old mill-stream was filled with a rushing river.

Chapter 8

Preble Key returned to his hotel from the convent, it is to be feared, with very little of that righteous satisfaction which is supposed to follow the performance of a good deed. He was by no means certain that what he had done was best for the young girl. He had only shown himself to her as a worldly monitor of dangers, of which her innocence was providentially unconscious. In his feverish haste to avert a scandal, he had no chance to explain his real feelings; he had, perhaps, even exposed her thwarted impulses to equally naive but more dangerous expression, which he might not have the opportunity to check. He tossed wakefully that night upon his pillow, tormented with alternate visions of her adorable presence at the hotel, and her bowed, renunciating figure as she reentered the convent gate. He waited expectantly the next day for the message she had promised, and which he believed she would find some way to send. But no message was forthcoming. The day passed, and he became alarmed. The fear that her escapade had been discovered again seized him. If she were in close restraint, she could neither send to him, nor could he convey to her the solicitude and sympathy that filled his heart. In her childish frankness she might have confessed the whole truth, and this would not only shut the doors of the convent against him, under his former pretext, but compromise her still more if he boldly called. He waylaid the afternoon procession; she was not among them. Utterly despairing, the wildest plans for seeing her passed through his brain—plans that recalled his hot-headed youth, and a few moments later made him smile at his extravagance, even while it half frightened him at the reality of his passion. He reached the hotel heart-sick and

desperate. The porter met him on the steps. It was with a thrill that sent the blood leaping to his cheeks that he heard the man say:

"Sister Seraphina is waiting for you in the sitting-room."

There was no thought of discovery or scandal in Preble Key's mind now; no doubt or hesitation as to what he would do, as he sprang up the staircase. He only knew that he had found her again, and was happy! He burst into the room, but this time remembered to shut the door behind him. He looked eagerly towards the window where she had stood the day before, but now she rose quickly from the sofa in the corner, where she had been seated, and the missal she had been reading rolled from her lap to the floor. He ran towards her to pick it up. Her name—the name she had told him to call her—was passionately trembling on his lips, when she slowly put her veil aside, and displayed a pale, kindly, middle-aged face, slightly marked by old scars of smallpox. It was not Alice; it was the real Sister Seraphina who stood before him.

His first revulsion of bitter disappointment was so quickly followed by a realization that all had been discovered, and his sacrifice of yesterday had gone for naught, that he stood before her, stammering, but without the power to say a word. Luckily for him, his utter embarrassment seemed to reassure her, and to calm that timidity which his brusque man-like irruption might well produce in the inexperienced, contemplative mind of the recluse. Her voice was very sweet, albeit sad, as she said gently:

"I am afraid I have taken you by surprise; but there was no time to arrange for a meeting, and the Lady Superior

thought that I, who knew all the facts, had better see you confidentially. Father Cipriano gave us your address."

Amazed and wondering, Key bowed her to a seat.

"You will remember," she went on softly, "that the Lady Superior failed to get any information from you regarding the brother of one of our dear children, whom he committed to our charge through a—a companion or acquaintance—a Mrs. Barker. As she was armed with his authority by letter, we accepted the dear child through her, permitted her as his representative to have free access to his sister, and even allowed her, as an unattended woman, to pass the night at the convent. We were therefore surprised this morning to receive a letter from him, absolutely forbidding any further intercourse, correspondence, or association of his sister with this companion, Mrs. Barker. It was necessary to inform the dear child of this at once, as she was on the point of writing to this woman; but we were pained and shocked at her reception of her brother's wishes. I ought to say, in justice to the dear child, that while she is usually docile, intelligent, and tractable to discipline, and a devote in her religious feelings, she is singularly impulsive. But we were not prepared for the rash and sudden step she has taken. At noon to-day she escaped from the convent!"

Key, who had been following her with relief, sprang to his feet at this unexpected culmination.

"Escaped!" he said. "Impossible! I mean," he added, hurriedly recalling himself, "your rules, your discipline, your attendants are so perfect."

"The poor impulsive creature has added sacrilege to her madness—a sacrilege we are willing to believe she did

not understand, for she escaped in a religious habit—my own."

"But this would sufficiently identify her," he said, controlling himself with an effort.

"Alas, not so! There are many of us who go abroad on our missions in these garments, and they are made all alike, so as to divert rather than attract attention to any individuality. We have sent private messengers in all directions, and sought her everywhere, but without success. You will understand that we wish to avoid scandal, which a more public inquiry would create."

"And you come to me," said Key, with a return of his first suspicion, in spite of his eagerness to cut short the interview and be free to act—"to me, almost a stranger?"

"Not a stranger, Mr. Key," returned the religieuse gently, "but to a well-known man—a man of affairs in the country where this unhappy child's brother lives—a friend who seems to be sent by Heaven to find out this brother for us, and speed this news to him. We come to the old pupil of Father Cipriano, a friend of the Holy Church; to the kindly gentleman who knows what it is to have dear relations of his own, and who only yesterday was seeking the convent to"—

"Enough!" interrupted Key hurriedly, with a slight color. "I will go at once. I do not know this man, but I will do my best to find him. And this—this—young girl? You say you have no trace of her? May she not still be here? I should have some clue by which to seek her—I mean that I could give to her brother."

"Alas! we fear she is already far away from here. If she went at once to San Luis, she could have easily taken a

train to San Francisco before we discovered her flight. We believe that it was the poor child's intent to join her brother, so as to intercede for her friend—or, perhaps, alas! to seek her."

"And this friend left yesterday morning?" he said quickly, yet concealing a feeling of relief. "Well, you may depend on me! And now, as there is no time to be lost, I will make my arrangements to take the next train." He held out his hand, paused, and said in almost boyish embarrassment: "Bid me God speed, Sister Seraphina!"

"May the Holy Virgin aid you," she said gently. Yet, as she passed out of the door, with a grateful smile, a characteristic reaction came over Key. His romantic belief in the interposition of Providence was not without a tendency to apply the ordinary rules of human evidence to such phenomena. Sister Seraphina's application to him seemed little short of miraculous interference; but what if it were only a trick to get rid of him, while the girl, whose escapade had been discovered, was either under restraint in the convent, or hiding in Santa Luisa? Yet this did not prevent him from mechanically continuing his arrangements for departure. When they were completed, and he had barely time to get to the station at San Luis, he again lingered in vague expectation of some determining event.

The appearance of a servant with a telegraphic message at this moment seemed to be an answer to this instinctive feeling. He tore it open hastily. But it was only a single line from his foreman at the mine, which had been repeated to him from the company's office in San Francisco. It read, "Come at once—important."

Disappointed as it left him, it determined his action; and as the train steamed out of San Luis, it for a while

diverted his attention from the object of his pursuit. In any event, his destination would have been Skinner's or the Hollow, as the point from which to begin his search. He believed with Sister Seraphina that the young girl would make her direct appeal to her brother; but even if she sought Mrs. Barker, it would still be at some of the haunts of the gang. The letter to the Lady Superior had been postmarked from "Bald Top," which Key knew to be an obscure settlement less frequented than Skinner's. Even then it was hardly possible that the chief of the road agents would present himself at the post-office, and it had probably been left by some less known of the gang. A vague idea, that was hardly a suspicion, that the girl might have a secret address of her brother's, without understanding the reasons for its secrecy, came into his mind. A still more vague hope, that he might meet her before she found her brother, upheld him. It would be an accidental meeting on her part, for he no longer dared to hope that she would seek or trust him again. And it was with very little of his old sanguine quality that, travel-worn and weary, he at last alighted at Skinner's. But his half careless inquiry if any lady passengers had lately arrived there, to his embarrassment produced a broad smile on the face of Skinner.

"You're the second man that asked that question, Mr. Key," he said.

"The second man?" ejaculated Key nervously.

"Yes the first was the sheriff of Sierra. He wanted to find a tall, good-looking woman, about thirty, with black eyes. I hope that ain't the kind o' girl you're looking arter—is it? for I reckon she's gin you both the slip."

Key protested with a forced laugh that it was not, yet suddenly hesitated to describe Alice; for he instantly

recognized the portrait of her friend, the assumed Mrs. Barker. Skinner continued in lazy confidence:

"Ye see they say that the sheriff had sorter got the dead wood on that gang o' road agents, and had hemmed 'em in somewhar betwixt Bald Top and Collinson's. But that woman was one o' their spies, and spotted his little game, and managed to give 'em the tip, so they got clean away. Anyhow, they ain't bin heard from since. But the big shake has made scoutin' along the ledges rather stiff work for the sheriff. They say the valley near Long Canyon's chock full o' rock and slumgullion that's slipped down."

"What do you mean by the big shake?" asked Key in surprise.

"Great Scott! you didn't hear of it? Didn't hear of the 'arthquake that shook us up all along Galloper's the other night? Well," he added disgustedly, "that's jist the conceit of them folks in the bay, that can't allow that ANYTHIN' happens in the mountains!"

The urgent telegrams of his foreman now flashed across Key's preoccupied mind. Possibly Skinner saw his concern, "I reckon your mine is all right, Mr. Key. One of your men was over yere last night, and didn't say nothin'."

But this did not satisfy Key; and in a few minutes he had mounted his horse and was speeding towards the Hollow, with a remorseful consciousness of having neglected his colleagues' interests. For himself, in the utter prepossession of his passion for Alice, he cared nothing. As he dashed down the slope to the Hollow, he thought only of the two momentous days that she had passed there, and the fate that had brought them so nearly together. There was nothing to recall its sylvan beauty in the hideous works that

now possessed it, or the substantial dwelling-house that had taken the place of the old cabin. A few hurried questions to the foreman satisfied him of the integrity of the property. There had been some alarm in the shaft, but there was no subsidence of the "seam," nor any difficulty in the working. "What I telegraphed you for, Mr. Key, was about something that has cropped up way back o' the earthquake. We were served here the other day with a legal notice of a claim to the mine, on account of previous work done on the ledge by the last occupant."

"But the cabin was built by a gang of thieves, who used it as a hoard for their booty," returned Key hotly, "and every one of them are outlaws, and have no standing before the law." He stopped with a pang as he thought of Alice. And the blood rushed to his cheeks as the foreman quietly continued:

"But the claim ain't in any o' their names. It's allowed to be the gift of their leader to his young sister, afore the outlawry, and it's in HER name—Alice Riggs or something."

Of the half-dozen tumultuous thoughts that passed through Key's mind, only one remained. It was purely an act of the brother's to secure some possible future benefit for his sister. And of this she was perfectly ignorant! He recovered himself quickly, and said with a smile:

"But I discovered the ledge and its auriferous character myself. There was no trace or sign of previous discovery or mining occupation."

"So I jedged, and so I said, and thet puts ye all right. But I thought I'd tell ye; for mining laws is mining laws, and it's the one thing ye can't get over," he added, with the

peculiar superstitious reverence of the Californian miner for that vested authority.

But Key scarcely listened. All that he had heard seemed only to link him more fatefully and indissolubly with the young girl. He was already impatient of even this slight delay in his quest. In his perplexity his thoughts had reverted to Collinson's: the mill was a good point to begin his search from; its good-natured, stupid proprietor might be his guide, his ally, and even his confidant.

When his horse was baited, he was again in the saddle. "If yer going Collinson's way, yer might ask him if he's lost a horse," said the foreman. "The morning after the shake, some of the boys picked up a mustang, with a make-up lady's saddle on." Key started! While it was impossible that it could have been ridden by Alice, it might have been by the woman who had preceded her.

"Did you make any search?" he inquired eagerly; "there may have been an accident."

"I reckon it wasn't no accident," returned the foreman coolly, "for the riata was loose and trailing, as if it had been staked out, and broken away."

Without another word, Key put spurs to his horse and galloped away, leaving his companion staring after him. Here was a clue: the horse could not have strayed far; the broken tether indicated a camp; the gang had been gathered somewhere in the vicinity where Mrs. Barker had warned them—perhaps in the wood beyond Collinson's. He would penetrate it alone. He knew his danger; but as a SINGLE unarmed man he might be admitted to the presence of the leader, and the alleged claim was a sufficient excuse. What he would say or do afterwards depended upon chance. It was

a wild scheme—but he was reckless. Yet he would go to Collinson's first.

At the end of two hours he reached the thick-set wood that gave upon the shelf at the top of the grade which descended to the mill. As he emerged from the wood into the bursting sunlight of the valley below, he sharply reined in his horse and stopped. Another bound would have been his last. For the shelf, the rocky grade itself, the ledge below, and the mill upon it, were all gone! The crumbling outer wall of the rocky grade had slipped away into immeasurable depths below, leaving only the sharp edge of a cliff, which incurved towards the woods that had once stood behind the mill, but which now bristled on the very edge of a precipice. A mist was hanging over its brink and rising from the valley; it was a full-fed stream that was coursing through the former dry bed of the river and falling down the face of the bluff. He rubbed his eyes, dismounted, crept along the edge of the precipice, and looked below: whatever had subsided and melted down into its thousand feet of depth, there was no trace left upon its smooth face. Scarcely an angle of drift or debris marred the perpendicular; the burial of all ruin was deep and compact; the erasure had been swift and sure— the obliteration complete. It might have been the precipitation of ages, and not of a single night. At that remote distance it even seemed as if grass were already growing ever this enormous sepulchre, but it was only the tops of the buried pines. The absolute silence, the utter absence of any mark of convulsive struggle, even the lulling whimper of falling waters, gave the scene a pastoral repose.

So profound was the impression upon Key and his human passion that it at first seemed an ironical and eternal ending of his quest. It was with difficulty that he reasoned that the catastrophe occurred before Alice's flight, and that even Collinson might have had time to escape. He slowly

skirted the edge of the chasm, and made his way back through the empty woods behind the old mill-site towards the place where he had dismounted. His horse seemed to have strayed into the shadows of this covert; but as he approached him, he was amazed to see that it was not his own, and that a woman's scarf was lying over its side saddle. A wild idea seized him, and found expression in an impulsive cry:

"Alice!"

The woods echoed it; there was an interval of silence, and then a faint response. But it was HER voice. He ran eagerly forward in that direction, and called again; the response was nearer this time, and then the tall ferns parted, and her lithe, graceful figure came running, stumbling, and limping towards him like a wounded fawn. Her face was pale and agitated, the tendrils of her light hair were straying over her shoulder, and one of the sleeves of her school-gown was stained with blood and dust. He caught the white and trembling hands that were thrust out to him eagerly.

"It is YOU!" she gasped. "I prayed for some one to come, but I did not dream it would be YOU. And then I heard YOUR voice—and I thought it could be only a dream until you called a second time."

"But you are hurt," he exclaimed passionately. "You have met with some accident!"

"No, no!" she said eagerly. "Not I—but a poor, poor man I found lying on the edge of the cliff. I could not help him much, I did not care to leave him. No one WOULD come! I have been with him alone, all the morning! Come quick, he may be dying."

He passed his arm around her waist unconsciously; she permitted it as unconsciously, as he half supported her figure while they hurried forward.

"He had been crushed by something, and was just hanging over the ledge, and could not move nor speak," she went on quickly. "I dragged him away to a tree, it took me hours to move him, he was so heavy—and I got him some water from the stream and bathed his face, and blooded all my sleeve."

"But what were you doing here?" he asked quickly.

A faint blush crossed the pallor of her delicate cheek. She looked away quickly. "I—was going to find my brother at Bald Top," she replied at last hurriedly. "But don't ask me now—only come quick, do."

"Is the wounded man conscious? Did you speak with him? Does he know who you are?" asked Key uneasily.

"No! he only moaned a little and opened his eyes when I dragged him. I don't think he even knew what had happened."

They hurried on again. The wood lightened suddenly. "Here!" she said in a half whisper, and stepped timidly into the open light. Only a few feet from the fatal ledge, against the roots of a buckeye, with HER shawl thrown over him, lay the wounded man.

Key started back. It was Collinson!

His head and shoulders seemed uninjured; but as Key lifted the shawl, he saw that the long, lank figure appeared to melt away below the waist into a mass of shapeless and

dirty rags. Key hurriedly replaced the shawl, and, bending over him, listened to his hurried respiration and the beating of his heart. Then he pressed a drinking-flask to his lips. The spirit seemed to revive him; he slowly opened his eyes. They fell upon Key with quick recognition. But the look changed; one could see that he was trying to rise, but that no movement of the limbs accompanied that effort of will, and his old patient, resigned look returned. Key shuddered. There was some injury to the spine. The man was paralyzed.

"I can't get up, Mr. Key," he said in a faint but untroubled voice, "nor seem to move my arms, but you'll just allow that I've shook hands with ye—all the same."

"How did this happen?" said Key anxiously.

"Thet's wot gets me! Sometimes I reckon I know, and sometimes I don't. Lyin' thar on thet ledge all last night, and only jest able to look down into the old valley, sometimes it seemed to me ez if I fell over and got caught in the rocks trying to save my wife; but then when I kem to think sensible, and know my wife wasn't there at all, I get mystified. Sometimes I think I got ter thinkin' of my wife only when this yer young gal thet's bin like an angel to me kem here and dragged me off the ledge, for you see she don't belong here, and hez dropped on to me like a sperrit."

"Then you were not in the house when the shock came?" said Key.

"No. You see the mill was filled with them fellers as the sheriff was arter, and it went over with 'em—and I"—

"Alice," said Key, with a white face, "would you mind going to my horse, which you will find somewhere

near yours, and bringing me a medicine case from my saddle-bags?"

The innocent girl glanced quickly at her companion, saw the change in his face, and, attributing it to the imminent danger of the injured man, at once glided away. When she was out of hearing, Key leaned gravely over him:

"Collinson, I must trust you with a secret. I am afraid that this poor girl who helped you is the sister of the leader of that gang the sheriff was in pursuit of. She has been kept in perfect ignorance of her brother's crimes. She must NEVER know them—nor even know his fate! If he perished utterly in this catastrophe, as it would seem—it was God's will to spare her that knowledge. I tell you this, to warn you in anything you say before her. She MUST believe, as I shall try to make her believe, that he has gone back to the States—where she will perhaps, hereafter, believe that he died. Better that she should know nothing—and keep her thought of him unchanged."

"I see—I see—I see, Mr. Key," murmured the injured man. "Thet's wot I've been sayin' to myself lyin' here all night. Thet's wot I bin sayin' o' my wife Sadie—her that I actooally got to think kem back to me last night. You see I'd heerd from one o' those fellars that a woman like unto her had been picked up in Texas and brought on yere, and that mebbe she was somewhar in Californy. I was that foolish—and that ontrue to her, all the while knowin', as I once told you, Mr. Key, that ef she'd been alive she'd bin yere—that I believed it true for a minit! And that was why, afore this happened, I had a dream, right out yer, and dreamed she kem to me, all white and troubled, through the woods. At first I thought it war my Sadie; but when I see she warn't like her old self, and her voice was strange and her laugh was strange—then I knowed it wasn't her, and I was

dreamin'. You're right, Mr. Key, in wot you got off just now—wot was it? Better to know nothin'—and keep the old thoughts unchanged."

"Have you any pain?" asked Key after a pause.

"No; I kinder feel easier now."

Key looked at his changing face. "Tell me," he said gently, "if it does not tax your strength, all that has happened here, all you know. It is for HER sake."

Thus adjured, with his eyes fixed on Key, Collinson narrated his story from the irruption of the outlaws to the final catastrophe. Even then he palliated their outrage with his characteristic patience, keeping still his strange fascination for Chivers, and his blind belief in his miserable wife. The story was at times broken by lapses of faintness, by a singular return of his old abstraction and forgetfulness in the midst of a sentence, and at last by a fit of coughing that left a few crimson bubbles on the corners of his month. Key lifted his eyes anxiously; there was some grave internal injury, which the dying man's resolute patience had suppressed. Yet, at the sound of Alice's returning step, Collinson's eyes brightened, apparently as much at her coming as from the effect of the powerful stimulant Key had taken from his medicine case.

"I thank ye, Mr. Key," he said faintly; "for I've got an idea I ain't got no great time before me, and I've got suthin' to say to you, afore witnesses"—his eyes sought Alice's in half apology— "afore witnesses, you understand. Would you mind standin' out thar, afore me, in the light, so I kin see you both, and you, miss, rememberin', ez a witness, suthin' I got to tell to him? You might take his hand, miss, to make it more regular and lawlike."

The two did as he bade them, standing side by side, painfully humoring what seemed to them to be wanderings of a dying man.

"Thar was a young fellow," said Collinson in a steady voice, "ez kem to my shanty a night ago on his way to the—the—valley. He was a sprightly young fellow, gay and chipper-like, and he sez to me, confidential-like, 'Collinson,' sez he, 'I'm off to the States this very night on business of importance; mebbe I'll be away a long time—for years! You know,' sez he, 'Mr. Key, in the Hollow! Go to him,' sez he, 'and tell him ez how I hadn't time to get to see him; tell him,' sez he, 'that RIVERS'—you've got the name, Mr. Key?—you've got the name, miss?—'that RIVERS wants him to say this to his little sister from her lovin' brother. And tell him,' sez he, this yer RIVERS, 'to look arter her, being alone.' You remember that, Mr. Key? you remember it, miss? You see, I remembered it, too, being, so to speak, alone myself"—he paused, and added in a faint whisper—"till now."

Then he was silent. That innocent lie was the first and last upon his honest lips; for as they stood there, hand in hand, they saw his plain, hard face take upon itself, at first, the gray, ashen hues of the rocks around him, and then and thereafter something of the infinite tranquillity and peace of that wilderness in which he had lived and died, and of which he was a part.

Contemporaneous history was less kindly. The "Bald Top Sentinel" congratulated its readers that the late seismic disturbance was accompanied with very little loss of life, if any. "It is reported that the proprietor of a low shebeen for emigrants in an obscure hollow had succumbed from injuries; but," added the editor, with a fine touch of Western humor, "whether this was the result of his being forcibly

mixed up with his own tanglefoot whiskey or not, we are unable to determine from the evidence before us." For all that, a small stone shaft was added later to the rocks near the site of the old mill, inscribed to the memory of this obscure proprietor," with the singular legend: "Have ye faith like to him?" And those who knew only of the material catastrophe looking around upon the scene of desolation it commemorated, thought grimly that it must be faith indeed, and—were wiser than they knew.

"You smiled, Don Preble," said the Lady Superior to Key a few weeks later, "when I told to you that many caballeros thought it most discreet to intrust their future brides to the maternal guardianship and training of the Holy Church; yet, of a truth, I meant not YOU. And yet—eh! well, we shall see."

A Phyllis of the Sierras

CHAPTER ONE

Where the great highway of the Sierras nears the summit, and the pines begin to show sterile reaches of rock and waste in their drawn-up files, there are signs of occasional departures from the main road, as if the weary traveller had at times succumbed to the long ascent, and turned aside for rest and breath again. The tired eyes of many a dusty passenger on the old overland coach have gazed wistfully on those sylvan openings, and imagined recesses of primeval shade and virgin wilderness in their dim perspectives. Had he descended, however, and followed one of these diverging paths, he would have come upon some rude wagon track, or "logslide," leading from a clearing on the slope, or the ominous saw-mill, half hidden in the forest it was slowly decimating. The woodland hush might have been broken by the sound of water passing over some unseen dam in the hollow, or the hiss of escaping steam and throb of an invisible engine in the covert.

Such, at least, was the experience of a young fellow of five-and-twenty, who, knapsack on back and stick in hand, had turned aside from the highway and entered the woods one pleasant afternoon in July. But he was evidently a deliberate pedestrian, and not a recent deposit of the proceeding stage-coach; and although his stout walking-shoes were covered with dust, he had neither the habitual slouch and slovenliness of the tramp, nor the hurried fatigue

and growing negligence of an involuntary wayfarer. His clothes, which were strong and serviceable, were better fitted for their present usage than the ordinary garments of the Californian travellers, which were too apt to be either above or below their requirements. But perhaps the stranger's greatest claim to originality was the absence of any weapon in his equipment. He carried neither rifle nor gun in his hand, and his narrow leathern belt was empty of either knife or revolver.

A half-mile from the main road, which seemed to him to have dropped out of sight the moment he had left it, he came upon a half-cleared area, where the hastily-cut stumps of pines, of irregular height, bore an odd resemblance to the broken columns of some vast and ruined temple. A few fallen shafts, denuded of their bark and tessellated branches, sawn into symmetrical cylinders, lay beside the stumps, and lent themselves to the illusion. But the freshly-cut chips, so damp that they still clung in layers to each other as they had fallen from the axe, and the stumps themselves, still wet and viscous from their drained life-blood, were redolent of an odor of youth and freshness.

The young man seated himself on one of the logs and deeply inhaled the sharp balsamic fragrance—albeit with a slight cough and a later hurried respiration. This, and a certain drawn look about his upper lip, seemed to indicate, in spite of his strength and color, some pulmonary weakness. He, however, rose after a moment's rest with undiminished energy and cheerfulness, readjusted his knapsack, and began to lightly pick his way across the fallen timber. A few paces on, the muffled whir of machinery became more audible, with the lazy, monotonous command of "Gee thar," from some unseen ox-driver. Presently, the slow, deliberately-swaying heads of a team of oxen emerged from the bushes, followed by the clanking chain of the "skids" of sawn

planks, which they were ponderously dragging with that ostentatious submissiveness peculiar to their species. They had nearly passed him when there was a sudden hitch in the procession. From where he stood he could see that a projecting plank had struck a pile of chips and become partly imbedded in it. To run to the obstruction and, with a few dexterous strokes and the leverage of his stout stick, dislodge the plank was the work not only of the moment but of an evidently energetic hand. The teamster looked back and merely nodded his appreciation, and with a "Gee up! Out of that, now!" the skids moved on.

"Much obliged, there!" said a hearty voice, as if supplementing the teamster's imperfect acknowledgment.

The stranger looked up. The voice came from the open, sashless, shutterless window of a rude building—a mere shell of boards and beams half hidden in the still leafy covert before him. He had completely overlooked it in his approach, even as he had ignored the nearer throbbing of the machinery, which was so violent as to impart a decided tremor to the slight edifice, and to shake the speaker so strongly that he was obliged while speaking to steady himself by the sashless frame of the window at which he stood. He had a face of good-natured and alert intelligence, a master's independence and authority of manner, in spite of his blue jean overalls and flannel shirt.

"Don't mention it," said the stranger, smiling with equal but more deliberate good-humor. Then, seeing that his interlocutor still lingered a hospitable moment in spite of his quick eyes and the jarring impatience of the machinery, he added hesitatingly, "I fancy I've wandered off the track a bit. Do you know a Mr. Bradley—somewhere here?"

The stranger's hesitation seemed to be more from some habitual conscientiousness of statement than awkwardness. The man in the window replied, "I'm Bradley."

"Ah! Thank you: I've a letter for you—somewhere. Here it is." He produced a note from his breast-pocket. Bradley stooped to a sitting posture in the window. "Pitch it up." It was thrown and caught cleverly. Bradley opened it, read it hastily, smiled and nodded, glanced behind him as if to implore further delay from the impatient machinery, leaned perilously from the window, and said—

"Look here! Do you see that silver-fir straight ahead?"

"Yes."

"A little to the left there's a trail. Follow it and skirt along the edge of the canyon until you see my house. Ask for my wife—that's Mrs. Bradley—and give her your letter. Stop!" He drew a carpenter's pencil from his pocket, scrawled two or three words across the open sheet and tossed it back to the stranger. "See you at tea! Excuse me—Mr. Mainwaring—we're short-handed—and—the engine—" But here he disappeared suddenly.

Without glancing at the note again, the stranger quietly replaced it in his pocket, and struck out across the fallen trunks towards the silver-fir. He quickly found the trail indicated by Bradley, although it was faint and apparently worn by a single pair of feet as a shorter and private cut from some more travelled path. It was well for the stranger that he had a keen eye or he would have lost it; it was equally fortunate that he had a mountaineering instinct, for a sudden profound deepening of the blue mist seen dimly through the

leaves before him caused him to slacken his steps. The trail bent abruptly to the right; a gulf fully two thousand feet deep was at his feet! It was the Great Canyon.

At the first glance it seemed so narrow that a rifle-shot could have crossed its tranquil depths; but a second look at the comparative size of the trees on the opposite mountain convinced him of his error. A nearer survey of the abyss also showed him that instead of its walls being perpendicular they were made of successive ledges or terraces to the valley below. Yet the air was so still, and the outlines so clearly cut, that they might have been only the reflections of the mountains around him cast upon the placid mirror of a lake. The spectacle arrested him, as it arrested all men, by some occult power beyond the mere attraction of beauty or magnitude; even the teamster never passed it without the tribute of a stone or broken twig tossed into its immeasurable profundity.

Reluctantly leaving the spot, the stranger turned with the trail that now began to skirt its edge. This was no easy matter, as the undergrowth was very thick, and the foliage dense to the perilous brink of the precipice. He walked on, however, wondering why Bradley had chosen so circuitous and dangerous a route to his house, which naturally would be some distance back from the canyon. At the end of ten minutes' struggling through the "brush," the trail became vague, and, to all appearances, ended. Had he arrived? The thicket was as dense as before; through the interstices of leaf and spray he could see the blue void of the canyon at his side, and he even fancied that the foliage ahead of him was more symmetrical and less irregular, and was touched here and there with faint bits of color. To complete his utter mystification, a woman's voice, very fresh, very youthful, and by no means unmusical, rose apparently from the

circumambient air. He looked hurriedly to the right and left, and even hopelessly into the trees above him.

"Yes," said the voice, as if renewing a suspended conversation, "it was too funny for anything. There were the two Missouri girls from Skinner's, with their auburn hair ringleted, my dear, like the old 'Books of Beauty'—in white frocks and sashes of an unripe greenish yellow, that puckered up your mouth like persimmons. One of them was speechless from good behavior, and the other—well! the other was so energetic she called out the figures before the fiddler did, and shrieked to my vis-a-vis to dance up to the entire stranger—meaning ME, if you please."

The voice appeared to come from the foliage that overhung the canyon, and the stranger even fancied he could detect through the shimmering leafy veil something that moved monotonously to and fro. Mystified and impatient, he made a hurried stride forward, his foot struck a wooden step, and the next moment the mystery was made clear. He had almost stumbled upon the end of a long veranda that projected over the abyss before a low, modern dwelling, till then invisible, nestling on its very brink. The symmetrically-trimmed foliage he had noticed were the luxuriant Madeira vines that hid the rude pillars of the veranda; the moving object was a rocking-chair, with its back towards the intruder, that disclosed only the brown hair above, and the white skirts and small slippered feet below, of a seated female figure. In the mean time, a second voice from the interior of the house had replied to the figure in the chair, who was evidently the first speaker:

"It must have been very funny; but as long as Jim is always bringing somebody over from the mill, I don't see how I can go to those places. You were lucky, my dear, to escape from the new Division Superintendent last night; he

was insufferable to Jim with his talk of his friend the San Francisco millionaire, and to me with his cheap society airs. I do hate a provincial fine gentleman."

The situation was becoming embarrassing to the intruder. At the apparition of the woman, the unaffected and simple directness he had previously shown in his equally abrupt contact with Bradley had fled utterly; confused by the awkwardness of his arrival, and shocked at the idea of overhearing a private conversation, he stepped hurriedly on the veranda.

"Well? go on!" said the second voice impatiently. "Well, who else was there? WHAT did you say? I don't hear you. What's the matter?"

The seated figure had risen from her chair, and turned a young and pretty face somewhat superciliously towards the stranger, as she said in a low tone to her unseen auditor, "Hush! there is somebody here."

The young man came forward with an awkwardness that was more boyish than rustic. His embarrassment was not lessened by the simultaneous entrance from the open door of a second woman, apparently as young as and prettier than the first.

"I trust you'll excuse me for—for—being so wretchedly stupid," he stammered, "but I really thought, you know, that—that—I was following the trail to—to—the front of the house, when I stumbled in—in here."

Long before he had finished, both women, by some simple feminine intuition, were relieved and even prepossessed by his voice and manner. They smiled graciously. The later-comer pointed to the empty chair. But

with his habit of pertinacious conscientiousness the stranger continued, “It was regularly stupid, wasn’t it?—and I ought to have known better. I should have turned back and gone away when I found out what an ass I was likely to be, but I was—afraid—you know, of alarming you by the noise.”

“Won’t you sit down?” said the second lady, pleasantly.

“Oh, thanks! I’ve a letter here—I”—he transferred his stick and hat to his left hand as he felt in his breast-pocket with his right. But the action was so awkward that the stick dropped on the veranda. Both women made a movement to restore it to its embarrassed owner, who, however, quickly anticipated them. “Pray don’t mind it,” he continued, with accelerated breath and heightened color. “Ah, here’s the letter!” He produced the note Bradley had returned to him. “It’s mine, in fact—that is, I brought it to Mr. Bradley. He said I was to give it to—to—to—Mrs. Bradley.” He paused, glancing embarrassedly from the one to the other.

“I’m Mrs. Bradley,” said the prettiest one, with a laugh. He handed her the letter. It ran as follows:

> DEAR BRADLEY—Put Mr. Mainwaring through as far as he wants to go, or hang him up at The Lookout, just as he likes. The Bank’s behind him, and his hat’s chalked all over the Road; but he don’t care much about being on velvet. That ain’t his style—and you’ll like him. He’s somebody’s son in England. B.

Mrs. Bradley glanced simply at the first sentence. “Pray sit down, Mr. Mainwaring,” she said gently; “or, rather, let me first introduce my cousin—Miss Macy.”

"Thanks," said Mainwaring, with a bow to Miss Macy, "but I—I—I—think," he added conscientiously, "you did not notice that your husband had written something across the paper."

Mrs. Bradley smiled, and glanced at her husband's indorsement—"All right. Wade in." "It's nothing but Jim's slang," she said, with a laugh and a slightly heightened color. "He ought not to have sent you by that short cut; it's a bother, and even dangerous for a stranger. If you had come directly to US by the road, without making your first call at the mill," she added, with a touch of coquetry, "you would have had a pleasanter walk, and seen US sooner. I suppose, however, you got off the stage at the mill?"

"I was not on the coach," said Mainwaring, unfastening the strap of his knapsack. "I walked over from Lone Pine Flat."

"Walked!" echoed both women in simultaneous astonishment.

"Yes," returned Mainwaring simply, laying aside his burden and taking the proffered seat. "It's a very fine bit of country."

"Why, it's fifteen miles," said Mrs. Bradley, glancing horror-stricken at her cousin. "How dreadful! And to think Jim could have sent you a horse to Lone Pine. Why, you must be dead!"

"Thanks, I'm all right! I rather enjoyed it, you know."

"But," said Miss Macy, glancing wonderingly at his knapsack, "you must want something, a change—or some refreshment—after fifteen miles."

"Pray don't disturb yourself," said Mainwaring, rising hastily, but not quickly enough to prevent the young girl from slipping past him into the house, whence she rapidly returned with a decanter and glasses.

"Perhaps Mr. Mainwaring would prefer to go into Jim's room and wash his hands and put on a pair of slippers?" said Mrs. Bradley, with gentle concern.

"Thanks, no. I really am not tired. I sent some luggage yesterday by the coach to the Summit Hotel," he said, observing the women's eyes still fixed upon his knapsack. "I dare say I can get them if I want them. I've got a change here," he continued, lifting the knapsack as if with a sudden sense of its incongruity with its surroundings, and depositing it on the end of the veranda.

"Do let it remain where it is," said Mrs. Bradley, greatly amused, "and pray sit still and take some refreshment. You'll make yourself ill after your exertions," she added, with a charming assumption of matronly solicitude.

"But I'm not at all deserving of your sympathy," said Mainwaring, with a laugh. "I'm awfully fond of walking, and my usual constitutional isn't much under this."

"Perhaps you were stronger than you are now," said Mrs. Bradley, gazing at him with a frank curiosity that, however, brought a faint deepening of color to his cheek.

"I dare say you're right," he said suddenly, with an apologetic smile. "I quite forgot that I'm a sort of an invalid, you know, travelling for my health. I'm not very strong here," he added, lightly tapping his chest, that now, relieved of the bands of his knapsack, appeared somewhat thin and hollow in spite of his broad shoulders. His voice, too, had become less clear and distinct.

Mrs. Bradley, who was still watching him, here rose potentially. "You ought to take more care of yourself," she said. "You should begin by eating this biscuit, drinking that glass of whiskey, and making yourself more comfortable in Jim's room until we can get the spare room fixed a little."

"But I am not to be sent to bed—am I?" asked Mainwaring, in half-real, half-amused consternation.

"I'm not so sure of that," said Mrs. Bradley, with playful precision. "But for the present we'll let you off with a good wash and a nap afterwards in that rocking-chair, while my cousin and I make some little domestic preparations. You see," she added with a certain proud humility, "we've got only one servant—a Chinaman, and there are many things we can't leave to him."

The color again rose in Mainwaring's cheek, but he had tact enough to reflect that any protest or hesitation on his part at that moment would only increase the difficulties of his gentle entertainers. He allowed himself to be ushered into the house by Mrs. Bradley, and shown to her husband's room, without perceiving that Miss Macy had availed herself of his absence to run to the end of the veranda, mischievously try to lift the discarded knapsack to her own pretty shoulder, but, failing, heroically stagger with it into the passage and softly deposit it at his door. This done, she pantingly rejoined her cousin in the kitchen.

"Well," said Mrs. Bradley, emphatically. "DID you ever? Walking fifteen miles for pleasure—and with such lungs!"

"And that knapsack!" added Louise Macy, pointing to the mark in her little palm where the strap had imbedded itself in the soft flesh.

"He's nice, though; isn't he?" said Mrs. Bradley, tentatively.

"Yes," said Miss Macy, "he isn't, certainly, one of those provincial fine gentlemen you object to. But DID you see his shoes? I suppose they make the miles go quickly, or seem to measure less by comparison."

"They're probably more serviceable than those high-heeled things that Captain Greyson hops about in."

"But the Captain always rides—and rides very well—you know," said Louise, reflectively. There was a moment's pause.

"I suppose Jim will tell us all about him," said Mrs. Bradley, dismissing the subject, as she turned her sleeves back over her white arms, preparatory to grappling certain culinary difficulties.

"Jim," observed Miss Macy, shortly, "in my opinion, knows nothing more than his note says. That's like Jim."

"There's nothing more to know, really," said Mrs. Bradley, with a superior air. "He's undoubtedly the son of some Englishman of fortune, sent out here for his health."

"Hush!"

Miss Macy had heard a step in the passage. It halted at last, half irresolutely, before the open door of the kitchen, and the stranger appeared with an embarrassed air.

But in his brief absence he seemed to have completely groomed himself, and stood there, the impersonation of close-cropped, clean, and wholesome English young manhood. The two women appreciated it with cat-like fastidiousness.

"I beg your pardon; but really you're going to let a fellow do something for you," he said, "just to keep him from looking like a fool. I really can do no end of things, you know, if you'll try me. I've done some camping-out, and can cook as well as the next man."

The two women made a movement of smiling remonstrance, half coquettish, and half superior, until Mrs. Bradley, becoming conscious of her bare arms and the stranger's wandering eyes, colored faintly, and said with more decision:

"Certainly not. You'd only be in the way. Besides, you need rest more than we do. Put yourself in the rocking-chair in the veranda, and go to sleep until Mr. Bradley comes."

Mainwaring saw that she was serious, and withdrew, a little ashamed at his familiarity into which his boyishness had betrayed him. But he had scarcely seated himself in the rocking-chair before Miss Macy appeared, carrying with both hands a large tin basin of unshelled peas.

"There," she said pantingly, placing her burden in his lap, "if you really want to help, there's something to do that isn't very fatiguing. You may shell these peas."

"SHELL them—I beg pardon, but how?" he asked, with smiling earnestness.

"How? Why, I'll show you—look."

She frankly stepped beside him, so close that her full-skirted dress half encompassed him and the basin in a delicious confusion, and, leaning over his lap, with her left hand picked up a pea-cod, which, with a single movement of her charming little right thumb, she broke at the end, and stripped the green shallow of its tiny treasures.

He watched her with smiling eyes; her own, looking down on him, were very bright and luminous. "There; that's easy enough," she said, and turned away.

"But—one moment, Miss—Miss—?"

"Macy," said louise.

"Where am I to put the shells?"

"Oh! throw them down there—there's room enough."

She was pointing to the canyon below. The veranda actually projected over its brink, and seemed to hang in mid air above it. Mainwaring almost mechanically threw his arm out to catch the incautious girl, who had stepped heedlessly to its extreme edge.

"How odd! Don't you find it rather dangerous here?" he could not help saying. "I mean—you might have had a railing that wouldn't intercept the view and yet be safe?"

"It's a fancy of Mr. Bradley's," returned the young girl carelessly. "It's all like this. The house was built on a ledge against the side of the precipice, and the road suddenly drops down to it."

"It's tremendously pretty, all the same, you know," said the young man thoughtfully, gazing, however, at the girl's rounded chin above him.

"Yes," she replied curtly. "But this isn't working. I must go back to Jenny. You can shell the peas until Mr. Bradley comes home. He won't be long."

She turned away, and re-entered the house. Without knowing why, he thought her withdrawal abrupt, and he was again feeling his ready color rise with the suspicion of either having been betrayed by the young girl's innocent fearlessness into some unpardonable familiarity, which she had quietly resented, or of feeling an ease and freedom in the company of these two women that were inconsistent with respect, and should be restrained.

He, however, began to apply himself to the task given to him with his usual conscientiousness of duty, and presently acquired a certain manual dexterity in the operation. It was "good fun" to throw the cast-off husks into the mighty unfathomable void before him, and watch them linger with suspended gravity in mid air for a moment—apparently motionless—until they either lost themselves, a mere vanishing black spot in the thin ether, or slid suddenly at a sharp angle into unknown shadow. How deuced odd for him to be sitting here in this fashion! It would be something to talk of hereafter, and yet—he stopped—it was not at all in the line of that characteristic adventure, uncivilized novelty, and barbarous freedom which for the last month he had sought and experienced. It was not at all

like his meeting with the grizzly last week while wandering in a lonely canyon; not a bit in the line of his chance acquaintance with that notorious ruffian, Spanish Jack, or his witnessing with his own eyes that actual lynching affair at Angels. No! Nor was it at all characteristic, according to his previous ideas of frontier rural seclusion—as for instance the Pike County cabin of the family where he stayed one night, and where the handsome daughter asked him what his Christian name was. No! These two young women were very unlike her; they seemed really quite the equals of his family and friends in England—perhaps more attractive—and yet, yes, it was this very attractiveness that alarmed his inbred social conservatism regarding women. With a man it was very different; that alert, active, intelligent husband, instinct with the throbbing life of his saw-mill, creator and worker in one, challenged his unqualified trust and admiration.

He had become conscious for the last minute or two of thinking rapidly and becoming feverishly excited; of breathing with greater difficulty, and a renewed tendency to cough. The tendency increased until he instinctively put aside the pan from his lap and half rose. But even that slight exertion brought on an accession of coughing. He put his handkerchief to his lips, partly to keep the sound from disturbing the women in the kitchen, partly because of a certain significant taste in his mouth which he unpleasantly remembered. When he removed the handkerchief it was, as he expected, spotted with blood. He turned quickly and re-entered the house softly, regaining the bedroom without attracting attention. An increasing faintness here obliged him to lie down on the bed until it should pass.

Everything was quiet. He hoped they would not discover his absence from the veranda until he was better; it was deucedly awkward that he should have had this attack just now—and after he had made so light of his previous

exertions. They would think him an effeminate fraud, these two bright, active women and that alert, energetic man. A faint color came into his cheek at the idea, and an uneasy sense that he had been in some way foolishly imprudent about his health. Again, they might be alarmed at missing him from the veranda; perhaps he had better have remained there; perhaps he ought to tell them that he had concluded to take their advice and lie down. He tried to rise, but the deep blue chasm before the window seemed to be swelling up to meet him, the bed slowly sinking into its oblivious profundity. He knew no more.

He came to with the smell and taste of some powerful volatile spirit, and the vague vision of Mr. Bradley still standing at the window of the mill and vibrating with the machinery; this changed presently to a pleasant lassitude and lazy curiosity as he perceived Mr. Bradley smile and apparently slip from the window of the mill to his bedside. "You're all right now," said Bradley, cheerfully.

He was feeling Mainwaring's pulse. Had he really been ill and was Bradley a doctor?

Bradley evidently saw what was passing in his mind. "Don't be alarmed," he said gayly. "I'm not a doctor, but I practise a little medicine and surgery on account of the men at the mill, and accidents, you know. You're all right now; you've lost a little blood: but in a couple of weeks in this air we'll have that tubercle healed, and you'll be as right as a trivet."

"In a couple of weeks!" echoed Mainwaring, in faint astonishment. "Why, I leave here to-morrow."

"You'll do nothing of the kind" said Mrs. Bradley, with smiling peremptoriness, suddenly slipping out from

behind her husband. “Everything is all perfectly arranged. Jim has sent off messengers to your friends, so that if you can’t come to them, they can come to you. You see you can’t help yourself! If you WILL walk fifteen miles with such lungs, and then frighten people to death, you must abide by the consequences.”

“You see the old lady has fixed you,” said Bradley, smiling; “and she’s the master here. Come, Mainwaring, you can send any other message you like, and have who and what you want here; but HERE you must stop for a while.”

“But did I frighten you really?” stammered Mainwaring, faintly, to Mrs. Bradley.

“Frighten us!” said Mrs. Bradley. “Well, look there!”

She pointed to the window, which commanded a view of the veranda. Miss Macy had dropped into the vacant chair, with her little feet stretched out before her, her cheeks burning with heat and fire, her eyes partly closed, her straw hat hanging by a ribbon round her neck, her brown hair clinging to her ears and forehead in damp tendrils, and an enormous palm-leaf fan in each hand violently playing upon this charming picture of exhaustion and abandonment.

“She came tearing down to the mill, bare-backed on our half-broken mustang, about half an hour ago, to call me ‘to help you,’” explained Bradley. “Heaven knows how she managed to do it!”

CHAPTER TWO

The medication of the woods was not overestimated by Bradley. There was surely some occult healing property in that vast reservoir of balmy and resinous odors over which The Lookout beetled and clung, and from which at times the pure exhalations of the terraced valley seemed to rise. Under its remedial influence and a conscientious adherence to the rules of absolute rest and repose laid down for him, Mainwaring had no return of the hemorrhage. The nearest professional medical authority, hastily summoned, saw no reason for changing or for supplementing Bradley's intelligent and simple treatment, although astounded that the patient had been under no more radical or systematic cure than travel and exercise. The women especially were amazed that Mainwaring had taken "nothing for it," in their habitual experience of an unfettered pill-and-elixir-consuming democracy. In their knowledge of the thousand "panaceas" that filled the shelves of the general store, this singular abstention of their guest seemed to indicate a national peculiarity.

His bed was moved beside the low window, from which he could not only view the veranda but converse at times with its occupants, and even listen to the book which Miss Macy, seated without, read aloud to him. In the evening Bradley would linger by his couch until late, beguiling the tedium of his convalescence with characteristic stories and information which he thought might please the invalid. For Mainwaring, who had been early struck with Bradley's ready and cultivated intelligence, ended by shyly avoiding the discussion of more serious topics, partly because Bradley impressed him with a suspicion of his own inferiority, and partly because Mainwaring questioned the taste of Bradley's

apparent exhibition of his manifest superiority. He learned accidentally that this mill-owner and backwoodsman was a college-bred man; but the practical application of that education to the ordinary affairs of life was new to the young Englishman's traditions, and grated a little harshly on his feelings. He would have been quite content if Bradley had, like himself and fellows he knew, undervalued his training, and kept his gifts conservatively impractical. The knowledge also that his host's education naturally came from some provincial institution unlike Oxford and Cambridge may have unconsciously affected his general estimate. I say unconsciously, for his strict conscientiousness would have rejected any such formal proposition.

Another trifle annoyed him. He could not help noticing also that although Bradley's manner and sympathy were confidential and almost brotherly, he never made any allusion to Mainwaring's own family or connections, and, in fact, gave no indication of what he believed was the national curiosity in regard to strangers. Somewhat embarrassed by this indifference, Mainwaring made the occasion of writing some letters home an opportunity for laughingly alluding to the fact that he had made his mother and his sisters fully aware of the great debt they owed the household of The Lookout.

"They'll probably all send you a round robin of thanks, except, perhaps, my next brother, Bob."

Bradley contented himself with a gesture of general deprecation, and did not ask WHY Mainwaring's young brother should contemplate his death with satisfaction. Nevertheless, some time afterwards Miss Macy remarked that it seemed hard that the happiness of one member of a family should depend upon a calamity to another. "As for instance?" asked Mainwaring, who had already forgotten the

circumstance. “Why, if you had died and your younger brother succeeded to the baronetcy, and become Sir Robert Mainwaring,” responded Miss Macy, with precision. This was the first and only allusion to his family and prospective rank. On the other hand, he had—through naive and boyish inquiries, which seemed to amuse his entertainers—acquired, as he believed, a full knowledge of the history and antecedents of the Bradley household. He knew how Bradley had brought his young wife and her cousin to California and abandoned a lucrative law practice in San Francisco to take possession of this mountain mill and woodland, which he had acquired through some professional service.

“Then you are a barrister really?” said Mainwaring, gravely.

Bradley laughed. “I’m afraid I’ve had more practice—though not as lucrative a one—as surgeon or doctor.”

“But you’re regularly on the rolls, you know; you’re entered as Counsel, and all that sort of thing?” continued Mainwaring, with great seriousness.

“Well, yes,” replied Bradley, much amused. “I’m afraid I must plead guilty to that.”

“It’s not a bad sort of thing,” said Mainwaring, naively, ignoring Bradley’s amusement. “I’ve got a cousin who’s gone in for the law. Got out of the army to do it—too. He’s a sharp fellow.”

“Then you DO allow a man to try many trades—over there,” said Miss Macy, demurely.

"Yes, sometimes," said Mainwaring, graciously, but by no means certain that the case was at all analogous.

Nevertheless, as if relieved of certain doubts of the conventional quality of his host's attainments, he now gave himself up to a very hearty and honest admiration of Bradley. "You know it's awfully kind of him to talk to a fellow like me who just pulled through, and never got any prizes at Oxford, and don't understand the half of these things," he remarked confidentially to Mrs. Bradley. "He knows more about the things we used to go in for at Oxford than lots of our men, and he's never been there. He's uncommonly clever."

"Jim was always very brilliant," returned Mrs. Bradley, indifferently, and with more than even conventionally polite wifely deprecation; "I wish he were more practical."

"Practical! Oh, I say, Mrs. Bradley! Why, a fellow that can go in among a lot of workmen and tell them just what to do—an all-round chap that can be independent of his valet, his doctor, and his—banker! By Jove—THAT'S practical!"

"I mean," said Mrs. Bradley, coldly, "that there are some things that a gentleman ought not to be practical about nor independent of. Mr. Bradley would have done better to have used his talents in some more legitimate and established way."

Mainwaring looked at her in genuine surprise. To his inexperienced observation Bradley's intelligent energy and, above all, his originality, ought to have been priceless in the eyes of his wife—the American female of his species. He felt that slight shock which most loyal or logical men feel

when first brought face to face with the easy disloyalty and incomprehensible logic of the feminine affections. Here was a fellow, by Jove, that any woman ought to be proud of, and—and—he stopped blankly. He wondered if Miss Macy sympathized with her cousin.

Howbeit, this did not affect the charm of their idyllic life at The Lookout. The precipice over which they hung was as charming as ever in its poetic illusions of space and depth and color; the isolation of their comfortable existence in the tasteful yet audacious habitation, the pleasant routine of daily tasks and amusements, all tended to make the enforced quiet and inaction of his convalescence a lazy recreation. He was really improving; more than that, he was conscious of a certain satisfaction in this passive observation of novelty that was healthier and perhaps TRUER than his previous passion for adventure and that febrile desire for change and excitement which he now felt was a part of his disease. Nor were incident and variety entirely absent from this tranquil experience. He was one day astonished at being presented by Bradley with copies of the latest English newspapers, procured from Sacramento, and he equally astonished his host, after profusely thanking him, by only listlessly glancing at their columns. He estopped a proposed visit from one of his influential countrymen; in the absence of his fair entertainers at their domestic duties, he extracted infinite satisfaction from Foo-Yup, the Chinese servant, who was particularly detached for his service. From his invalid coign of vantage at the window he was observant of all that passed upon the veranda, that al-fresco audience-room of The Lookout, and he was good-humoredly conscious that a great many eccentric and peculiar visitors were invariably dragged thither by Miss Macy, and goaded into characteristic exhibition within sight and hearing of her guest, with a too evident view, under the ostentatious excuse of extending his

knowledge of national character or mischievously shocking him.

"When you are strong enough to stand Captain Gashweiler's opinions of the Established Church and Chinamen," said Miss Macy, after one of these revelations, "I'll get Jim to bring him here, for really he swears so outrageously that even in the broadest interests of international understanding and good-will neither Mrs. Bradley nor myself could be present."

On another occasion she provokingly lingered before his window for a moment with a rifle slung jauntily over her shoulder. "If you hear a shot or two don't excite yourself, and believe we're having a lynching case in the woods. It will be only me. There's some creature—confess, you expected me to say 'critter'—hanging round the barn. It may be a bear. Good-by." She missed the creature—which happened to be really a bear—much to Mainwaring's illogical satisfaction. "I wonder why," he reflected, with vague uneasiness, "she doesn't leave all that sort of thing to girls like that tow-headed girl at the blacksmith's."

It chanced, however, that this blacksmith's tow-headed daughter, who, it may be incidentally remarked, had the additional eccentricities of large black eyes and large white teeth, came to the fore in quite another fashion. Shortly after this, Mainwaring being able to leave his room and join the family board, Mrs. Bradley found it necessary to enlarge her domestic service, and arranged with her nearest neighbor, the blacksmith, to allow his daughter to come to The Lookout for a few days to "do the chores" and assist in the housekeeping, as she had on previous occasions. The day of her advent Bradley entered Mainwaring's room, and, closing the door mysteriously, fixed his blue eyes, kindling with mischief, on the young Englishman.

"You are aware, my dear boy," he began with affected gravity, "that you are now living in a land of liberty, where mere artificial distinctions are not known, and where Freedom from her mountain heights generally levels all social positions. I think you have graciously admitted that fact."

"I know I've been taking a tremendous lot of freedom with you and yours, old man, and it's a deuced shame," interrupted Mainwaring, with a faint smile.

"And that nowhere," continued Bradley, with immovable features, "does equality exist as perfectly as above yonder unfathomable abyss, where you have also, doubtless, observed the American eagle proudly soars and screams defiance."

"Then that was the fellow that kept me awake this morning, and made me wonder if I was strong enough to hold a gun again."

"That wouldn't have settled the matter," continued Bradley, imperturbably. "The case is simply this: Miss Minty Sharpe, that blacksmith's daughter, has once or twice consented, for a slight emolument, to assist in our domestic service for a day or two, and she comes back again to-day. Now, under the aegis of that noble bird whom your national instincts tempt you to destroy, she has on all previous occasions taken her meals with us, at the same table, on terms of perfect equality. She will naturally expect to do the same now. Mrs. Bradley thought it proper, therefore, to warn you, that, in case your health was not quite equal to this democratic simplicity, you could still dine in your room."

"It would be great fun—if Miss Sharpe won't object to my presence."

"But it must not be 'great fun,'" returned Bradley, more seriously; "for Miss Minty's perception of humor is probably as keen as yours, and she would be quick to notice it. And, so far from having any objection to you, I am inclined to think that we owe her consent to come to her desire of making your acquaintance."

"She will find my conduct most exemplary," said Mainwaring, earnestly.

"Let us hope so," concluded Bradley, with unabated gravity. "And, now that you have consented, let me add from my own experience that Miss Minty's lemon-pies alone are worthy of any concession."

The dinner-hour came. Mainwaring, a little pale and interesting, leaning on the arm of Bradley, crossed the hall, and for the first time entered the dining-room of the house where he had lodged for three weeks. It was a bright, cheerful apartment, giving upon the laurels of the rocky hillside, and permeated, like the rest of the house, with the wholesome spice of the valley—an odor that, in its pure desiccating property, seemed to obliterate all flavor of alien human habitation, and even to dominate and etherealize the appetizing smell of the viands before them. The bare, shining, planed, boarded walls appeared to resent any decoration that might have savored of dust, decay, or moisture. The four large windows and long, open door, set in scanty strips of the plainest spotless muslin, framed in themselves pictures of woods and rock and sky of limitless depth, color, and distance, that made all other adornment impertinent. Nature, invading the room at every opening, had banished Art from those neutral walls.

"It's like a picnic, with comfort," said Mainwaring, glancing round him with boyish appreciation. Miss Minty

was not yet there; the Chinaman was alone in attendance. Mainwaring could not help whispering, half mischievously, to Louise, “You draw the line at Chinamen, I suppose?”

“WE don’t, but HE does,” answered the young girl. “He considers us his social inferiors. But—hush!”

Minty Sharpe had just entered the room, and was advancing with smiling confidence towards the table. Mainwaring was a little startled; he had seen Minty in a holland sun-bonnet and turned up skirt crossing the veranda, only a moment before; in the brief instant between the dishing-up of dinner and its actual announcement she had managed to change her dress, put on a clean collar, cuffs, and a large jet brooch, and apply some odorous unguent to her rebellious hair. Her face, guiltless of powder or cold cream, was still shining with the healthy perspiration of her last labors as she promptly took the vacant chair beside Mainwaring.

“Don’t mind me, folks,” she said cheerfully, resting her plump elbow on the table, and addressing the company generally, but gazing with frank curiosity into the face of the young man at her side. “It was a keen jump, I tell yer, to get out of my old duds inter these, and look decent inside o’ five minutes. But I reckon I ain’t kept yer waitin’ long—least of all this yer sick stranger. But you’re looking pearter than you did. You’re wonderin’ like ez not where I ever saw ye before?” she continued, laughing. “Well, I’ll tell you. Last week! I’d kem over yer on a chance of seein’ Jenny Bradley, and while I was meanderin’ down the veranda I saw you lyin’ back in your chair by the window drowned in sleep, like a baby. Lordy! I mout hev won a pair o’ gloves, but I reckoned you were Loo’s game, and not mine.”

The slightly constrained laugh which went round the table after Miss Minty's speech was due quite as much to the faint flush that had accented Mainwaring's own smile as to the embarrassing remark itself. Mrs. Bradley and Miss Macy exchanged rapid glances. Bradley, who alone retained his composure, with a slight flicker of amusement in the corner of his eye and nostril, said quickly: "You see, Mainwaring, how nature stands ready to help your convalescence at every turn. If Miss Minty had only followed up her healing opportunity, your cure would have been complete."

"Ye mout hev left some o' that pretty talk for HIM to say," said Minty, taking up her knife and fork with a slight shrug, "and you needn't call me MISS Minty either, jest because there's kempeny present."

"I hope you won't look upon me as company, Minty, or I shall be obliged to call you 'Miss' too," said Mainwaring, unexpectedly regaining his usual frankness.

Bradley's face brightened; Miss Minty raised her black eyes from her plate with still broader appreciation.

"There's nothin' mean about that," she said, showing her white teeth. "Well, what's YOUR first name?"

"Not as pretty as yours, I'm afraid. It's Frank."

"No it ain't, it's Francis! You reckon to be Sir Francis some day," she said gravely. "You can't play any Frank off on me. You wouldn't do it on HER," she added, indicating Louise with her elbow.

A momentous silence followed. The particular form that Minty's vulgarity had taken had not been anticipated by the two other women. They had, not unreasonably, expected

some original audacity or gaucherie from the blacksmith's daughter, which might astonish yet amuse their guest, and condone for the situation forced upon them. But they were not prepared for a playfulness that involved themselves in a ridiculous indiscretion. Mrs. Bradley's eyes sought her husband's meaningly; Louise's pretty mouth hardened. Luckily the cheerful cause of it suddenly jumped up from the table, and saying that the stranger was starving, insisted upon bringing a dish from the other side and helping him herself plentifully. Mainwaring rose gallantly to take the dish from her hand, a slight scuffle ensued which ended in the young man being forced down in his chair by the pressure of Minty's strong plump hand on his shoulder. "There," she said, "ye kin mind your dinner now, and I reckon we'll give the others a chance to chip into the conversation," and at once applied herself to the plate before her.

The conversation presently became general, with the exception that Minty, more or less engrossed by professional anxiety in the quality of the dinner and occasional hurried visits to the kitchen, briefly answered the few polite remarks which Mainwaring felt called upon to address to her. Nevertheless, he was conscious, malgre her rallying allusions to Miss Macy, that he felt none of the vague yet half pleasant anxiety with which Louise was beginning to inspire him. He felt at ease in Minty's presence, and believed, rightly or wrongly, that she understood him as well as he understood her. And there were certainly points in common between his two hostesses and their humbler though proud dependent. The social evolution of Mrs. Bradley and Louise Macy from some previous Minty was neither remote nor complete; the self-sufficient independence, ease, and quiet self-assertion were alike in each. The superior position was still too recent and accidental for either to resent or criticise qualities that were common to both. At least, this was what he thought when not

abandoning himself to the gratification of a convalescent appetite; to the presence of two pretty women, the sympathy of a genial friend, the healthy intoxication of the white sunlight that glanced upon the pine walls, the views that mirrored themselves in the open windows, and the pure atmosphere in which The Lookout seemed to swim. Wandering breezes of balm and spice lightly stirred the flowers on the table, and seemed to fan his hair and forehead with softly healing breath. Looking up in an interval of silence, he caught Bradley's gray eyes fixed upon him with a subdued light of amusement and affection, as of an elder brother regarding a schoolboy's boisterous appetite at some feast. Mainwaring laid down his knife and fork with a laughing color, touched equally by Bradley's fraternal kindliness and the consciousness of his gastronomical powers.

"Hang it, Bradley; look here! I know my appetite's disgraceful, but what can a fellow do? In such air, with such viands and such company! It's like the bees getting drunk on Hybla and Hymettus, you know. I'm not responsible!"

"It's the first square meal I believe you've really eaten in six months," said Bradley, gravely. "I can't understand why your doctor allowed you to run down so dreadfully."

"I reckon you ain't as keerful of yourself, you Britishers, ez us," said Minty. "Lordy! Why there's Pop invests in more patent medicines in one day than you have in two weeks, and he'd make two of you. Mebbe your folks don't look after you enough."

"I'm a splendid advertisement of what YOUR care and your medicines have done," said Mainwaring,

gratefully, to Mrs. Bradley; "and if you ever want to set up a 'Cure' here, I'm ready with a ten-page testimonial."

"Have a care, Mainwaring," said Bradley, laughing, "that the ladies don't take you at your word. Louise and Jenny have been doing their best for the last year to get me to accept a flattering offer from a Sacramento firm to put up a hotel for tourists on the site of The Lookout. Why, I believe that they have already secretly in their hearts concocted a flaming prospectus of 'Unrivalled Scenery' and 'Health-giving Air,' and are looking forward to Saturday night hops on the piazza."

"Have you really, though?" said Mainwaring, gazing from the one to the other.

"We should certainly see more company than we do now, and feel a little less out of the world," said Louise, candidly. "There are no neighbors here—I mean the people at the Summit are not," she added, with a slight glance towards Minty.

"And Mr. Bradley would find it more profitable—not to say more suitable to a man of his position—than this wretched saw-mill and timber business," said Mrs. Bradley, decidedly.

Mainwaring was astounded; was it possible they considered it more dignified for a lawyer to keep a hotel than a saw-mill? Bradley, as if answering what was passing in his mind, said mischievously, "I'm not sure, exactly, what my position is, my dear, and I'm afraid I've declined the hotel on business principles. But, by the way, Mainwaring, I found a letter at the mill this morning from Mr. Richardson. He is about to pay us the distinguished honor of visiting The Lookout, solely on your account, my dear fellow."

"But I wrote him that I was much better, and it wasn't necessary for him to come," said Mainwaring.

"He makes an excuse of some law business with me. I suppose he considers the mere fact of his taking the trouble to come here, all the way from San Francisco, a sufficient honor to justify any absence of formal invitation," said Bradley, smiling.

"But he's only—I mean he's my father's banker," said Mainwaring, correcting himself, "and—you don't keep a hotel."

"Not yet," returned Bradley, with a mischievous glance at the two women, "but The Lookout is elastic, and I dare say we can manage to put him up."

A silence ensued. It seemed as if some shadow, or momentary darkening of the brilliant atmosphere; some film across the mirror-like expanse of the open windows, or misty dimming of their wholesome light, had arisen to their elevation. Mainwaring felt that he was looking forward with unreasoning indignation and uneasiness to this impending interruption of their idyllic life; Mrs. Bradley and Louise, who had become a little more constrained and formal under Minty's freedom, were less sympathetic; even the irrepressible Minty appeared absorbed in the responsibilities of the dinner.

Bradley alone preserved his usual patient good-humor. "We'll take our coffee on the veranda, and the ladies will join us by and by, Mainwaring; besides, I don't know that I can allow you, as an invalid, to go entirely through Minty's bountiful menu at present. You shall have the sweets another time."

When they were alone on the veranda, he said, between the puffs of his black brier-wood pipe—a pet aversion of Mrs. Bradley—"I wonder how Richardson will accept Minty!"

"If I can, I think he MUST," returned Mainwaring, dryly. "By Jove, it will be great fun to see him; but"—he stopped and hesitated—"I don't know about the ladies. I don't think, you know, that they'll stand Minty again before another stranger."

Bradley glanced quickly at the young man; their eyes met, and they both joined in a superior and, I fear, disloyal smile. After a pause Bradley, as if in a spirit of further confidence, took his pipe from his mouth and pointed to the blue abyss before them.

"Look at that profundity, Mainwaring, and think of it ever being bullied and overawed by a long veranda-load of gaping, patronizing tourists, and the idiotic flirting females of their species. Think of a lot of over-dressed creatures flouting those severe outlines and deep-toned distances with frippery and garishness. You know how you have been lulled to sleep by that delicious, indefinite, far-off murmur of the canyon at night—think of it being broken by a crazy waltz or a monotonous german—by the clatter of waiters and the pop of champagne corks. And yet, by thunder, those women are capable of liking both and finding no discord in them!"

"Dancing ain't half bad, you know," said Mainwaring, conscientiously, "if a chap's got the wind to do it; and all Americans, especially the women, dance better than we do. But I say, Bradley, to hear you talk, a fellow wouldn't suspect you were as big a Vandal as anybody, with a beastly, howling saw-mill in the heart of the primeval forest. By Jove, you quite bowled me over that first day we

met, when you popped your head out of that delirium tremens shaking mill, like the very genius of destructive improvement."

"But that was FIGHTING Nature, not patronizing her; and it's a business that pays. That reminds me that I must go back to it," said Bradley, rising and knocking the ashes from his pipe.

"Not AFTER dinner, surely!" said Mainwaring, in surprise. "Come now, that's too much like the bolting Yankee of the travellers' books."

"There's a heavy run to get through tonight. We're working against time," returned Bradley. Even while speaking he had vanished within the house, returned quickly—having replaced his dark suit by jean trousers tucked in heavy boots, and a red flannel shirt over his starched white one—and, nodding gayly to Mainwaring, stepped from the lower end of the veranda. "The beggar actually looks pleased to go," said Mainwaring to himself in wonderment.

"Oh! Jim," said Mrs. Bradley, appearing at the door.

"Yes," said Bradley, faintly, from the bushes.

"Minty's ready. You might take her home."

"All right. I'll wait."

"I hope I haven't frightened Miss Sharpe away," said Mainwaring. "She isn't going, surely?"

"Only to get some better clothes, on account of company. I'm afraid you are giving her a good deal of trouble, Mr. Mainwaring," said Mrs. Bradley, laughing.

"She wished me to say good-by to you for her, as she couldn't come on the veranda in her old shawl and sun-bonnet," added Louise, who had joined them. "What do you really think of her, Mr. Mainwaring? I call her quite pretty, at times. Don't you?"

Mainwaring knew not what to say. He could not understand why they could have any special interest in the girl, or care to know what he, a perfect stranger, thought of her. He avoided a direct reply, however, by playfully wondering how Mrs. Bradley could subject her husband to Miss Minty's undivided fascinations.

"Oh, Jim always takes her home—if it's in the evening. He gets along with these people better than we do," returned Mrs. Bradley, dryly. "But," she added, with a return of her piquant Quaker-like coquettishness, "Jim says we are to devote ourselves to you to-night—in retaliation, I suppose. We are to amuse you, and not let you get excited; and you are to be sent to bed early."

It is to be feared that these latter wise precautions—invaluable for all defenceless and enfeebled humanity—were not carried out: and it was late when Mainwaring eventually retired, with brightened eyes and a somewhat accelerated pulse. For the ladies, who had quite regained that kindly equanimity which Minty had rudely interrupted, had also added a delicate and confidential sympathy in their relations with Mainwaring—as of people who had suffered in common—and he experienced these tender attentions at their hands which any two women are emboldened by each other's saving presence to show any

single member of our sex. Indeed, he hardly knew if his satisfaction was the more complete when Mrs. Bradley, withdrawing for a few moments, left him alone on the veranda with Louise and the vast, omnipotent night.

For a while they sat silent, in the midst of the profound and measureless calm. Looking down upon the dim moonlit abyss at their feet, they themselves seemed a part of this night that arched above it; the half-risen moon appeared to linger long enough at their side to enwrap and suffuse them with its glory; a few bright stars quietly ringed themselves around them, and looked wonderingly into the level of their own shining eyes. For some vague yearning to humanity seemed to draw this dark and passionless void towards them. The vast protecting maternity of Nature leant hushed and breathless over the solitude. Warm currents of air rose occasionally from the valley, which one might have believed were sighs from its full and overflowing breast, or a grateful coolness swept their cheeks and hair when the tranquil heights around them were moved to slowly respond. Odors from invisible bay and laurel sometimes filled the air; the incense of some rare and remoter cultivated meadow beyond their ken, or the strong germinating breath of leagues of wild oats, that had yellowed the upland by day. In the silence and shadow, their voices took upon themselves, almost without their volition, a far-off confidential murmur, with intervals of meaning silence—rather as if their thoughts had spoken for themselves, and they had stopped wonderingly to listen. They talked at first vaguely to this discreet audience of space and darkness, and then, growing bolder, spoke to each other and of themselves. Invested by the infinite gravity of nature, they had no fear of human ridicule to restrain their youthful conceit or the extravagance of their unimportant confessions. They talked of their tastes, of their habits, of their friends and acquaintances. They settled some points of doctrine, duty, and etiquette, with the

sweet seriousness of youth and its all-powerful convictions. The listening vines would have recognized no flirtation or love-making in their animated but important confidences; yet when Mrs. Bradley reappeared to warn the invalid that it was time to seek his couch, they both coughed slightly in the nervous consciousness of some unaccustomed quality in their voices, and a sense of interruption far beyond their own or the innocent intruder's ken.

"Well?" said Mrs. Bradley, in the sitting-room as Mainwaring's steps retreated down the passage to his room.

"Well," said Louise with a slight yawn, leaning her pretty shoulders languidly against the door-post, as she shaded her moonlight-accustomed eyes from the vulgar brilliancy of Mrs. Bradley's bedroom candle. "Well—oh, he talked a great deal about 'his people' as he called them, and I talked about us. He's very nice. You know in some things he's really like a boy."

"He looks much better."

"Yes; but he is far from strong yet."

Meantime, Mainwaring had no other confidant of his impressions than his own thoughts. Mingled with his exaltation, which was the more seductive that it had no well-defined foundation for existing, and implied no future responsibility, was a recurrence of his uneasiness at the impending visit of Richardson the next day. Strangely enough, it had increased under the stimulus of the evening. Just as he was really getting on with the family, he felt sure that this visitor would import some foreign element into their familiarity, as Minty had done. It was possible they would not like him: now he remembered there was really something ostentatiously British and insular about this

Richardson—something they would likely resent. Why couldn't this fellow have come later—or even before? Before what? But here he fell asleep, and almost instantly slipped from this veranda in the Sierras, six thousand miles away, to an ancient terrace, overgrown with moss and tradition, that overlooked the sedate glory of an English park. Here he found himself, restricted painfully by his inconsistent night-clothes, endeavoring to impress his mother and sisters with the singular virtues and excellences of his American host and hostesses—virtues and excellences that he himself was beginning to feel conscious had become more or less apocryphal in that atmosphere. He heard his mother's voice saying severely, "When you learn, Francis, to respect the opinions and prejudices of your family enough to prevent your appearing before them in this uncivilized aboriginal costume, we will listen to what you have to say of the friends whose habits you seem to have adopted;" and he was frantically indignant that his efforts to convince them that his negligence was a personal oversight, and not a Californian custom, were utterly futile. But even then this vision was brushed away by the bewildering sweep of Louise's pretty skirt across the dreamy picture, and her delicate features and softly-fringed eyes remained the last to slip from his fading consciousness.

The moon rose higher and higher above the sleeping house and softly breathing canyon. There was nothing to mar the idyllic repose of the landscape; only the growing light of the last two hours had brought out in the far eastern horizon a dim white peak, that gleamed faintly among the stars, like a bridal couch spread between the hills fringed with fading nuptial torches. No one would have believed that behind that impenetrable shadow to the west, in the heart of the forest, the throbbing saw-mill of James Bradley was even at that moment eating its destructive way through the conserved growth of Nature and centuries, and that the refined

proprietor of house and greenwood, with the glow of his furnace fires on his red shirt, and his alert, intelligent eyes, was the genie of that devastation, and the toiling leader of the shadowy, toiling figures around him.

CHAPTER THREE

Amid the beauty of the most uncultivated and untrodden wilderness there are certain localities where the meaner and mere common processes of Nature take upon themselves a degrading likeness to the slovenly, wasteful, and improvident processes of man. The unrecorded land-slip disintegrating a whole hillside will not only lay bare the delicate framework of strata and deposit to the vulgar eye, but hurl into the valley a debris so monstrous and unlovely as to shame even the hideous ruins left by dynamite, hydraulic, or pick and shovel; an overflown and forgotten woodland torrent will leave in some remote hollow a disturbed and ungraceful chaos of inextricable logs, branches, rock, and soil that will rival the unsavory details of some wrecked or abandoned settlement. Of lesser magnitude and importance, there are certain natural dust-heaps, sinks, and cesspools, where the elements have collected the cast-off, broken, and frayed disjecta of wood and field—the sweepings of the sylvan household. It was remarkable that Nature, so kindly considerate of mere human ruins, made no attempt to cover up or disguise these monuments of her own mortality: no grass grew over the unsightly landslides, no moss or ivy clothed the stripped and bleached skeletons of overthrown branch and tree; the dead leaves and withered husks rotted in their open grave uncrossed by vine and creeper. Even the animals, except the lower organizations, shunned those haunts of decay and ruin.

It was scarcely a hundred yards from one of those dreary receptacles that Mr. Bradley had taken leave of Miss Minty Sharpe. The cabin occupied by her father, herself, and a younger brother stood, in fact, on the very edge of the little hollow, which was partly filled with decayed wood, leaves,

and displacements of the crumbling bank, with the coal dust and ashes which Mr. Sharpe had added from his forge, that stood a few paces distant at the corner of a cross-road. The occupants of the cabin had also contributed to the hollow the refuse of their household in broken boxes, earthenware, tin cans, and cast-off clothing; and it is not improbable that the site of the cabin was chosen with reference to this convenient disposal of useless and encumbering impedimenta. It was true that the locality offered little choice in the way of beauty. An outcrop of brown granite—a portent of higher altitudes—extended a quarter of a mile from the nearest fringe of dwarf laurel and "brush" in one direction; in the other an advanced file of Bradley's woods had suffered from some long-forgotten fire, and still raised its blackened masts and broken stumps over the scorched and arid soil, swept of older underbrush and verdure. On the other side of the road a dark ravine, tangled with briers and haunted at night by owls and wild cats, struggled wearily on, until blundering at last upon the edge of the Great Canyon, it slipped and lost itself forever in a single furrow of those mighty flanks. When Bradley had once asked Sharpe why he had not built his house in the ravine, the blacksmith had replied: "That until the Lord had appointed his time, he reckoned to keep his head above ground and the foundations thereof." Howbeit, the ravine, or the "run," as it was locally known, was Minty's only Saturday afternoon resort for recreation or berries. "It was," she had explained, "pow'ful soothin', and solitary."

She entered the house—a rude, square building of unpainted boards—containing a sitting-room, a kitchen, and two bedrooms. A glance at these rooms, which were plainly furnished, and whose canvas-colored walls were adorned with gorgeous agricultural implement circulars, patent medicine calendars, with polytinted chromos and cheaply-illuminated Scriptural texts, showed her that a certain neatness and order had been preserved during her absence;

and, finding the house empty, she crossed the barren and blackened intervening space between the back door and her father's forge, and entered the open shed. The light was fading from the sky; but the glow of the forge lit up the dusty road before it, and accented the blackness of the rocky ledge beyond. A small curly-headed boy, bearing a singular likeness to a smudged and blackened crayon drawing of Minty, was mechanically blowing the bellows and obviously intent upon something else; while her father—a powerfully built man, with a quaintly dissatisfied expression of countenance—was with equal want of interest mechanically hammering at a horseshoe. Without noticing Minty's advent, he lazily broke into a querulous drawling chant of some vague religious character:

O tur-ren, sinner; tur-ren.
For the Lord bids you turn—ah!
O tur-ren, sinner; tur-ren.
Why will you die?

The musical accent adapted itself to the monotonous fall of the sledge-hammer; and at every repetition of the word "turn" he suited the action to the word by turning the horseshoe with the iron in his left hand. A slight grunt at the end of every stroke, and the simultaneous repetition of "turn" seemed to offer him amusement and relief. Minty, without speaking, crossed the shop, and administered a sound box on her brother's ear. "Take that, and let me ketch you agen layin' low when my back's turned, to put on your store pants."

"The others had fetched away in the laig," said the boy, opposing a knee and elbow at acute angle to further attack.

"You jest get and change 'em," said Minty.

The sudden collapse of the bellows broke in upon the soothing refrain of Mr. Sharpe, and caused him to turn also.

"It's Minty," he said, replacing the horseshoe on the coals, and setting his powerful arms and the sledge on the anvil with an exaggerated expression of weariness.

"Yes; it's me," said Minty, "and Creation knows it's time I DID come, to keep that boy from ruinin' us with his airs and conceits."

"Did ye bring over any o' that fever mixter?"

"No. Bradley sez you're loading yerself up with so much o' that bitter bark—kuinine they call it over there—that you'll lift the ruff off your head next. He allows ye ain't got no ague; it's jest wind and dyspepsy. He sez yer's strong ez a hoss."

"Bradley," said Sharpe, laying aside his sledge with an aggrieved manner which was, however, as complacent as his fatigue and discontent, "ez one of them nat'ral born finikin skunks ez I despise. I reckon he began to give p'ints to his parents when he was about knee-high to Richelieu there. He's on them confidential terms with hisself and the Almighty that he reckons he ken run a saw-mill and a man's insides at the same time with one hand tied behind him. And this finikin is up to his conceit: he wanted to tell me that that yer handy brush dump outside our shanty was unhealthy. Give a man with frills like that his own way and he'd be a sprinkling odor cologne and peppermint all over the country."

"He set your shoulder as well as any doctor," said Minty.

"That's bone-settin', and a nat'ral gift," returned Sharpe, as triumphantly as his habitual depression would admit; "it ain't conceit and finikin got out o' books! Well," he added, after a pause, "wot's happened?"

Minty's face slightly changed. "Nothin'; I kem back to get some things," she said shortly, moving away.

"And ye saw HIM?"

"Ye-e-s," drawled Minty, carelessly, still retreating.

"Bixby was along here about noon. He says the stranger was suthin' high and mighty in his own country, and them 'Frisco millionaires are quite sweet on him. Where are ye goin'?"

"In the house."

"Well, look yer, Minty. Now that you're here, ye might get up a batch o' hot biscuit for supper. Dinner was that promiscous and experimental to-day, along o' Richelieu's nat'ral foolin', that I think I could git outside of a little suthin' now, if only to prop up a kind of innard sinkin' that takes me. Ye ken tell me the news at supper."

Later, however, when Mr. Sharpe had quitted his forge for the night and, seated at his domestic board, was, with a dismal presentiment of future indigestion, voraciously absorbing his favorite meal of hot saleratus biscuits swimming in butter, he had apparently forgotten his curiosity concerning Mainwaring and settled himself to a complaining chronicle of the day's mishaps. "Nat'rally, havin' an extra lot o' work on hand and no time for foolin', what does that ornery Richelieu get up and do this mornin'? Ye know them ridiklus specimens that he's been chippin'

outer that ledge that the yearth slipped from down the run, and litterin' up the whole shanty with 'em. Well, darn my skin! if he didn't run a heap of 'em, mixed up with coal, unbeknowned to me, in the forge, to make what he called a 'fire essay' of 'em. Nat'rally, I couldn't get a blessed iron hot, and didn't know what had gone of the fire, or the coal either, for two hours, till I stopped work and raked out the coal. That comes from his hangin' round that saw-mill in the woods, and listenin' to Bradley's high-falutin' talk about rocks and strata and sich."

"But Bradley don't go a cent on minin', Pop," said Minty. "He sez the woods is good enough for him; and there's millions to be made when the railroad comes along, and timber's wanted."

"But until then he's got to keep hisself, to pay wages, and keep the mill runnin'. Onless it's, ez Bixby says, that he hopes to get that Englishman to rope in some o' them 'Frisco friends of his to take a hand. Ye didn't have any o' that kind o' talk, did ye?"

"No; not THAT kind o' talk," said Minty.

"Not THAT kind o' talk!" repeated her father with aggrieved curiosity, "Wot kind, then?"

"Well," said Minty, lifting her black eyes to her father's; "I ain't no account, and you ain't no account either. You ain't got no college education, ain't got no friends in 'Frisco, and ain't got no high-toned style; I can't play the pianner, jabber French, nor get French dresses. We ain't got no fancy 'Shallet,' as they call it, with a first-class view of nothing; but only a shanty on dry rock. But, afore I'D take advantage of a lazy, gawky boy—for it ain't anything else, though he's good meanin' enough—that happened to fall

sick in MY house, and coax and cosset him, and wrap him in white cotton, and mother him, and sister him, and Aunt Sukey him, and almost dry-nuss him gin'rally, jist to get him sweet on me and on mine, and take the inside track of others—I'D be an Injin! And if you'd allow it, Pop, you'd be wuss nor a [racial expletive]!"

"Sho!" said her father, kindling with that intense gratification with which the male receives any intimation of alien feminine weakness. "It ain't that, Minty, I wanter know!"

"It's jist that, Pop; and I ez good ez let 'em know I seed it. I ain't a fool, if some folks do drop their eyes and pertend to wipe the laugh out of their noses with a handkerchief when I let out to speak. I mayn't be good enough kempany—"

"Look yer, Minty," interrupted the blacksmith, sternly, half rising from his seat with every trace of his former weakness vanished from his hardset face; "do you mean to say that they put on airs to ye—to MY darter?"

"No," said Minty quickly; "the men didn't; and don't you, a man, mix yourself up with women's meannesses. I ken manage 'em, Pop, with one hand."

Mr. Sharpe looked at his daughter's flashing black eyes. Perhaps an uneasy recollection of the late Mrs. Sharpe's remarkable capacity in that respect checked his further rage.

"No. Wot I was sayin'," resumed Minty, "ez that I mayn't be thought by others good enough to keep kempany with baronetts ez is to be—though baronetts mightn't object—but I ain't mean enough to try to steal away some

ole woman's darling boy in England, or snatch some likely young English girl's big brother outer the family without sayin' by your leave. How'd you like it if Richelieu was growed up, and went to sea—and it would be like his peartness—and he fell sick in some foreign land, and some princess or other skyulged HIM underhand away from us?"

Probably owing to the affair of the specimens, the elder Sharpe did not seem to regard the possible mesalliance of Richelieu with extraordinary disfavor. "That boy is conceited enough with hair ile and fine clothes for anything," he said plaintively. "But didn't that Louise Macy hev a feller already—that Captain Greyson? Wot's gone o' him?"

"That's it," said Minty: "he kin go out in the woods and whistle now. But all the same, she could hitch him in again at any time if the other stranger kicked over the traces. That's the style over there at The Lookout. There ain't ez much heart in them two women put together ez would make a green gal flush up playin' forfeits. It's all in their breed, Pop. Love ain't going to spile their appetites and complexions, give 'em nose-bleed, nor put a drop o' water into their eyes in all their natural born days. That's wot makes me mad. Ef I thought that Loo cared a bit for that child I wouldn't mind; I'd just advise her to make him get up and get—pack his duds out o' camp, and go home and not come back until he had a written permit from his mother, or the other baronet in office."

"Looks sorter ef some one orter interfere," said the blacksmith, reflectively. "'Tain't exackly a case for a vigilance committee, tho' it's agin public morals, this sorter kidnappin' o' strangers. Looks ez if it might bring the country into discredit in England."

"Well, don't YOU go and interfere and havin' folks say ez my nose was put out o' jint over there," said Minty, curtly. "There's another Englishman comin' up from 'Frisco to see him to-morrow. Ef he ain't scooped up by Jenny Bradley he'll guess there's a [racial expletive] in the fence somewhere. But there, Pop, let it drop. It's a bad aig, anyway," she concluded, rising from the table, and passing her hands down her frock and her shapely hips, as if to wipe off further contamination of the subject. "Where's Richelieu agin?"

"Said he didn't want supper, and like ez not he's gone over to see that fammerly at the Summit. There's a little girl thar he's sparkin', about his own age."

"His own age!" said Minty, indignantly. "Why, she's double that, if she's a day. Well—if he ain't the triflinest, conceitednest little limb that ever grew! I'd like to know where he got it from—it wasn't mar's style."

Mr. Sharpe smiled darkly. Richelieu's precocious gallantry evidently was not considered as gratuitous as his experimental metallurgy. But as his eyes followed his daughter's wholesome, Phyllis-like figure, a new idea took possession of him: needless to say, however, it was in the line of another personal aggrievement, albeit it took the form of religious reflection.

"It's curous, Minty, wot's foreordained, and wot ain't. Now, yer's one of them high and mighty fellows, after the Lord, ez comes meanderin' around here, and drops off—ez fur ez I kin hear—in a kind o' faint at the first house he kems to, and is taken in and lodged and sumptuously fed; and, nat'rally, they gets their reward for it. Now wot's to hev kept that young feller from coming HERE and droppin'

down in my forge, or in this very room, and YOU a tendin' him, and jist layin' over them folks at The Lookout?"

"Wot's got hold o' ye, Pop? Don't I tell ye he had a letter to Jim Bradley?" said Minty, quickly, with an angry flash of color in her cheek.

"That ain't it," said Sharpe confidently; "it's cos he WALKED. Nat'rally, you'd think he'd RIDE, being high and mighty, and that's where, ez the parson will tell ye, wot's merely fi-nite and human wisdom errs! Ef that feller had ridden, he'd have had to come by this yer road, and by this yer forge, and stop a spell like any other. But it was foreordained that he should walk, jest cos it wasn't generally kalkilated and reckoned on. So, YOU had no show."

For a moment, Minty seemed struck with her father's original theory. But with a vigorous shake of her shoulders she threw it off. Her eyes darkened.

"I reckon you ain't thinking, Pop—" she began.

"I was only sayin' it was curous," he rejoined quietly. Nevertheless, after a pause, he rose, coughed, and going up to the young girl, as she leaned over the dresser, bent his powerful arm around her, and, drawing her and the plate she was holding against his breast, laid his bearded cheek for an instant softly upon her rebellious head. "It's all right, Minty," he said; "ain't it, pet?" Minty's eyelids closed gently under the familiar pressure. "Wot's that in your hair, Minty?" he said tactfully, breaking an embarrassing pause.

"Bar's grease, father," murmured Minty, in a child's voice—the grown-up woman, under that magic touch, having lapsed again into her father's motherless charge of ten years before.

"It's pow'ful soothin', and pretty," said her father.

"I made it myself—do you want some?" asked Minty.

"Not now, girl!" For a moment they slightly rocked each other in that attitude—the man dexterously, the woman with infinite tenderness—and then they separated.

Late that night, after Richelieu had returned, and her father wrestled in his fitful sleep with the remorse of his guilty indulgence at supper, Minty remained alone in her room, hard at work, surrounded by the contents of one of her mother's trunks and the fragments of certain ripped-up and newly-turned dresses. For Minty had conceived the bold idea of altering one of her mother's gowns to the fashion of a certain fascinating frock worn by Louise Macy. It was late when her self-imposed task was completed. With a nervous trepidation that was novel to her, Minty began to disrobe herself preparatory to trying on her new creation. The light of a tallow candle and a large swinging lantern, borrowed from her father's forge, fell shyly on her milky neck and shoulders, and shone in her sparkling eyes, as she stood before her largest mirror—the long glazed door of a kitchen clock which she had placed upon her chest of drawers. Had poor Minty been content with the full, free, and goddess-like outlines that it reflected, she would have been spared her impending disappointment. For, alas! the dress of her model had been framed upon a symmetrically attenuated French corset, and the unfortunate Minty's fuller and ampler curves had under her simple country stays known no more restraining cincture than knew the Venus of Milo. The alteration was a hideous failure, it was neither Minty's statuesque outline nor Louise Macy's graceful contour. Minty was no fool, and the revelation of this slow education of the figure and training of outline—whether fair or false in

art—struck her quick intelligence with all its full and hopeless significance. A bitter light sprang to her eyes; she tore the wretched sham from her shoulders, and then wrapping a shawl around her, threw herself heavily and sullenly on the bed. But inaction was not a characteristic of Minty's emotion; she presently rose again, and, taking an old work-box from her trunk, began to rummage in its recesses. It was an old shell-incrusted affair, and the apparent receptacle of such cheap odds and ends of jewelry as she possessed; a hideous cameo ring, the property of the late Mrs. Sharpe, was missing. She again rapidly explored the contents of the box, and then an inspiration seized her, and she darted into her brother's bedroom.

That precocious and gallant Lovelace of ten, despite all sentiment, had basely succumbed to the gross materialism of youthful slumber. On a cot in the corner, half hidden under the wreck of his own careless and hurried disrobing, with one arm hanging out of the coverlid, Richelieu lay supremely unconscious. On the forefinger of his small but dirty hand the missing cameo was still glittering guiltily. With a swift movement of indignation Minty rushed with uplifted palm towards the tempting expanse of youthful cheek that lay invitingly exposed upon the pillow. Then she stopped suddenly.

She had seen him lying thus a hundred times before. On the pillow near him an indistinguishable mass of golden fur—the helpless bulk of a squirrel chained to the leg of his cot; at his feet a wall-eyed cat, who had followed his tyrannous caprices with the long-suffering devotion of her sex; on the shelf above him a loathsome collection of flies and tarantulas in dull green bottles: a slab of ginger-bread for light nocturnal refection, and her own pot of bear's grease. Perhaps it was the piteous defencelessness of youthful sleep, perhaps it was some lingering memory of her father's caress;

but as she gazed at him with troubled eyes, the juvenile reprobate slipped back into the baby-boy that she had carried in her own childish arms such a short time ago, when the maternal responsibility had descended with the dead mother's ill-fitting dresses upon her lank girlish figure and scant virgin breast—and her hand fell listlessly at her side.

The sleeper stirred slightly and awoke. At the same moment, by some mysterious sympathy, a pair of beady bright eyes appeared in the bulk of fur near his curls, the cat stretched herself, and even a vague agitation was heard in the bottles on the shelf. Richelieu's blinking eyes wandered from the candle to his sister, and then the guilty hand was suddenly withdrawn under the bedclothes.

"No matter, dear," said Minty; "it's mar's, and you kin wear it when you like, if you'll only ask for it."

Richelieu wondered if he was dreaming! This unexpected mildness—this inexplicable tremor in his sister's voice: it must be some occult influence of the night season on the sisterly mind, possibly akin to a fear of ghosts! He made a mental note of it in view of future favors, yet for the moment he felt embarrassedly gratified. "Ye ain't wantin' anything, Minty," he said affectionately; "a pail o' cold water from the far spring—no nothin'?" He made an ostentatious movement as if to rise, yet sufficiently protracted to prevent any hasty acceptance of his prodigal offer.

"No, dear," she said, still gazing at him with an absorbed look in her dark eyes.

Richelieu felt a slight creepy sensation under that lonely far-off gaze. "Your eyes look awful big at night, Minty," he said. He would have added "and pretty," but she

was his sister, and he had the lofty fraternal conviction of his duty in repressing the inordinate vanity of the sex. “Ye’re sure ye ain’t wantin’ nothin’?”

“Not now, dear.” She paused a moment, and then said deliberately: “But you wouldn’t mind turnin’ out after sun-up and runnin’ an errand for me over to The Lookout?”

Richelieu’s eyes sparkled so suddenly that even in her absorption Minty noticed the change. “But ye’re not goin’ to tarry over there, ner gossip—you hear? Yer to take this yer message. Yer to say ‘that it will be onpossible for me to come back there, on account—on account of—’”

“Important business,” suggested Richelieu; “that’s the perlite style.”

“Ef you like.” She leaned over the bed and put her lips to his forehead, still damp with the dews of sleep, and then to his long-lashed lids. “Mind Nip!”—the squirrel—he practically suggested. For an instant their blond curls mingled on the pillow. “Now go to sleep,” she said curtly.

But Richelieu had taken her white neck in the short strangulatory hug of the small boy, and held her fast. “Ye’ll let me put on my best pants?”

“Yes.”

“And wear that ring?”

“Yes”—a little sadly.

“Then yer kin count me in, Minty; and see here”—his voice sank to a confidential whisper—“mebbee some day ye’ll be beholden to ME for a lot o’ real jewelry.”

She returned slowly to her room, and, opening the window, looked out upon the night. The same moon that had lent such supererogatory grace to the natural beauty of The Lookout, here seemed to have failed; as Minty had, in disguising the relentless limitations of Nature or the cruel bonds of custom. The black plain of granite, under its rays, appeared only to extend its poverty to some remoter barrier; the blackened stumps of the burnt forest stood bleaker against the sky, like broken and twisted pillars of iron. The cavity of the broken ledge where Richelieu had prospected was a hideous chasm of bluish blackness, over which a purple vapor seemed to hover; the "brush dump" beside the house showed a cavern of writhing and distorted objects stiffened into dark rigidity. She had often looked upon the prospect: it had never seemed so hard and changeless; yet she accepted it, as she had accepted it before.

She turned away, undressed herself mechanically, and went to bed. She had an idea that she had been very foolish; that her escape from being still more foolish was something miraculous, and in some measure connected with Providence, her father, her little brother, and her dead mother, whose dress she had recklessly spoiled. But that she had even so slightly touched the bitterness and glory of renunciation—as written of heroines and fine ladies by novelists and poets—never entered the foolish head of Minty Sharpe, the blacksmith's daughter.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was a little after daybreak next morning that Mainwaring awoke from the first unrefreshing night he had passed at The Lookout. He was so feverish and restless that he dressed himself at sunrise, and cautiously stepped out upon the still silent veranda. The chairs which he and Louise Macy had occupied were still, it seemed to him, conspicuously confidential with each other, and he separated them, but as he looked down into the Great Canyon at his feet he was conscious of some undefinable change in the prospect. A slight mist was rising from the valley, as if it were the last of last night's illusions; the first level sunbeams were obtrusively searching, and the keen morning air had a dryly practical insistence which irritated him, until a light footstep on the farther end of the veranda caused him to turn sharply.

It was the singular apparition of a small boy, bearing a surprising resemblance to Minty Sharpe, and dressed in an unique fashion. On a tumbled sea of blond curls a "chip" sailor hat, with a broad red ribbon, rode jauntily. But here the nautical suggestion changed, as had the desire of becoming a pirate which induced it. A red shirt, with a white collar, and a yellow plaid ribbon tie, that also recalled Minty Sharpe, lightly turned the suggestion of his costume to mining. Short black velvet trousers, coming to his knee, and ostentatiously new short-legged boots, with visible straps like curling ears, completed the entirely original character of his lower limbs.

Mainwaring, always easily gentle and familiar with children and his inferiors, looked at him with an encouraging smile. Richelieu—for it was he—advanced gravely and held

out his hand, with the cameo ring apparent. Mainwaring, with equal gravity, shook it warmly, and removed his hat. Richelieu, keenly observant, did the same.

"Is Jim Bradley out yet?" asked Richelieu, carelessly.

"No; I think not. But I'm Frank Mainwaring. Will I do?"

Richelieu smiled. The dimples, the white teeth, the dark, laughing eyes, were surely Minty's?

"I'm Richelieu," he rejoined with equal candor.

"Richelieu?"

"Yes. That Frenchman—the Lord Cardinal—you know. Mar saw Forrest do him out in Saint Louis."

"Do him?"

"Yes, in the theayter."

With a confused misconception of his meaning, Mainwaring tried to recall the historical dress of the great Cardinal and fit it to the masquerader—if such he were—before him. But Richelieu relieved him by adding—

"Richelieu Sharpe."

"Oh, that's your NAME!" said Mainwaring, cheerfully. "Then you're Miss Minty's brother. I know her. How jolly lucky!"

They both shook hands again. Richelieu, eager to get rid of the burden of his sister's message, which he felt was in the way of free-and-easy intercourse with this charming stranger, looked uneasily towards the house.

"I say," said Mainwaring, "if you're in a hurry, you'd better go in there and knock. I hear some one stirring in the kitchen."

Richelieu nodded, but first went back to the steps of the veranda, picked up a small blue knotted handkerchief, apparently containing some heavy objects, and repassed Mainwaring.

"What! have you cut it, Richelieu, with your valuables? What have you got there?"

"Specimins," said Richelieu, shortly, and vanished.

He returned presently. "Well, Cardinal, did you see anybody?" asked Mainwaring.

"Mrs. Bradley; but Jim's over to the mill. I'm goin' there."

"Did you see Miss Macy?" continued Mainwaring, carelessly.

"Loo?"

"Loo!—well; yes."

"No. She's philanderin' with Captain Greyson."

"Philandering with Greyson?" echoed Mainwaring, in wonder.

"Yes; on horseback on the ridge."

"You mean she's riding out with Mr.—with Captain Greyson?"

"Yes; ridin' AND philanderin'," persisted Richelieu.

"And what do you call philandering?"

"Well; I reckon you and she oughter know," returned Richelieu, with a precocious air.

"Certainly," said Mainwaring, with a faint smile. Richelieu really was like Minty.

There was a long silence. This young Englishman was becoming exceedingly uninteresting. Richelieu felt that he was gaining neither profit nor amusement, and losing time. "I'm going," he said.

"Good morning," said Mainwaring, without looking up.

Richelieu picked up his specimens, thoroughly convinced of the stranger's glittering deceitfulness, and vanished.

It was nearly eight o'clock when Mrs. Bradley came from the house. She apologized, with a slightly distrait smile, for the tardiness of the household. "Mr. Bradley stayed at the mill all night, and will not be here until breakfast, when he brings your friend Mr. Richardson with him"—Mainwaring scarcely repressed a movement of impatience—"who arrives early. It's unfortunate that Miss Sharpe can't come to-day."

In his abstraction Mainwaring did not notice that Mrs. Bradley slightly accented Minty's formal appellation, and said carelessly—

"Oh, that's why her brother came over here so early!"

"Did YOU see him?" asked Mrs. Bradley, almost abruptly.

"Yes. He is an amusing little beggar; but I think he shares his sister's preference for Mr. Bradley. He deserted me here in the veranda for him at the mill."

"Louise will keep you company as soon as she has changed her dress," continued Mrs. Bradley. "She was out riding early this morning with a friend. She's very fond of early morning rides."

"AND philandering," repeated Mainwaring to himself. It was quite natural for Miss Macy to ride out in the morning, after the fashion of the country, with an escort; but why had the cub insisted on the "philandering"? He had said, "AND philandering," distinctly. It was a nasty thing for him to say. Any other fellow but he, Mainwaring, might misunderstand the whole thing. Perhaps he ought to warn her—but no! he could not repeat the gossip of a child, and that child the brother of one of her inferiors. But was Minty an inferior? Did she and Minty talk together about this fellow Greyson? At all events, it would only revive the awkwardness of the preceding day, and he resolved to say nothing.

He was rewarded by a half-inquiring, half-confiding look in Louise's bright eyes, when she presently greeted him on the veranda. "She had quite forgotten," she said, "to tell him last night of her morning's engagement; indeed, she had

half forgotten IT. It used to be a favorite practice of hers, with Captain Greyson; but she had lately given it up. She believed she had not ridden since—since—"

"Since when?" asked Mainwaring.

"Well, since you were ill," she said frankly.

A quick pleasure shone in Mainwaring's cheek and eye; but Louise's pretty lids did not drop, nor her faint, quiet bloom deepen. Breakfast was already waiting when Mr. Richardson arrived alone.

He explained that Mr. Bradley had some important and unexpected business which had delayed him, but which, he added, "Mr. Bradley says may prove interesting enough to you to excuse his absence this morning." Mainwaring was not displeased that his critical and observant host was not present at their meeting. Louise Macy was, however, as demurely conscious of the different bearing of the two compatriots. Richardson's somewhat self-important patronage of the two ladies, and that Californian familiarity he had acquired, changed to a certain uneasy deference towards Mainwaring; while the younger Englishman's slightly stiff and deliberate cordiality was, nevertheless, mingled with a mysterious understanding that appeared innate and unconscious. Louise was quick to see that these two men, more widely divergent in quality than any two of her own countrymen, were yet more subtly connected by some unknown sympathy than the most equal of Americans. Minty's prophetic belief of the effect of the two women upon Richardson was certainly true as regarded Mrs. Bradley. The banker—a large material nature—was quickly fascinated by the demure, puritanic graces of that lady, and was inclined to exhibit a somewhat broad and ostentatious gallantry that annoyed Mainwaring. When they were seated alone on the

veranda, which the ladies had discreetly left to them, Richardson said—

"Odd I didn't hear of Bradley's wife before. She seems a spicy, pretty, comfortable creature. Regularly thrown away with him up here."

Mainwaring replied coldly that she was "an admirable helpmeet of a very admirable man," not, however, without an uneasy recollection of her previous confidences respecting her husband. "They have been most thoroughly good and kind to me; my own brother and sister could not have done more. And certainly not with better taste or delicacy," he added, markedly.

"Certainly, certainly," said Richardson, hurriedly. "I wrote to Lady Mainwaring that you were taken capital care of by some very honest people; and that—"

"Lady Mainwaring already knows what I think of them, and what she owes to their kindness," said Mainwaring, dryly.

"True, true," said Richardson, apologetically. "Of course you must have seen a good deal of them. I only know Bradley in a business way. He's been trying to get the Bank to help him to put up some new mills here; but we didn't see it. I dare say he is good company—rather amusing, eh?"

Mainwaring had the gift of his class of snubbing by the polite and forgiving oblivion of silence. Richardson shifted uneasily in his chair, but continued with assumed carelessness:

"No; I only knew of this cousin, Miss Macy. I heard of her when she was visiting some friends in Menlo Park last

year. Rather an attractive girl. They say Colonel Johnson, of Sacramento, took quite a fancy to her—it would have been a good match, I dare say, for he is very rich—but the thing fell through in some way. Then, they say, SHE wanted to marry that Spaniard, young Pico, of the Amador Ranche; but his family wouldn't hear of it. Somehow, she's deuced unlucky. I suppose she'll make a mess of it with Captain Greyson she was out riding with this morning."

"Didn't the Bank think Bradley's mills a good investment?" asked Mainwaring quietly, when Richardson paused.

"Not with him in it; he is not a business man, you know."

"I thought he was. He seems to me an energetic man, who knows his work, and is not afraid to look after it himself."

"That's just it. He has got absurd ideas of co-operating with his workmen, you know, and doing everything slowly and on a limited scale. The only thing to be done is to buy up all the land on this ridge, run off the settlers, freeze out all the other mills, and put it into a big San Francisco company on shares. That's the only way we would look at it."

"But you don't consider the investment bad, even from HIS point of view?"

"Perhaps not."

"And you only decline it because it isn't big enough for the Bank?"

"Exactly."

"Richardson," said Mainwaring, slowly rising, putting his hands in his trousers pockets, and suddenly looking down upon the banker from the easy level of habitual superiority, "I wish you'd attend to this thing for me. I desire to make some return to Mr. Bradley for his kindness. I wish to give him what help he wants—in his own way—you understand. I wish it, and I believe my father wishes it, too. If you'd like him to write to you to that effect—"

"By no means, it's not at all necessary," said Richardson, dropping with equal suddenness into his old-world obsequiousness. "I shall certainly do as you wish. It is not a bad investment, Mr. Mainwaring, and as you suggest, a very proper return for their kindness. And, being here, it will come quite naturally for me to take up the affair again."

"And—I say, Richardson."

"Yes, sir?"

"As these ladies are rather short-handed in their domestic service, you know, perhaps you'd better not stay to luncheon or dinner, but go on to the Summit House—it's only a mile or two farther—and come back here this evening. I shan't want you until then."

"Certainly!" stammered Richardson. "I'll just take leave of the ladies!"

"It's not at all necessary," said Mainwaring, quietly; "you would only disturb them in their household duties. I'll tell them what I've done with you, if they ask. You'll find your stick and hat in the passage, and you can leave the

veranda by these steps. By the way, you had better manage at the Summit to get some one to bring my traps from here to be forwarded to Sacramento to-morrow. I'll want a conveyance, or a horse of some kind, myself, for I've given up walking for a while; but we can settle about that to-night. Come early. Good morning?"

He accompanied his thoroughly subjugated countryman—who, however, far from attempting to reassert himself, actually seemed easier and more cheerful in his submission—to the end of the veranda, and watched him depart. As he turned back, he saw the pretty figure of Louise Macy leaning against the doorway. How graceful and refined she looked in that simple morning dress! What wonder that she was admired by Greyson, by Johnson, and by that Spaniard!—no, by Jove, it was SHE that wanted to marry him!

"What have you sent away Mr. Richardson for?" asked the young girl, with a half-reproachful, half-mischievous look in her bright eyes.

"I packed him off because I thought it was a little too hard on you and Mrs. Bradley to entertain him without help."

"But as he was OUR guest, you might have left that to us," said Miss Macy.

"By Jove! I never thought of that," said Mainwaring, coloring in consternation. "Pray forgive me, Miss Macy—but you see I knew the man, and could say it, and you couldn't."

"Well, I forgive you, for you look really so cut up," said Louise, laughing. "But I don't know what Jenny will say of your disposing of her conquest so summarily." She

stopped and regarded him more attentively. “Has he brought you any bad news? if so, it’s a pity you didn’t send him away before. He’s quite spoiling our cure.”

Mainwaring thought bitterly that he had. “But it’s a cure for all that, Miss Macy,” he said, with an attempt at cheerfulness, “and being a cure, you see, there’s no longer an excuse for my staying here. I have been making arrangements for leaving here to-morrow.”

“So soon?”

“Do you think it soon, Miss Macy?” asked Mainwaring, turning pale in spite of himself.

“I quite forgot—that you were here as an invalid only, and that we owe our pleasure to the accident of your pain.”

She spoke a little artificially, he thought, yet her cheeks had not lost their pink bloom, nor her eyes their tranquillity. Had he heard Minty’s criticism he might have believed that the organic omission noticed by her was a fact.

“And now that your good work as Sister of Charity is completed, you’ll be able to enter the world of gayety again with a clear conscience,” said Mainwaring, with a smile that he inwardly felt was a miserable failure. “You’ll be able to resume your morning rides, you know, which the wretched invalid interrupted.”

Louise raised her clear eyes to his, without reproach, indignation, or even wonder. He felt as if he had attempted an insult and failed.

"Does my cousin know you are going so soon?" she asked finally.

"No, I did not know myself until to-day. You see," he added hastily, while his honest blood blazoned the lie in his cheek, "I've heard of some miserable business affairs that will bring me back to England sooner that I expected."

"I think you should consider your health more important than any mere business," said Louise. "I don't mean that you should remain HERE," she added with a hasty laugh, "but it would be a pity, now that you have reaped the benefit of rest and taking care of yourself, that you should not make it your only business to seek it elsewhere."

Mainwaring longed to say that within the last half hour, living or dying had become of little moment to him; but he doubted the truth or efficacy of this timeworn heroic of passion. He felt, too, that anything he said was a mere subterfuge for the real reason of his sudden departure. And how was he to question her as to that reason? In escaping from these subterfuges—he was compelled to lie again. With an assumption of changing the subject, he said calmly, "Richardson thought he had met you before—in Menlo Park, I think."

Amazed at the evident irrelevance of the remark, Louise said coldly, that she did not remember having seen him before.

"I think it was at a Mr. Johnson's—or WITH a Mr. Johnson—or perhaps at one of those Spanish ranches—I think he mentioned some name like Pico!"

Louise looked at him wonderingly for an instant, and then gave way to a frank, irrepressible laugh, which lent her

delicate but rather set little face all the color he had missed. Partially relieved by her unconcern, and yet mortified that he had only provoked her sense of the ludicrous, he tried to laugh also.

"Then, to be quite plain," said Louise, wiping her now humid eyes, "you want me to understand that you really didn't pay sufficient attention to hear correctly! Thank you; that's a pretty English compliment, I suppose."

"I dare say you wouldn't call it 'philandering'?"

"I certainly shouldn't, for I don't know what 'philandering' means."

Mainwaring could not reply, with Richelieu, "You ought to know"; nor did he dare explain what he thought it meant, and how he knew it. Louise, however, innocently solved the difficulty.

"There's a country song I've heard Minty sing," she said. "It runs—

Come, Philander, let us be a-marchin',
Every one for his true love a-sarchin'
Choose your true love now or never….

Have you been listening to her also?"

"No," said Mainwaring, with a sudden incomprehensible, but utterly irrepressible, resolution; "but I'M 'a-marchin',' you know, and perhaps I must 'choose my true love now or never.' Will you help me, Miss Macy?"

He drew gently near her. He had become quite white, but also very manly, and it struck her, more deeply,

thoroughly, and conscientiously sincere than any man who had before addressed her. She moved slightly away, as if to rest herself by laying both hands upon the back of the chair.

"Where do you expect to begin your 'sarchin''?" she said, leaning on the chair and tilting it before her; "or are you as vague as usual as to locality? Is it at some 'Mr. Johnson' or 'Mr. Pico,' or—"

"Here," he interrupted boldly.

"I really think you ought to first tell my cousin that you are going away to-morrow," she said, with a faint smile. "It's such short notice. She's just in there." She nodded her pretty head, without raising her eyes, towards the hall.

"But it may not be so soon," said Mainwaring.

"Oh, then the 'sarchin'' is not so important?" said Louise, raising her head, and looking towards the hall with some uneasy but indefinable feminine instinct.

She was right; the sitting-room door opened, and Mrs. Bradley made her smiling appearance.

"Mr. Mainwaring was just looking for you," said Louise, for the first time raising her eyes to him. "He's not only sent off Mr. Richardson, but he's going away himself to-morrow."

Mrs. Bradley looked from the one to the other in mute wonder. Mainwaring cast an imploring glance at Louise, which had the desired effect. Much more seriously, and in a quaint, business-like way, the young girl took it upon herself to explain to Mrs. Bradley that Richardson had brought the invalid some important news that would,

unfortunately, not only shorten his stay in America, but even compel him to leave The Lookout sooner than he expected, perhaps to-morrow. Mainwaring thanked her with his eyes, and then turned to Mrs. Bradley.

"Whether I go to-morrow or next day," he said with simple and earnest directness, "I intend, you know, to see you soon again, either here or in my own home in England. I do not know," he added with marked gravity, "that I have succeeded in convincing you that I have made your family already well known to my people, and that"—he fixed his eyes with a meaning look on Louise—"no matter when, or in what way, you come to them, your place is made ready for you. You may not like them, you know: the governor is getting to be an old man—perhaps too old for young Americans—but THEY will like YOU, and you must put up with that. My mother and sisters know Miss Macy as well as I do, and will make her one of the family."

The conscientious earnestness with which these apparent conventionalities were uttered, and some occult quality of quiet conviction in the young man's manner, brought a pleasant sparkle to the eyes of Mrs. Bradley and Louise.

"But," said Mrs. Bradley, gayly, "our going to England is quite beyond our present wildest dreams; nothing but a windfall, an unexpected rise in timber, or even the tabooed hotel speculation, could make it possible."

"But I shall take the liberty of trying to present it to Mr. Bradley tonight in some practical way that may convince even his critical judgment," said Mainwaring, still seriously. "It will be," he added more lightly, "the famous testimonial of my cure which I promised you."

"And you will find Mr. Bradley so sceptical that you will be obliged to defer your going," said Mrs. Bradley, triumphantly. "Come, Louise, we must not forget that we have still Mr. Mainwaring's present comfort to look after; that Minty has basely deserted us, and that we ourselves must see that the last days of our guest beneath our roof are not remembered for their privation."

She led Louise away with a half-mischievous suggestion of maternal propriety, and left Mainwaring once more alone on the veranda.

He had done it! Certainly she must have understood his meaning, and there was nothing left for him to do but to acquaint Bradley with his intentions to-night, and press her for a final answer in the morning. There would be no indelicacy then in asking her for an interview more free from interruption than this public veranda. Without conceit, he did not doubt what the answer would be. His indecision, his sudden resolution to leave her, had been all based upon the uncertainty of HIS own feelings, the propriety of HIS declaration, the possibility of some previous experience of hers that might compromise HIM. Convinced by her unembarrassed manner of her innocence, or rather satisfied of her indifference to Richardson's gossip, he had been hurried by his feelings into an unexpected avowal. Brought up in the perfect security of his own social position, and familiarly conscious—without vanity—of its importance and power in such a situation, he believed, without undervaluing Louise's charms or independence, that he had no one else than himself to consult. Even the slight uneasiness that still pursued him was more due to his habitual conscientiousness of his own intention than to any fear that she would not fully respond to it. Indeed, with his conservative ideas of proper feminine self-restraint, Louise's calm passivity and undemonstrative attitude were a proof of

her superiority; had she blushed overmuch, cried, or thrown herself into his arms, he would have doubted the wisdom of so easy a selection. It was true he had known her scarcely three weeks; if he chose to be content with that, his own accessible record of three centuries should be sufficient for her, and condone any irregularity.

Nevertheless, as an hour slipped away and Louise did not make her appearance, either on the veranda or in the little sitting-room off the hall, Mainwaring became more uneasy as to the incompleteness of their interview. Perhaps a faint suspicion of the inadequacy of her response began to trouble him; but he still fatuously regarded it rather as owing to his own hurried and unfinished declaration. It was true that he hadn't said half what he intended to say; it was true that she might have misunderstood it as the conventional gallantry of the situation, as—terrible thought!—the light banter of the habitual love-making American, to which she had been accustomed; perhaps even now she relegated him to the level of Greyson, and this accounted for her singular impassiveness—an impassiveness that certainly was singular now he reflected upon it—that might have been even contempt. The last thought pricked his deep conscientiousness; he walked hurriedly up and down the veranda, and then, suddenly re-entering his room, took up a sheet of note-paper, and began to write to her:

> Can you grant me a few moments' interview alone? I cannot bear you should think that what I was trying to tell you when we were interrupted was prompted by anything but the deepest sincerity and conviction, or that I am willing it should be passed over lightly by you or be forgotten. Pray give me a

chance of proving it, by saying you will see me. F. M.

But how should he convey this to her? His delicacy revolted against handing it to her behind Mrs. Bradley's back, or the prestidigitation of slipping it into her lap or under her plate before them at luncheon; he thought for an instant of the Chinaman, but gentlemen—except in that "mirror of nature" the stage—usually hesitate to suborn other people's servants, or entrust a woman's secret to her inferiors. He remembered that Louise's room was at the farther end of the house, and its low window gave upon the veranda, and was guarded at night by a film of white and blue curtains that were parted during the day, to allow a triangular revelation of a pale blue and white draped interior. Mainwaring reflected that the low inside window ledge was easily accessible from the veranda, would afford a capital lodgment for the note, and be quickly seen by the fair occupant of the room on entering. He sauntered slowly past the window; the room was empty, the moment propitious. A slight breeze was stirring the blue ribbons of the curtain; it would be necessary to secure the note with something; he returned along the veranda to the steps, where he had noticed a small irregular stone lying, which had evidently escaped from Richelieu's bag of treasure specimens, and had been overlooked by that ingenuous child. It was of a pretty peacock-blue color, and, besides securing a paper, would be sure to attract her attention. He placed his note on the inside ledge, and the blue stone atop, and went away with a sense of relief.

Another half hour passed without incident. He could hear the voices of the two women in the kitchen and dining-room. After a while they appeared to cease, and he heard the

sound of an opening door. It then occurred to him that the veranda was still too exposed for a confidential interview, and he resolved to descend the steps, pass before the windows of the kitchen where Louise might see him, and penetrate the shrubbery, where she might be induced to follow him. They would not be interrupted nor overheard there.

But he had barely left the veranda before the figure of Richelieu, who had been patiently waiting for Mainwaring's disappearance, emerged stealthily from the shrubbery. He had discovered his loss on handing his "fire assays" to the good-humored Bradley for later examination, and he had retraced his way, step by step, looking everywhere for his missing stone with the unbounded hopefulness, lazy persistency, and lofty disregard for time and occupation known only to the genuine boy. He remembered to have placed his knotted bag upon the veranda, and, slipping off his stiff boots slowly and softly, slid along against the wall of the house, looking carefully on the floor, and yet preserving a studied negligence of demeanor, with one hand in his pocket, and his small mouth contracted into a singularly soothing and almost voiceless whistle—Richelieu's own peculiar accomplishment. But no stone appeared. Like most of his genus he was superstitious, and repeated to himself the cabalistic formula: "Losin's seekin's, findin's keepin's"—presumed to be of great efficacy in such cases—with religious fervor. He had laboriously reached the end of the veranda when he noticed the open window of Louise's room, and stopped as a perfunctory duty to look in. And then Richelieu Sharpe stood for an instant utterly confounded and aghast at this crowning proof of the absolute infamy and sickening enormity of Man.

There was HIS stone—HIS, RICHELIEU'S, OWN SPECIMEN, carefully gathered by himself and none

other—and now stolen, abstracted, "skyugled," "smouged," "hooked" by this "rotten, skunkified, long-legged, splay-footed, hoss-laughin', [racial expletive]-toothed, or'nary despot" And, worse than all, actually made to do infamous duty as a "love token"—a "candy-gift!"—a "philanderin' box" to HIS, Richelieu's, girl—for Louise belonged to that innocent and vague outside seraglio of Richelieu's boyish dreams—and put atop of a letter to her! and Providence permitted such an outrage! "Wot was he, Richelieu, sent to school for, and organized wickedness in the shape of gorilla Injins like this allowed to ride high horses rampant over Californey!" He looked at the heavens in mute appeal. And then—Providence not immediately interfering—he thrust his own small arm into the window, regained his priceless treasure, and fled swiftly.

A fateful silence ensued. The wind slightly moved the curtain outward, as if in a playful attempt to follow him, and then subsided. A moment later, apparently re-enforced by other winds, or sympathizing with Richelieu, it lightly lifted the unlucky missive and cast it softly from the window. But here another wind, lying in wait, caught it cleverly, and tossed it, in a long curve, into the abyss. For an instant it seemed to float lazily, as on the mirrored surface of a lake, until, turning upon its side, it suddenly darted into utter oblivion.

When Mainwaring returned from the shrubbery, he went softly to the window. The disappearance of the letter and stone satisfied him of the success of his stratagem, and for the space of three hours relieved his anxiety. But at the end of that time, finding no response from Louise, his former uneasiness returned. Was she offended, or—the first doubt of her acceptance of him crossed his mind!

A sudden and inexplicable sense of shame came upon him. At the same moment, he heard his name called from the steps, turned—and beheld Minty.

Her dark eyes were shining with a pleasant light, and her lips parted on her white teeth with a frank, happy smile. She advanced and held out her hand. He took it with a mingling of disappointment and embarrassment.

"You're wondering why I kem on here, arter I sent word this morning that I kelkilated not to come. Well, 'twixt then and now suthin' 's happened. We've had fine doin's over at our house, you bet! Pop don't know which end he's standin' on; and I reckon that for about ten minutes I didn't know my own name. But ez soon ez I got fairly hold o' the hull thing, and had it put straight in my mind, I sez to myself, Minty Sharpe, sez I, the first thing for you to do now, is to put on yer bonnet and shawl, and trapse over to Jim Bradley's and help them two womenfolks get dinner for themselves and that sick stranger. And," continued Minty, throwing herself into a chair and fanning her glowing face with her apron, "yer I am!"

"But you have not told me WHAT has happened," said Mainwaring, with a constrained smile, and an uneasy glance towards the house.

"That's so," said Minty, with a brilliant laugh. "I clean forgot the hull gist of the thing. Well, we're rich folks now—over thar' on Barren Ledge! That onery brother of mine, Richelieu, hez taken some of his specimens over to Jim Bradley to be tested. And Bradley, just to please that child, takes 'em; and not an hour ago Bradley comes running, likety switch, over to Pop to tell him to put up his notices, for the hull of that ledge where the forge stands is a mine o' silver and copper. Afore ye knew it, Lordy! half the

folks outer the Summit and the mill was scattered down thar all over it. Richardson—that stranger ez knows you—kem thar too with Jim, and he allows, ef Bradley's essay is right, it's worth more than a hundred thousand dollars ez it stands!"

"I suppose I must congratulate you, Miss Sharpe," said Mainwaring with an attempt at interest, but his attention still preoccupied with the open doorway.

"Oh, THEY know all about it!" said Minty, following the direction of his abstracted eyes with a slight darkening of her own, "I jest kem out o' the kitchen the other way, and Jim sent 'em a note; but I allowed I'd tell YOU myself. Specially ez you are going away to-morrow."

"Who said I was going away to-morrow?" asked Mainwaring, uneasily.

"Loo Macy!"

"Ah—she did? But I may change my mind, you know!" he continued, with a faint smile.

Minty shook her curls decisively. "I reckon SHE knows," she said dryly, "she's got law and gospel for wot she says. But yer she comes. Ask her! Look yer, Loo," she added, as the two women appeared at the doorway, with a certain exaggeration of congratulatory manner that struck Mainwaring as being as artificial and disturbed as his own, "didn't Sir Francis yer say he was going to-morrow?"

"That's what I understood!" returned Louise, with cold astonishment, letting her clear indifferent eyes fall upon Mainwaring. "I do not know that he has changed his mind."

"Unless, as Miss Sharpe is a great capitalist now, she is willing to use her powers of persuasion," added Mrs. Bradley, with a slight acidulous pointing of her usual prim playfulness.

"I reckon Minty Sharpe's the same ez she allus wos, unless more so," returned Minty, with an honest egotism that carried so much conviction to the hearer as to condone its vanity. "But I kem yer to do a day's work, gals, and I allow to pitch in and do it, and not sit yer swoppin' compliments and keeping HIM from packin' his duds. Onless," she stopped, and looked around at the uneasy, unsympathetic circle with a faint tremulousness of lip that belied the brave black eyes above it, "onless I'm in yer way."

The two women sprang forward with a feminine bewildering excess of protestation; and Mainwaring, suddenly pierced through his outer selfish embarrassment to his more honest depths, stammered quickly—

"Look here, Miss Sharpe, if you think of running away again, after having come all the way here to make us share the knowledge of your good fortune and your better heart, by Jove! I'll go back with you."

But here the two women effusively hurried her away from the dangerous proximity of such sympathetic honesty, and a moment later Mainwaring heard her laughing voice, as of old, ringing in the kitchen. And then, as if unconsciously responding to the significant common sense that lay in her last allusion to him, he went to his room and grimly began his packing.

He did not again see Louise alone. At their informal luncheon the conversation turned upon the more absorbing topic of the Sharpes' discovery, its extent, and its probable

effect upon the fortunes of the locality. He noticed, abstractedly, that both Mrs. Bradley and her cousin showed a real or assumed scepticism of its value. This did not disturb him greatly, except for its intended check upon Minty's enthusiasm. He was more conscious, perhaps—with a faint touch of mortified vanity—that his own contemplated departure was of lesser importance than this local excitement. Yet in his growing conviction that all was over—if, indeed, it had ever begun—between himself and Louise, he was grateful to this natural diversion of incident which spared them both an interval of embarrassing commonplaces. And, with the suspicion of some indefinable insincerity—either of his own or Louise's—haunting him, Minty's frank heartiness and outspoken loyalty gave him a strange relief. It seemed to him as if the clear cool breath of the forest had entered with her homely garments, and the steadfast truth of Nature were incarnate in her shining eyes. How far this poetic fancy would have been consistent or even coexistent with any gleam of tenderness or self-forgetfulness in Louise's equally pretty orbs, I leave the satirical feminine reader to determine.

It was late when Bradley at last returned, bringing further and more complete corroboration of the truth of Sharpe's good fortune. Two experts had arrived, one from Pine Flat and another from the Summit, and upon this statement Richardson had offered to purchase an interest in the discovery that would at once enable the blacksmith to develop his mine. "I shouldn't wonder, Mainwaring," he added cheerfully, "if he'd put you into it, too, and make your eternal fortune."

"With larks falling from the skies all round you, it's a pity YOU couldn't get put into something," said Mrs. Bradley, straightening her pretty brows.

"I'm not a gold-miner, my dear," said Bradley, pleasantly.

"Nor a gold-finder," returned his wife, with a cruel little depression of her pink nostrils, "but you can work all night in that stupid mill and then," she added in a low voice, to escape Minty's attention, "spend the whole of the next day examining and following up a boy's discovery that his own relations had been too lazy and too ignorant to understand and profit by. I suppose that next you will be hunting up a site on the OTHER SIDE of the Canyon, where somebody else can put up a hotel and ruin your own prospects."

A sensitive shadow of pain quickly dimmed Bradley's glance—not the first or last time evidently, for it was gradually bringing out a background of sadness in his intelligent eyes. But the next moment he turned kindly to Mainwaring, and began to deplore the necessity of his early departure, which Richardson had already made known to him with practical and satisfying reasons.

"I hope you won't forget, my dear fellow, that your most really urgent business is to look after your health; and if, hereafter, you'll only remember the old Lookout enough to impress that fact upon you, I shall feel that any poor service I have rendered you has been amply repaid."

Mainwaring, notwithstanding that he winced slightly at this fateful echo of Louise's advice, returned the grasp of his friend's hand with an honest pressure equal to his own. He longed now only for the coming of Richardson, to complete his scheme of grateful benefaction to his host.

The banker came fortunately as the conversation began to flag; and Mrs. Bradley's half-coquettish ill-humor of a pretty woman, and Louise's abstracted indifference,

were becoming so noticeable as to even impress Minty into a thoughtful taciturnity. The graciousness of his reception by Mrs. Bradley somewhat restored his former ostentatious gallantry, and his self-satisfied, domineering manner had enough masculine power in it to favorably affect the three women, who, it must be confessed, were a little bored by the finer abstractions of Bradley and Mainwaring. After a few moments, Mainwaring rose and, with a significant glance at Richardson to remind him of his proposed conference with Bradley, turned to leave the room. He was obliged to pass Louise, who was sitting by the table. His attention was suddenly arrested by something in her hand with which she was listlessly playing. It was the stone which he had put on his letter to her.

As he had not been present when Bradley arrived, he did not know that this fateful object had been brought home by his host, who, after receiving it from Richelieu, had put it in his pocket to illustrate his story of the discovery. On the contrary, it seemed that Louise's careless exposure of his foolish stratagem was gratuitously and purposely cruel. Nevertheless, he stopped and looked at her.

"That's a queer stone you have there," he said, in a tone which she recognized as coldly and ostentatiously civil.

"Yes," she replied, without looking up; "it's the outcrop of that mine." She handed it to him as if to obviate any further remark. "I thought you had seen it before."

"The outcrop," he repeated dryly. "That is—it—it—it is the indication or sign of something important that's below it—isn't it?"

Louise shrugged her shoulders sceptically. “It don’t follow. It’s just as likely to cover rubbish, after you’ve taken the trouble to look.”

“Thanks,” he said, with measured gentleness, and passed quietly out of the room.

The moon had already risen when Bradley, with his brierwood pipe, preceded Richardson upon the veranda. The latter threw his large frame into Louise’s rocking-chair near the edge of the abyss; Bradley, with his own chair tilted against the side of the house after the national fashion, waited for him to speak. The absence of Mainwaring and the stimulus of Mrs. Bradley’s graciousness had given the banker a certain condescending familiarity, which Bradley received with amused and ironical tolerance that his twinkling eyes made partly visible in the darkness.

“One of the things I wanted to talk to you about, Bradley, was that old affair of the advance you asked for from the Bank. We did not quite see our way to it then, and, speaking as a business man, it isn’t really a matter of business now; but it has lately been put to me in a light that would make the doing of it possible—you understand? The fact of the matter is this: Sir Robert Mainwaring, the father of the young fellow you’ve got in your house, is one of our directors and largest shareholders, and I can tell you—if you don’t suspect it already—you’ve been lucky, Bradley—deucedly lucky—to have had him in your house and to have rendered him a service. He’s the heir to one of the largest landed estates in his country, one of the oldest county families, and will step into the title some day. But, ahem!” he coughed patronizingly, “you knew all that! No? Well, that charming wife of yours, at least, does; for she’s been talking about it. Gad, Bradley, it takes those women to find out anything of that kind, eh?”

The light in Bradley's eyes and his pipe went slowly out together.

"Then we'll say that affair of the advance is as good as settled. It's Sir Robert's wish, you understand, and this young fellow's wish—and if you'll come down to the Bank next week we'll arrange it for you; I think you'll admit they're doing the handsome to you and yours. And therefore," he lowered his voice confidentially, "you'll see, Bradley, that it will only be the honorable thing in you, you know, to look upon the affair as finished, and, in fact, to do all you can"—he drew his chair closer—"to—to—to drop this other foolishness."

"I don't think I quite understand you!" said Bradley, slowly.

"But your wife does, if you don't," returned Richardson, bluntly; "I mean this foolish flirtation between Louise Macy and Mainwaring, which is utterly preposterous. Why, man, it can't possibly come to anything, and it couldn't be allowed for a moment. Look at his position and hers. I should think, as a practical man, it would strike you—"

"Only one thing strikes me, Richardson," interrupted Bradley, in a singularly distinct whisper, rising, and moving nearer the speaker; "it is that you're sitting perilously near the edge of this veranda. For, by the living God, if you don't take yourself out of that chair and out of this house, I won't be answerable for the consequences!"

"Hold on there a minute, will you?" said Mainwaring's voice from the window.

Both men turned towards it. A long leg was protruding from Mainwaring's window; it was quickly

followed by the other leg and body of the occupant, and the next moment Mainwaring come towards the two men, with his hands in his pockets.

"Not so loud," he said, looking towards the house.

"Let that man go," said Bradley, in a repressed voice. "You and I, Mainwaring, can speak together afterwards."

"That man must stay until he hears what I have got to say," said Mainwaring, stepping between them. He was very white and grave in the moonlight, but very quiet; and he did not take his hands from his pockets. "I've listened to what he said because he came here on MY business, which was simply to offer to do you a service. That was all, Bradley, that I told him to do. This rot about what he expects of you in return is his own impertinence. If you'd punched his head when he began it, it would have been all right. But since he has begun it, before he goes I think he ought to hear me tell you that I have already OFFERED myself to Miss Macy, and she has REFUSED me! If she had given me the least encouragement, I should have told you before. Further, I want to say that, in spite of that man's insinuations, I firmly believe that no one is aware of the circumstance except Miss Macy and myself."

"I had no idea of intimating that anything had happened that was not highly honorable and creditable to you and the young lady," began Richardson hurriedly.

"I don't know that it was necessary for you to have any ideas on the subject at all," said Mainwaring, sternly; "nor that, having been shown how you have insulted this gentleman and myself, you need trouble us an instant longer with your company. You need not come back. I will manage my other affairs myself."

"Very well, Mr. Mainwaring—but—you may be sure that I shall certainly take the first opportunity to explain myself to Sir Robert," returned Richardson as, with an attempt at dignity, he strode away.

There was an interval of silence.

"Don't be too hard upon a fellow, Bradley," said Mainwaring as Bradley remained dark and motionless in the shadow. "It is a poor return I'm making you for your kindness, but I swear I never thought of anything like—like—this."

"Nor did I," said Bradley, bitterly.

"I know it, and that's what makes it so infernally bad for me. Forgive me, won't you? Think of me, old fellow, as the wretchedest ass you ever met, but not such a cad as this would make me!" As Mainwaring stepped out from the moonlight towards him with extended hand, Bradley grasped it warmly.

"Thanks—there—thanks, old fellow! And, Bradley—I say—don't say anything to your wife, for I don't think she knows it. And, Bradley—look here—I didn't like to be anything but plain before that fellow; but I don't mind telling YOU, now that it's all over, that I really think Louise—Miss Macy—didn't altogether understand me either."

With another shake of the hand they separated for the night. For a long time after Mainwaring had gone, Bradley remained gazing thoughtfully into the Great Canyon. He thought of the time when he had first come there, full of life and enthusiasm, making an ideal world of his pure and wholesome eyrie on the ledge. What else he thought will,

probably, never be known until the misunderstanding of honorable and chivalrous men by a charming and illogical sex shall incite the audacious pen of some more daring romancer.

When he returned to the house, he said kindly to his wife, “I have been thinking to-day about your hotel scheme, and I shall write to Sacramento to-night to accept that capitalist’s offer.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The sun was just rising. In two years of mutation and change it had seen the little cottage clinging like a swallow's nest to the rocky caves of a great Sierran canyon give way to a straggling, many-galleried hotel, and a dozen blackened chimneys rise above the barren tableland where once had stood the lonely forge. To that conservative orb of light and heat there must have been a peculiar satisfaction in looking down a few hours earlier upon the battlements and gables of Oldenhurst, whose base was deeply embedded in the matured foundations and settled traditions of an English county. For the rising sun had for ten centuries found Oldenhurst in its place, from the heavy stone terrace that covered the dead-and-forgotten wall, where a Roman sentinel had once paced, to the little grating in the cloistered quadrangle, where it had seen a Cistercian brother place the morning dole. It had daily welcomed the growth of this vast and picturesque excrescence of the times; it had smiled every morning upon this formidable yet quaint incrustation of power and custom, ignoring, as Oldenhurst itself had ignored, the generations who possessed it, the men who built it, the men who carried it with fire and sword, the men who had lied and cringed for it, the King who had given it to a favorite, the few brave hearts who had died for it in exile, and the one or two who had bought and paid for it. For Oldenhurst had absorbed all these and more until it had become a story of the past, incarnate in stone, greenwood, and flower; it had even drained the life-blood from adjacent hamlets, repaying them with tumuli growths like its own, in the shape of purposeless lodges, quaintly incompetent hospitals and schools, and churches where the inestimable blessing and knowledge of its gospel were taught and fostered. Nor had it dealt more kindly with the gentry within

its walls, sending some to the scaffold, pillorying others in infamous office, reducing a few to poverty, and halting its later guests with gout and paralysis. It had given them in exchange the dubious immortality of a portrait gallery, from which they stared with stony and equal resignation; it had preserved their useless armor and accoutrements; it had set up their marble effigies in churches or laid them in cross-legged attitudes to trip up the unwary, until in death, as in life, they got between the congregation and the Truth that was taught there. It had allowed an Oldenhurst crusader, with a broken nose like a pugilist, on the strength of his having been twice to the Holy Land, to hide the beautifully illuminated Word from the lowlier worshipper on the humbler benches; it had sent an iconoclastic Bishop of the Reformation to a nearer minster to ostentatiously occupy the place of the consecrated image he had overthrown. Small wonder that crowding the Oldenhurst retainers gradually into smaller space, with occasional Sabbath glimpses of the living rulers of Oldenhurst already in railed-off exaltation, it had forced them to accept Oldenhurst as a synonym of eternity, and left the knowledge of a higher Power to what time they should be turned out to their longer sleep under the tender grass of the beautiful outer churchyard.

And even so, while every stone of the pile of Oldenhurst and every tree in its leafy park might have been eloquent with the story of vanity, selfishness, and unequal justice, it had been left to the infinite mercy of Nature to seal their lips with a spell of beauty that left mankind equally dumb; earth, air, and moisture had entered into a gentle conspiracy to soften, mellow, and clothe its external blemishes of breach and accident, its irregular design, its additions, accretions, ruins, and lapses with a harmonious charm of outline and color; poets, romancers, and historians had equally conspired to illuminate the dark passages and uglier inconsistencies of its interior life with the glamour of

their own fancy. The fragment of menacing keep, with its choked oubliettes, became a bower of tender ivy; the grim story of its crimes, properly edited by a contemporary bard of the family, passed into a charming ballad. Even the superstitious darkness of its religious house had escaped through fallen roof and shattered wall, leaving only the foliated and sun-pierced screen of front, with its rose-window and pinnacle of cross behind. Pilgrims from all lands had come to see it; fierce Republicans had crossed the seas to gaze at its mediaeval outlines, and copy them in wood and stucco on their younger soil. Politicians had equally pointed to it as a convincing evidence of their own principles and in refutation of each other; and it had survived both. For it was this belief in its own perpetuity that was its strength and weakness. And that belief was never stronger than on this bright August morning, when it was on the verge of dissolution. A telegram brought to Sir Robert Mainwaring had even then as completely shattered and disintegrated Oldenhurst, in all it was and all it meant, as if the brown-paper envelope had been itself charged with the electric fluid.

Sir Robert Mainwaring, whose family had for three centuries possessed Oldenhurst, had received the news of his financial ruin; and the vast pile which had survived the repeated invasion of superstition, force, intrigue, and even progress, had succumbed to a foe its founders and proprietors had loftily ignored and left to Jews and traders. The acquisition of money, except by despoilment, gift, royal favor, or inheritance, had been unknown at Oldenhurst. The present degenerate custodian of its fortunes, staggering under the weight of its sentimental mortmain already alluded to, had speculated in order to keep up its material strength, that was gradually shrinking through impoverished land and the ruined trade it had despised. He had invested largely in California mines, and was the chief shareholder in a San

Francisco Bank. But the mines had proved worthless, the Bank had that morning suspended payment, owing to the failure of a large land and timber company on the Sierras which it had imprudently "carried." The spark which had demolished Oldenhurst had been fired from the new telegraph-station in the hotel above the great Sierran canyon.

There was a large house-party at Oldenhurst that morning. But it had been a part of the history of the Mainwarings to accept defeat gallantly and as became their blood. Sir Percival—the second gentleman on the left as you entered the library—unhorsed, dying on a distant moor, with a handful of followers, abandoned by a charming Prince and a miserable cause, was scarcely a greater hero than this ruined but undaunted gentleman of eighty, entering the breakfast-room a few hours later as jauntily as his gout would permit, and conscientiously dispensing the hospitalities of his crumbling house. When he had arranged a few pleasure parties for the day and himself thoughtfully anticipated the different tastes of his guests, he turned to Lady Mainwaring.

"Don't forget that somebody ought to go to the station to meet the Bradleys. Frank writes from Saint Moritz that they are due here to-day."

Lady Mainwaring glanced quickly at her husband, and said sotto voce, "Do you think they'll care to come NOW? They probably have heard all about it."

"Not how it affects me," returned Sir Robert, in the same tone; "and as they might think that because Frank was with them on that California mountain we would believe it had something to do with Richardson involving the Bank in that wretched company, we must really INSIST upon their coming."

"Bradley!" echoed the Hononorable Captain FitzHarry, overhearing the name during a late forage on the sideboard, "Bradley!—there was an awfully pretty American at Biarritz, travelling with a cousin, I think—a Miss Mason or Macy. Those sort of people, you know, who have a companion as pretty as themselves; bring you down with the other barrel if one misses—eh? Very clever, both of them, and hardly any accent."

"Mr. Bradley was a very dear friend of Frank's, and most kind to him," said Lady Mainwaring, gravely.

"Didn't know there WAS a Mr. Bradley, really. He didn't come to the fore, then," said the unabashed Captain. "Deuced hard to follow up those American husbands!"

"And their wives wouldn't thank you, if you did," said Lady Griselda Armiger, with a sweet smile.

"If it is the Mrs. Bradley I mean," said Lady Canterbridge from the lower end of the table, looking up from her letter, "who looks a little like Mrs. Summertree, and has a pretty cousin with her who has very good frocks, I'm afraid you won't be able to get her down here. She's booked with engagements for the next six weeks. She and her cousin made all the running at Grigsby Royal, and she has quite deposed that other American beauty in Northforeland's good graces. She regularly affiche'd him, and it is piteous to see him follow her about. No, my dear; I don't believe they'll come to any one of less rank than a Marquis. If they did, I'm sure Canterbridge would have had them at Buckenthorpe already."

"I wonder if there was ever anything in Frank's admiration of this Miss Macy?" said Lady Mainwaring a few moments later, lingering beside her husband in his study.

"I really don't know," said Sir Robert, abstractedly: "his letters were filled with her praises, and Richardson thought—"

"Pray don't mention that man's name again," said Lady Mainwaring, with the first indication of feeling she had shown. "I shouldn't trust him."

"But why do you ask?" returned her husband.

Lady Mainwaring was silent for a moment. "She is very rich, I believe," she said slowly. "At least, Frank writes that some neighbors of theirs whom he met in the Engadine told him they had sold the site of that absurd cottage where he was ill for some extravagant sum."

"My dear Geraldine," said the old man, affectionately, taking his wife's hand in his own, that now for the first time trembled, "if you have any hope based upon what you are thinking of now, let it be the last and least. You forget that Paget told us that with the best care he could scarcely ensure Frank's return to perfect health. Even if God in his mercy spared him long enough to take my place, what girl would be willing to tie herself to a man doomed to sickness and poverty? Hardly the one you speak of, my dear."

Lady Canterbridge proved a true prophet. Mrs. Bradley and Miss Macy did not come, regretfully alleging a previous engagement made on the continent with the Duke of Northforeland and the Marquis of Dungeness; but the unexpected and apocryphal husband DID arrive. "I myself have not seen my wife and cousin since I returned from my visit to your son in Switzerland. I am glad they were able to amuse themselves without waiting for me at a London hotel, though I should have preferred to have met them here." Sir

Robert and Lady Mainwaring were courteous but slightly embarrassed. Lady Canterbridge, who had come to the station in bored curiosity, raised her clear blue eyes to his. He did not look like a fool, a complaisant or fashionably-cynical husband—this well-dressed, well-mannered, but quietly and sympathetically observant man. Did he really care for his selfish wife? was it perfect trust or some absurd Transatlantic custom? She did not understand him. It wearied her and she turned her eyes indifferently away. Bradley, a little irritated, he knew not why, at the scrutiny of this tall, handsome, gentlemanly-looking woman, who, however, in spite of her broad shoulders and narrow hips possessed a refined muliebrity superior to mere womanliness of outline, turned slightly towards Sir Robert. "Lady Canterbridge, Frank's cousin," explained Sir Robert, hesitatingly, as if conscious of some vague awkwardness. Bradley and Lady Canterbridge both bowed—possibly the latter's salutation was the most masculine—and Bradley, eventually forgetting her presence, plunged into an earnest, sympathetic, and intelligent account of the condition in which he found the invalid at Saint Moritz. The old man at first listened with an almost perfunctory courtesy and a hesitating reserve; but as Bradley was lapsing into equal reserve and they drove up to the gates of the quadrangle, he unexpectedly warmed with a word or two of serious welcome. Looking up with a half-unconscious smile, Bradley met Lady Canterbridge's examining eyes.

The next morning, finding an opportunity to be alone with him, Bradley, with a tactful mingling of sympathy and directness informed his host that he was cognizant of the disaster that had overtaken the Bank, and delicately begged him to accept any service he could render him. "Pardon me," he said, "if I speak as plainly to you as I would to your son: my friendship for him justifies an equal frankness to any one he loves; but I should not intrude upon your confidence if I

did not believe that my knowledge and assistance might be of benefit to you. Although I did not sell my lands to Richardson or approve of his methods," he continued, "I fear it was some suggestion of mine that eventually induced him to form the larger and more disastrous scheme that ruined the Bank. So you see," he added lightly, "I claim a right to offer you my services." Touched by Bradley's sincerity and discreet intelligence, Sir Robert was equally frank. During the recital of his Californian investments—a chronicle of almost fatuous speculation and imbecile enterprise—Bradley was profoundly moved at the naive ignorance of business and hopeless ingenuousness of this old habitue of a cynical world and an intriguing and insincere society, to whom no scheme had been too wild for acceptance. As Bradley listened with a half-saddened smile to the grave visions of this aged enthusiast, he remembered the son's unsophisticated simplicity: what he had considered as the "boyishness" of immaturity was the taint of the utterly unpractical Mainwaring blood. It was upon this blood, and others like it, that Oldenhurst had for centuries waxed and fattened.

Bradley was true to his promise of assistance, and with the aid of two or three of his brother-millionaires, whose knowledge of the resources of the locality was no less powerful and convincing than the security of their actual wealth, managed to stay the immediate action of the catastrophe until the affairs of the Sierran Land and Timber Company could be examined and some plan of reconstruction arranged.

During this interval of five months, in which the credit of Sir Robert Mainwaring was preserved with the secret of his disaster, Bradley was a frequent and welcome visitor to Oldenhurst. Apart from his strange and chivalrous friendship for the Mainwarings—which was as

incomprehensible to Sir Robert as Sir Robert's equally eccentric and Quixotic speculations had been to Bradley—he began to feel a singular and weird fascination for the place. A patient martyr in the vast London house he had taken for his wife and cousin's amusement, he loved to escape the loneliness of its autumn solitude or the occasional greater loneliness of his wife's social triumphs. The handsome, thoughtful man who sometimes appeared at the foot of his wife's table or melted away like a well-bred ghost in the hollow emptiness of her brilliant receptions, piqued the languid curiosity of a few. A distinguished personage, known for his tactful observance of convenances that others forgot, had made a point of challenging this gentlemanly apparition, and had followed it up with courteous civilities, which led to exchange of much respect but no increase of acquaintance. He had even spent a week at Buckenthorpe, with Canterbridge in the coverts and Lady Canterbridge in the music-room and library. He had returned more thoughtful, and for some time after was more frequent in his appearances at home, and more earnest in his renewed efforts to induce his wife to return to America with him.

"You'll never be happy anywhere but in California, among those common people," she replied; "and while I was willing to share your poverty THERE," she added dryly, "I prefer to share your wealth among civilized ladies and gentlemen. Besides," she continued, "we must consider Louise. She is as good as engaged to Lord Dunshunner, and I do not intend that you shall make a mess of her affairs here as you did in California."

It was the first time he had heard of Lord Dunshunner's proposals; it was the first allusion she had ever made to Louise and Mainwaring.

Meantime, the autumn leaves had fallen silently over the broad terraces of Oldenhurst with little changes to the fortunes of the great house itself. The Christmas house-party included Lady Canterbridge, whose husband was still detained at Homburg in company with Dunshunner; and Bradley, whose wife and cousin lingered on the continent. He was slightly embarrassed when Lady Canterbridge turned to him one afternoon as they were returning from the lake and congratulated him abruptly upon Louise's engagement.

"Perhaps you don't care to be congratulated," she said, as he did not immediately respond, "and you had as little to do with it as with that other? It is a woman's function."

"What other?" echoed Bradley.

Lady Canterbridge slightly turned her handsome head towards him as she walked unbendingly at his side. "Tell me how you manage to keep your absolute simplicity so fresh. Do you suppose it wasn't known at Oldenhurst that Frank had quite compromised himself with Miss Macy over there?"

"It certainly was not known 'over there,'" said Bradley, curtly.

"Don't be angry with me."

Such an appeal from the tall, indifferent woman at his side, so confidently superior to criticism, and uttered in a low tone, made him smile, albeit uneasily.

"I only meant to congratulate you," she continued carelessly. "Dunshunner is not a bad sort of fellow, and will

come into a good property some day. And then, society is so made up of caprice, just now, that it is well for your wife's cousin to make the most of her opportunities while they last. She is very popular now; but next season—" Seeing that Bradley remained silent, she did not finish the sentence, but said with her usual abruptness, "Do you know a Miss Araminta Eulalie Sharpe?"

Bradley started. Could any one recognize honest Minty in the hopeless vulgarity which this fine lady had managed to carelessly import into her name? His eye kindled.

"She is an old friend of mine, Lady Canterbridge."

"How fortunate! Then I can please you by giving you good news of her. She is the coming sensation. They say she is very rich, but quite one of the people, you know: in fact, she makes no scruples of telling you her father was a blacksmith, I think, and takes the dear old man with her everywhere. FitzHarry raves about her, and says her naivete is something too delicious. She is regularly in with some of the best people already. Lady Dungeness has taken her up, and Northforeland is only waiting for your cousin's engagement to be able to go over decently. Shall I ask her to Buckenthorpe?—come, now, as an apology for my rudeness to your cousin?" She was very womanly now in spite of her high collar, her straight back, and her tightly-fitting jacket, as she stood there smiling. Suddenly, her smile faded; she drew her breath in quickly.

She had caught a glimpse of his usually thoughtful face and eyes, now illuminated with some pleasant memory.

"Thank you," he said smilingly, yet with a certain hesitation, as he thought of The Lookout and Araminta

Eulalie Sharpe, and tried to reconcile them with the lady before him. “I should like it very much.”

“Then you have known Miss Sharpe a long time?” continued Lady Canterbridge as they walked on.

“While we were at The Lookout she was our nearest neighbor.”

“And I suppose your wife will consider it quite proper for you to see her again at my house?” said Lady Canterbridge, with a return of conventional levity.

“Oh! quite,” said Bradley.

They had reached the low Norman-arched side-entrance to the quadrangle. As Bradley swung open the bolt-studded oaken door to let her pass, she said carelessly—

“Then you are not coming in now?”

“No; I shall walk a little longer.”

“And I am quite forgiven?”

“I am thanking you very much,” he said, smiling directly into her blue eyes. She lowered them, and vanished into the darkness of the passage.

The news of Minty’s success was further corroborated by Sir Robert, who later that evening called Bradley into the study. “Frank has been writing from Nice that he has renewed his acquaintance with some old Californian friends of yours—a Mr. and Miss Sharpe. Lady Canterbridge says that they are well known in London to some of our friends, but I would like to ask you something

about them. Lady Mainwaring was on the point of inviting them here when I received a letter from Mr. Sharpe asking for a BUSINESS interview. Pray who is this Sharpe?"

"You say he writes for a BUSINESS interview?" asked Bradley.

"Yes."

Bradley hesitated for a moment and then said quietly, "Perhaps, then, I am justified in a breach of confidence to him, in order to answer your question. He is the man who has assumed all the liabilities of the Sierran Land and Timber Company to enable the Bank to resume payment. But he did it on the condition that you were never to know it. For the rest, he was a blacksmith who made a fortune, as Lady Canterbridge will tell you."

"How very odd—how kind, I mean. I should like to have been civil to him on Frank's account alone."

"I should see him on business and be civil to him afterwards." Sir Robert received the American's levity with his usual seriousness.

"No, they must come here for Christmas. His daughter is—?"

"Araminta Eulalie Sharpe," said Bradley, in defiant memory of Lady Canterbridge.

Sir Robert winced audibly. "I shall rely on you, my dear boy, to help me make it pleasant for them," he said.

Christmas came, but not Minty. It drew a large contingent from Oldenhurst to the quaint old church, who

came to view the green-wreathed monuments, and walls spotted with crimson berries, as if with the blood of former Oldenhurst warriors, and to impress the wondering villagers with the ineffable goodness and bounty of the Creator towards the Lords of Oldenhurst and their friends. Sir Robert, a little gouty, kept the house, and Bradley, somewhat uneasy at the Sharpes' absence, but more distrait with other thoughts, wandered listlessly in the long library. At the lower angle it was embayed into the octagon space of a former tower, which was furnished as a quaint recess for writing or study, pierced through its enormous walls with a lance-shaped window, hidden by heavy curtains. He was gazing abstractedly at the melancholy eyes of Sir Percival, looking down from the dark panel opposite, when he heard the crisp rustle of a skirt. Lady Canterbridge tightly and stiffly buttoned in black from her long narrow boots to her slim, white-collared neck, stood beside him with a prayer-book in her ungloved hand. Bradley colored quickly; the penetrating incense of the Christmas boughs and branches that decked the walls and ceilings, mingled with some indefinable intoxicating aura from the woman at his side, confused his senses. He seemed to be losing himself in some forgotten past coeval with the long, quaintly-lighted room, the rich hangings, and the painted ancestor of this handsome woman. He recovered himself with an effort, and said,

"You are going to church?"

"I may meet them coming home; it's all the same. You like HIM?" she said abruptly, pointing to the portrait. "I thought you did not care for that sort of man over there."

"A man like that must have felt the impotence of his sacrifice before he died, and that condoned everything," said Bradley, thoughtfully.

"Then you don't think him a fool? Bob says it was a fair bargain for a title and an office, and that by dying he escaped trial and the confiscation of what he had."

Bradley did not reply.

"I am disturbing your illusions again. Yet I rather like them. I think you are quite capable of a sacrifice—perhaps you know what it is already."

He felt that she was looking at him; he felt equally that he could not respond with a commonplace. He was silent.

"I have offended you again, Mr. Bradley," she said. "Please be Christian, and pardon me. You know this is a season of peace and goodwill." She raised her blue eyes at the same moment to the Christmas decorations on the ceiling. They were standing before the parted drapery of the lance window. Midway between the arched curtains hung a spray of mistletoe—the conceit of a mischievous housemaid. Their eyes met it simultaneously.

Bradley had Lady Canterbridge's slim, white hand in his own. The next moment voices were heard in the passage, and the door nearly opposite to them opened deliberately. The idea of their apparent seclusion and half compromising attitude flashed through the minds of both at the same time. Lady Canterbridge stepped quickly backward, drawing Bradley with her, into the embrasure of the window; the folds of the curtain swung together and concealed them from view.

The door had been opened by the footman, ushering in a broad-shouldered man, who was carrying a travelling-bag and an umbrella in his hand. Dropping into an arm-chair

before the curtain, he waved away the footman, who, even now, mechanically repeated a previously vain attempt to relieve the stranger of his luggage.

"You leave that 'ere grip sack where it is, young man, and tell Sir Robert Mainwaring that Mr. Demander Sharpe, of Californy, wishes to see him—on business—on BUSINESS, do ye' hear? You hang onter that sentence—on BUSINESS! it's about ez much ez you kin carry, I reckon, and leave that grip sack alone."

From behind the curtain Bradley made a sudden movement to go forward; but Lady Canterbridge—now quite pale but collected—restrained him with a warning movement of her hand. Sir Robert's stick and halting step were next heard along the passage, and he entered the room. His simple and courteous greeting of the stranger was instantly followed by a renewed attack upon the "grip sack," and a renewed defence of it by the stranger.

"No, Sir Robert," said the voice argumentatively, "this yer's a BUSINESS interview, and until it's over—if YOU please—we'll remain ez we air. I'm Demander Sharpe, of Californy, and I and my darter, Minty, oncet had the pleasure of knowing your boy over thar, and of meeting him agin the other day at Nice."

"I think," said Sir Robert's voice gently, "that these are not the only claims you have upon me. I have only a day or two ago heard from Mr. Bradley that I owe to your generous hands and your disinterested liberality the saving of my California fortune."

There was the momentary sound of a pushed-back chair, a stamping of feet, and then Mr. Sharpe's voice rose

high with the blacksmith's old querulous aggrieved utterance.

"So it's that finikin', conceited Bradley agin—that's giv' me away! Ef that man's all-fired belief in his being the Angel Gabriel and Dan'l Webster rolled inter one don't beat anythin'! I suppose that high-flyin' jay-bird kalkilated to put you and me and my gal and yer boy inter harness for his four hoss chariot and he sittin' kam on the box drivin' us! Why don't he tend to his own business, and look arter his own concerns—instead o' leaving Jinny Bradley and Loo Macy dependent on Kings and Queens and titled folks gen'rally, and he, Jim Bradley, philanderin' with another man's wife—while that thar man is hard at work tryin' to make a honest livin' fer his wife, buckin' agin faro an' the tiger gen'rally at Monaco! Eh? And that man a-inter-meddlin' with me! Ef," continued the voice, dropped to a tone of hopeless moral conviction, "ef there's a man I mor'aly despise—it's that finikin' Jim Bradley."

"You quite misunderstand me, my dear sir," said Sir Robert's hurried voice; "he told me you had pledged him to secrecy, and he only revealed it to explain why you wished to see me."

There was a grunt of half-placated wrath from Sharpe, and then the voice resumed, but more deliberately, "Well, to come back to business: you've got a boy, Francis, and I've got a darter, Araminty. They've sorter taken a shine to each other and they want to get married. Mind yer—wait a moment!—it wasn't allus so. No, sir; when my gal Araminty first seed your boy in Californy she was poor, and she didn't kalkilate to get inter anybody's family unbeknownst or on sufferance. Then she got rich and you got poor; and then—hold on a minit!—she allows, does my girl, that there ain't any nearer chance o' their making a match

than they were afore, for she isn't goin' to hev it said that she married your son fur the chance of some day becomin' Lady Mainwaring."

"One moment, Mr. Sharpe," said the voice of the Baronet, gravely: "I am both flattered and pained by what I believe to be the kindly object of your visit. Indeed, I may say I have gathered a suspicion of what might be the sequel of this most unhappy acquaintance of my son and your daughter; but I cannot believe that he has kept you in ignorance of his unfortunate prospects and his still more unfortunate state of health."

"When I told ye to hold on a minit," continued the blacksmith's voice, with a touch of querulousness in its accent, "that was jist wot I was comin' to. I knowed part of it from my own pocket, she knowed the rest of it from his lip and the doctors she interviewed. And then she says to me—sez my girl Minty—Pop,' she sez, 'he's got nothing to live for now but his title, and that he never may live to get, so that I think ye kin jist go, Pop, and fairly and squarely, as a honest man, ask his father to let me hev him.' Them's my darter's own words, Sir Robert, and when I tell yer that she's got a million o' dollars to back them, ye'll know she means business, every time."

"Did Francis know that you were coming here?"

"Bless ye, no! he don't know that she would have him. Ef it kem to that, he ain't even asked her! She wouldn't let him until she was sure of YOU."

"Then you mean to say there is no engagement?"

"In course not. I reckoned to do the square thing first with ye."

The halting step of the Baronet crossing the room was heard distinctly. He had stopped beside Sharpe. "My dear Mr. Sharpe," he said, in a troubled voice, "I cannot permit this sacrifice. It is too—too great!"

"Then," said Sharpe' s voice querulously, "I'm afraid we must do without your permission. I didn't reckon to find a sort o' British Jim Bradley in you. If YOU can't permit my darter to sacrifice herself by marryin' your son, I can't permit her to sacrifice her love and him by NOT marryin' him. So I reckon this yer interview is over."

"I am afraid we are both old fools, Mr. Sharpe; but—we will talk this over with Lady Mainwaring. Come—" There was evidently a slight struggle near the chair over some inanimate object. But the next moment the Baronet's voice rose, persuasively, "Really, I must insist upon relieving you of your bag and umbrella."

"Well, if you'll let me telegraph 'yes' to Minty, I don't care if yer do."

When the room was quiet again, Lady Canterbridge and James Bradley silently slipped from the curtain, and, without a word, separated at the door.

There was a merry Christmas at Oldenhurst and at Nice. But whether Minty's loving sacrifice was accepted or not, or whether she ever reigned as Lady Mainwaring, or lived an untitled widow, I cannot say. But as Oldenhurst still exists in all its pride and power, it is presumed that the peril that threatened its fortunes was averted, and that if another heroine was not found worthy of a frame in its picture-gallery, at least it had been sustained as of old by devotion and renunciation.

Peter Schroeder

When we heard that Peter Schroeder had "struck it rich," or, to paraphrase the local idiom, had that morning taken fifty thousand dollars from a suddenly developed "pocket" in his claim, only one expression, that of sincere congratulation, went up from Spanish Gulch. It would, perhaps, be wrong to say that this feeling arose from any instinctive perception of his fitness for good fortune, or even of his practical deserts. Spanish Gulch was seldom moved by such delicate ethics. But he had always been a lovable figure in its rude life. His quaint, serious good nature; his touching belief in ourselves as representative Americans, and the legitimate results of those free institutions he admired so in theory; his innocent adoption of our slang, and often of our vices, which made even an oath or vulgarism from his lips as harmless and irresponsible as from a child's all this gave "Dutch Pete," as he loved to be called, a certain place in our affections which no stroke of enviable good fortune could imperil. More than this, I think we took a great satisfaction in believing that in some way we were part of that Providence which had so blessed him. A few, I think, intimated as much.

"I'm so glad I allus told the old man to stick to that claim," said one, with an air of wearied well-doing; "I allus kept him up to the rack, and I reckon he now sees the benefit of my four years experience in these parts." "Only yesterday," said another, "I lent him a pick, seeing his was rather shaky, and they say thar's luck in old tools in green hands."

A majority of the camp called upon him at once. The result of their visit satisfied them. Unchanged, unaltered by good fortune, Peter Schroeder welcomed them in his old simple way, and in that old simple, blundering slang which, to the delight of the camp, he was pleased to accept as idiomatic American speech. He stood beside a table covered with a vivid red blanket, which displayed from this vantage a huge fragment of decomposed quartz, dazzlingly streaked and honeycombed with the precious metal. Above it hung a placard the gift of a native humorist bearing the legend, "Welcome, little stranger."

"Come in, poys, and tondt pe pashful. Sits doun from de front! De elefant now goes round mit you. De pand pegins to play. Dare she ish look at it, shentlemans! You dakes your money and you bays your schoice. Ha! ha! Vot for a strike ist dot? Eh? How high is dot, poys?"

When the laugh at his characteristic version of a slang phrase in the last sentence had subsided, some one asked him what he intended to do, now that he was a rich man.

"Well, poys, dot's shoost it. I goes to Washington first. I looks round and maype I finds Dick Unterwoots, and I goes mit him mit de army and I fights a little for de Union." The Dick Underwood here alluded to had recently exchanged his long-handled Californian shovel for the sword, and was now, in this last year of the Civil War, a colonel.

"But you'll get killed, Pete, and what's the good of your money then?"

"So! I sends it first to my fader and moder in Shermany."

"But it's none of your funeral, Pete. You're only a blank Dutchman."

"Eh a Dootchman! Veil, vot's Sigel, eh? Vot's Rosenkrans, eh? Vot's Heintzelmann? Vot's Carl Schurz, eh?"

In vain did Spanish Gulch point out the egregious folly of a rich alien engaging in a domestic quarrel; Peter was firm in his determination. And Spanish Gulch, having by experience learned to respect his dull obstinacy in those matters of his private conscience which did not directly interfere with his duties to the camp, yielded the point gracefully, and gave him in one farewell debauch their half-maledictory valediction.

Peter Schroeder was as good as his word. Within three weeks he entered the Army of the Potomac, and served until the Richmond surrender. It is to be recorded that although faithful, loyal, honest, and brave, only a sergeant's chevron marked his advancement. Perhaps he was not ambitious; possibly old habits of military servitude kept him out of the political manoeuvrings of these citizen bayonets; perhaps he had no personal friends at Washington; perhaps he was a little dull. But it is to be also recorded that his dogged devotion to his theories of the great Republican principles for which he was contending never faltered amidst the free and outspoken criticism of superiors and general grumbling of these citizen camps. Malcontents feared him, even good patriots quite misunderstood his sentimental convictions; he was a confusion to his comrades as often as he was to the enemy. I close his brief military record with a story still extant, but until now imperfect in its details. A gallant Confederate officer, and a descendant of the Virginian founders of the Republic, found himself, after the shattered onset of a brave but unsuccessful charge, lying

wounded and crippled before the earthwork of a battery, deserted by his men and confronted only by the guns of his adversary, and the flag his ancestors had created flaunting in his face!

"I looked up, gentlemen," he said, "and the sergeant of the Yankee battery saw me, and at the risk of his life crept down and dragged me into the works. He was a German; so I felt thankful that I wasn't under obligations to a Yankee. But what did he do! Why, gentlemen, this d——d Dutchman who couldn't speak the language plainly who hadn't, I solemnly believe, been a fortnight in America, he looks down at me, and, pointing to my crippled leg, says, Aha! dot's wot you gets for fightin against de old flag ! If a mule had kicked me I couldn't have felt meaner." The mule that had kicked this gallant gentleman was Peter Schroeder. But it was a Parthian kick. A few days later he was honorably dis charged, drew his back-pay and bounty, and sailed for Germany.

Fifteen years had elapsed. Peter Schroeder, much stouter and quite bald, sat in that inevitable latticed summer-house which is one of the sacred outdoor Penates of every Rhenish householder, and seriously sipped his Moselle wine. He was not thinking that his curiously wrought iron garden-chair was not as comfortable as an American rocker or armchair, he was long past that grumbling; he was not thinking the table too high and insecure for his feet to rest on, for Frau Schroeder had in the first year of his married life interdicted that American attitude of reflection and bibulous enjoyment. He was not looking at the inevitable little fountain, whose stone basin suggested a hasty provision against a leak from some invisible water-cask, nor at the inevitable little grotto, a child's playground of bright shells and pebbles artistically arranged by a grown-up player. None of these, nor even the statue of Germania looking like

Lorelei with a helmet, nor of Lorelei looking like Germania with a harp, nor even of a bust of the good old Emperor, looking always like his own august self, and regarding reprehensible mythology with fatherly forbearance, attracted Peter's attention. His serious blue eyes were filmy and abstracted; the pinky red of his round cheeks was a little deeper for that digestive glow known in the rich vernacular of his analytical nation as "Essfieber;" his respiration was slightly stertorous, and his pipe had gone out idly in his hand; Peter was dreaming.

Of the Past. Of the fifteen long years that had flown since he arrived, almost a stranger, in his own land; of his reception by his few old friends, a reception given to a new Peter whom they had evidently never known; of the joy of his old parents, a joy tempered with a kind of awe at his fortune and his novel ideas and heresies; of the matchmaking of his parents that ended in his betrothal to the well-born but slightly dowered Fraulein Von Hummel; of the marriage that smoothed those parents dying pillow, but left Peter's bridal couch lonelier than before; of his relegation to a new life to which he was stranger than ever.

Of the monotony of those days, of the monotony of all outward signs and symbols, band-playing, concert-singing, picture-viewing, troops parading night and morning before his window, of festivals, of fetes, of celebrations of all conceivable things to celebrate, all alike uniform, theatrical, and unreal, and yet, too, all established with precedent, and often reinforced with the serene presence of hereditary greatness. Of the monotony of his home life; of the monotony of five meals a day seriously considered and dutifully performed; of betrothals and love-making under the parental and public eye; of sentimental hand shakings and speech-makings to bride and bridegroom, arid the pointed obtrusion of domestic and personal affairs before the world,

as shown in the sentimental public advertisement of such conventionalities as births, deaths, and marriages.

Of the great war with France, which forever estopped his voluble reminiscences of his former transatlantic military career, by leaving him no longer an authority in slaughter and gunpowder, rekindled his old ardor for Das Vaterland, dragged him into its seething vortex, and left him at last stranded in his own town, with more parading, more rattle of drums, more celebrations to celebrate, more precedents, and, in fact, more settled convictions to combat than ever.

A clap of thunder recalled his wandering senses. Looking up, he saw above the lindens that stood in his garden a blue-black velvety cloud. It was the natural climax of a sultry summer's day; but Peter's thoughts were so dark that it seemed to be as ominous as the cloud that rose above the Arabian fisherman's jar when the awful seal of Solomon was broken. In such a mood Faust received a visit from Mephistopheles, and at this moment, at his elbow, a servant was presenting a card.

"Mr. John Folinsbee," read Peter aloud.

"A gentleman and four ladies," explained the servant.

Peter's mental processes were slowly evolving something.

"Strangers," suggested the maiden; "I think Americans."

The magical note of nationality sent the good-hearted Peter into his drawing-room, pleased, yet embarrassed as a schoolgirl.

Certainly no weakness of this kind was visible in his guests. Three of them, young ladies, were scattered about the room ; one at the piano, one at the centre table, looking over a book of photographs, and another beside the jardiniere, from which she had already extracted the rose bud suited to her complexion. On the sofa another, and possibly the elder, if a certain air of lassitude and ennui were a criterion of age, had gracefully composed herself. All were pretty, all were graceful, all were exceedingly well-dressed, and all were, to Peter's half pleasure, half embarrassment, very much at home!

They acknowledged his smile of welcome by an inquiring glance towards a gentleman who at that moment was engaged in examining a barometer at the window. He disengaged himself from his meteorological inquest, came forward with easy good-humor, and held out his hand. He was a tall, well-formed man, of Peter's own age, but looked, like the rest of his party, as if he were a thousand years younger.

"Peter Schroeder, I reckon?"

Peter's face beamed with delight as he shook the out stretched hand warmly.

"Ja! Dot's schoost it Peter Schroeder."

"You don't remember me?" continued the stranger, with a slight smile. "I never saw you but once, and that was at Spanish Gulch, the day you made that strike! I came over from Dry Creek with the boys, and went up to your cabin. How are you, old man? You're looking as if your grub agreed with you."

Peter, still shaking his hand, said in his half-forgotten English, that he knew him "from de voorst!"

"When I left California, a month ago, I promised the boys I'd hunt you up," continued the stranger. "I stopped at Cologne yesterday. Heard you were here. Came up on a sort of pasear with the ladies. Let me introduce them. Rosey Tibbets, Grace Tibbets, Minnie Tibbets, Mrs. Johnson."

Peter, always a bashful man, under this presentation of bright eyes and Parisian toilettes could only stammer out his regrets that the Frau Schroeder was that day absent visiting a soul-friend and was not there to welcome them.

Mrs. Johnson, looking up from the sofa, would have so liked to see her; Miss Rosey, looking up from the photograph-book, would have so liked to see her; Miss Grace, at the piano, and Miss Minnie, with the delicate petals of a rose against her pink nostrils, would have both so liked to see her. Indeed, the only one present who might not have participated in this chorus was poor Peter himself, who, despite his previous polite assurance, felt a vague relief at his wife's absence. Conscious of this weakness, he insisted the more upon plying them with various refreshments, and "showing them the house.

Several American improvements which he had introduced, to the wonder and distrust of his neighbors, failed, however, to impress his visitors. The ladies regarded them languidly:

"You ve got the old-fashioned kind. We use only the self-acting patent now," they said. "You're behind the age, old man," was Folinsbee's less courteous comment. Peter, a trifle mortified, nevertheless kept up his unfailing good-

humor, and finally stopped before the door of a small chamber with a confident air.

"I shows you somedings now dot you can t imbrove on ha! Somedings vot you and us fellus knows. Dot is mine own brivate abartment. Vot for Americans is dot!"

As he spoke he flung open the door, and disclosed a small room, with an American flag festooned over the window. On one side of the wall hung a portrait of Abraham Lincoln; on the other, the blue cap and blouse of a sergeant in the American army.

Peter paused to permit the patriotic feelings of his visitors their fullest vent. To his surprise, only a dead silence followed this national exhibition. Peter, doubtful of their eyesight, drew aside the window-curtains, and ostentatiously wiped the portrait of the martyred president.

"Dot is Lincoln."

"Chromo?" asked Folinsbee.

"I don't know," replied Peter, a little crestfallen.

"The engravings don't make him quite so ugly," said Mrs. Johnson, "although he was an ugly man."

"Awful," said Miss Rosey.

Peter smiled meekly. "He wasn't bretty as a womans," he said, with an embarrassed attempt at gallantry, followed by an apoplectic blush.

"What's that?" asked Folinsbee, indicating the cap and blouse with his cane. "Some of your mining duds from Spanish Gulch?"

"Dot!" gasped Peter. "Dot is mine uniforms!"

Folinsbee laughed. "I thought it might be some of that damaged clothing condemned by the War Department, and sold at auction there. The boys bought up a lot of it cheap to knock around in the tunnels with. Yes, I remember now. The fellers had a mighty good joke on your goin into the War when you hadn't any call to go."

"Which side were you on, Mr. Schroeder?" asked Mrs. Johnson, with a polite affectation of interest.

"Which side?" echoed Peter in vague astonishment.

"I fights mit de Union."

"I had an uncle in the Federal army, and two cousins in the Confederate service," observed Miss Minnie languidly.

"Dey wos good fellers on the oder side too," hastily interpolated the kind-hearted Peter.

"They came home awfully sick of it all of em," continued Miss Minnie. "I'm sure it was dreadfully horrid."

"Awful," said Rosey.

Meanwhile they had backed out of the room listlessly, and were clearly indicating that they were awaiting Peter's further movements. He closed the door with an embarrassing laugh that was half a sigh, and led the way

back to the drawing-room. On the way Miss Rosey stopped to admire the photograph of a stout, good-humored gentle man in a gorgeous hussar uniform.

"Who is this?"

"Dot is me myself," said Peter "wen I was in de war mit France," he added apologetically. To his surprise, the ladies gathered before it with an appearance of interest; and Mrs. Johnson remarked archly that the uniform was very becoming.

"Why didn't you show the girls that first?" asked Folinsbee, taking Peter aside. "Why did you trot out those old army rags of yours? Don't you know they're just crazy after these foreign uniforms? Think there's a count or baron inside of em always. By the way," he asked suddenly, "you ain't anything o that sort now, are you?"

Peter shook his head blankly, but found himself blushing as he thought of his wife's uniformed relations.

"Didn't get anything of that kind for your services?" continued Folinsbee. "Nary ribbon medals eh?"

"I get de Iron Cross," said Peter mildly.

"Humph! Iron Cross! Couldn't afford a gold one, eh? Not much of that lying round loose here in these parts?"

Too modest to explain further, too delicate to expose what he conceived to be the natural ignorance of his foreign visitor, but utterly oblivious of the mischief in that foreign visitor's eye, Peter endeavored to turn the subject by asking him to bring the ladies to dine with him the next day.

"I reckon not, old man," said Folinsbee. "I ll be on my way to Berlin to-morrow, and I reckon the girls are headin up the Rhine to tackle some of them ruined castles. But you might ask em, just for a flyer."

"Don't you all go mit yourselves together?" queried the astonished Peter.

Folinsbee smiled. "Not much, I reckon. We only met at Brussels, and we happened to travel in the same coupe to Cologne. We sorter passed the time o day, swapped lies, and made ourselves sociable. I told em at Cologne I reckoned to run up yer to see you, and asked em to come along. It was a little pasear that's all. They're all right, old man," he added, laughing at Peter's puzzled face, "one of em a senator's daughter, I reckon. If they ain't right, I'm responsible."

Peter laughed and blushed. Not that he saw anything in this escapade but an instance of that republican simplicity and social freedom which he admired in theory ; but he was conscious that his new life had brought with it responsibilities to other customs. He was vaguely relieved that his wife was not present to hear Folinsbee's explanation, and, later, that the ladies politely declined his invitation.

Nevertheless, he parted with them reluctantly. When the smart landau drove up to his door, and they took their places, serene and self-possessed, under the wondering and critical fire of his neighbors Spions, they seemed such a vision of happy, confident, graceful, beautiful, and fitly adorned youth, that, as he reentered his house, he felt he had grown a hundred years older, and even his familiar surroundings appeared to belong to another epoch and planet. He mounted slowly to the little room which contained his treasures. He looked at them again carefully; inspected the grave melancholy of Lincoln's face, and lifted the blue

blouse from its nail. Were those features "ugly"? was that blouse a "rag"? Peter pondered long and perplexedly. Gradually an explanation slowly evolved itself from its profundity. He placed his finger beside his nose, and a look of deep cunning shone in his eyes.

"Dot's it," he said to himself triumphantly, "dot's shoost it! Der rebooplicans don't got no memories. Ve don't — got nodings else."

He did not, however, confide to his wife the full details of this visit. But one day, when she had returned from visiting a remote cousin at Kissingen, she asked him why he had never told her that Mrs. Johnson had called. The guilty blood flew to Peter's face, and he stammered out some half-intelligible excuse. To his infinite relief and astonishment, however, Frau Schroeder, far from noticing his confusion, spoke volubly of having met Mrs. Johnson at Kissingen, and dwelt at some length on the gentlemanly graces and breeding of Mr. Johnson.

"He did not call with her, then?" asked Mrs. Schroeder.

Peter, stammering and untruthful, really could not remember. There were half a dozen people, and they did not stop long.

"I forget if she said that her husband knew you," continued Frau Schroeder; "but you would remember him, of course. He's not like the Americans, you know, but like a a gentleman and an officer."

Peter, not daring to allude to the informal character of Mrs. Johnson's escort, said nothing.

"They are coming here next week," added Frau Schroeder; "I have invited them."

As Peter seldom had a voice in the nomination of his visitors, he meekly acquiesced.

"But vot gets me," he communed with himself, "how dot bretty, Mrs. Johnson, mit no cards, gets mine wife."

The next week brought Mrs. Johnson, who languidly remembered Peter, and at once made herself as much at home with Peter's wife as she had with him. It brought also Mr. Johnson, a small, quiet, plain man.

"You would hardly remember me as a Californian, Mr. Schroeder!" he said, extending his hand.

Peter would hardly have recognized him even as an American. Certainly no one could be further from the type most familiar to Peter. He was unlike Folinsbee unlike any of his old army comrades unlike any other American he had known, and yet as certainly unlike any European with whom Peter was familiar. He was as confident and self-possessed as Folinsbee, and yet without Folinsbee's humorous familiarity; he was modest and unassuming, and yet Peter felt that he took possession of him as securely as Folinsbee had. He was inclined to resent this at first inclined to watch Mr. Johnson's mouth a peculiar mouth, with a latent apologetical smile a smile as if humanity on all occasions presented a humorous aspect to him (Johnson) which nothing but his (Johnson s) thoughtful commiseration for humanity kept him from publicly noticing.

"Yet," continued Johnson, regarding Peter as a wayward, mirth-provoking child, "yet I have lived in California many years. I remember to have heard of you

there; of your good fortune, of your subsequent career in the army, and of your return here. I have known many of your friends. Indeed, I feel as if we were old acquaintances."

That was what he said. His smiling commentary seemed to Peter to add as plainly, "And there are humorous depths in your career and character, Peter, which nobody knows better than myself; but we won't say anything about that, Peter, not a word."

Considerably embarrassed, Peter asked him a few questions. But he was annoyed at the extent and variety of Mr. Johnson's knowledge of his affairs. Scarcely a person Peter had known scarcely an incident in Peter's experience but were as equally and humorously recognized by Mr. Johnson. Peter's first partner in the mines, the bugler in his regiment, his fellow-passenger and room-mate in the steamer, his banker and friend in Cologne, even his wife's relations, yea, actually, a certain awe-inspiring general and forty-first cousin of Frau Schroeder's at Coblentz, were all familiar to Johnson. And all and each were, on the authority of his peculiar smile, more or less ridiculous, if he chose to say so. But he wouldn't.

Perhaps it was this appearance of restrained power, combined with great gentleness of manner, which made him so popular with the women, and particularly with Fran Schroeder. No American had before touched that formal, well-regulated woman's heart. Peter was astounded at the influence this stranger had gained in the Von Hummel family. Had he not intimated, by his peculiar smile, that he was sure that the Herr General Yon Hummel drank too much, and that the family were more than once scandalized by his too susceptible weaknesses for the fair sex? Had he not suggested in the same way that the learned Herr Professor's last book on ethnology was ridiculous, as,

indeed, some critics had already said, but insinuated that he vas even capable of greater folly? Honest Peter could not understand it. Folirisbee, with his blunt familiarity and frivolity, would have been coldly repulsed by Frau Schroeder. Peter even now shuddered as he recalled the blank and even resentful amazement with which she had received the characteristic humor of an American tourist to whom he had once, in their earlier married life, rashly introduced her. Who was this Mr. T. Barker Johnson? Even the usual local caution regarding a stranger's social and financial standing was withheld. Frau Schroeder spoke of him as a Californian capitalist. His banker Peter's banker too knew him as a man of ample remittances. That was all.

For two weeks the stranger had held undoubted sway at the Schroeder's. Dinners and suppers had been given in his honor. General Von Hummel had sat late with him at table; the Herr Professor had presented him with his last volume and disclosed his future literary intentions.

Even Peter was conscious of being lifted into importance in his own family by his former residence in the country of this popular stranger and his familiarity with Americans. Little as he knew of the type represented by Johnson, he was compelled in sheer self-defense to assume a thorough knowledge of it; and I fear the poor fellow went even so far when the praises of Johnson were being hymned in his ears as to invent florid reminiscences of other John sons more extraordinary than this.

"Wunderschon!" gasped the apoplectic general.

"Man knows when man in that wonderful country has been," said Peter, shaking his head sententiously.

The Frau Schroeder did not indorse this sentiment.

"There are Americans and Americans!" she said significantly ; and Peter was fain to retire to his little room, and, in company with his pipe, contemplate the portrait of Lincoln and the faded trappings of his old military service.

He was sitting thus one evening, when there came a tap at his door. It opened to Johnson, quiet, gentlemanly, and humorously sympathetic. Peter was a little embarrassed. Since the exhibition of his treasures to the Folinsbee party he had grown doubtful of their effect upon strangers, and had said nothing of them to Johnson. But that gentleman smiled on Lincoln's picture as on a brother humorist, and looked at Peter's blouse and cap with an evident instinctive foreknowledge of all that was laughable in his history.

"You knew dot Lincoln?" queried Peter timidly, pointing with his pipe at the picture.

Johnson smiled. It presently appeared that he not only knew all that contemporary history knew of the martyred President, but many facts yet unrecorded. To Mr. Lincoln's humor as interpreted by Peter in one or two well-worn anecdotes Mr. Johnson accorded the recognition of a thoughtful smile, while in Peter's clothes he detected evidently some kindred and latent folly. Emboldened by his sympathy, Peter confided to him the history of his life, his aims, his political theories and dreams, and even his recent disappointment at the conduct of Folinsbee and his friends.

"Yes," said Peter, "he called mine uniform rags; dot was not an oopside ding to say, Mr. Johnson, and I says mit mineself, Der rebooplicans don't got no memories eh?"

Mr. Johnson smiled assentingly, patiently, expectantly quite as if he were previously aware of all Peter had told him, but was too polite to interrupt him. Then,

laying his hand on Peter's shoulder, he said softly, "You're too good a republican, Peter, to brood over mere sentimental memories. Now, look here. I like you, and I want to be frank with you. I know you, and you're not properly appreciated here even by your own family. It is time, Peter, you should assert yourself. It is time they should know what you are. You are the stuff from which liberators and deliverers are made. I saw it when I first saw you, long before you ever knew me."

The most modest and unassuming man has somewhere within him the germ of self-conscious merit, which needs only the sunshine of praise to bud and blossom into life. Poor Peter had never known praise before, perhaps he had never missed it, but, tasting the strange fruit, he found it good, and that, like other forbidden fruit, it made him a god like others, and, with his face glowing with pleasure, he seized and shook Johnson's hand warmly. He was still too unsophisticated to disguise his feelings. Perhaps, having already suffered from modesty, he did not care to simulate it.

"It rests with you, Peter, to make yourself what you should be, what you can be," continued Johnson,

"What if I told you of another country, Peter, newer and fresher than the one you once adopted; where the soil is virgin and the people are plastic, a country to be moulded and fashioned into shape by men like you; a country with no predilections, few traditions, and no history; a republic wanting only ideas, and capital; a country that you might become president of as I am?"

Peter, whose eyes had been growing wider and wider, shut them at this climax from sheer inability to face the astounding revelation. There was a dead silence. The

voice of Mrs. Johnson at the piano came melodiously from the drawing-room; the voice of Mrs. Schroeder, inquiring for her missing lord, came potentially from the hall below; but Peter heeded them not. Johnson smiled, closed the door, and drawing a chair beside Peter, in a confidential whisper quietly took absorbing possession of his faculties for two mortal hours.

I had arrived at Calais from Brussels near midnight, an hour too early for the tidal boat, and in advance of the train from Paris. There was scarcely time to seek an hotel, too much time to wait at the station, and the keeper of the "buffet" had informed me that his "establishment" could not be open for the receipt of custom until the arrival of the Paris train. Noticing a light in a cosy sitting-room adjoining, I made bold, in spite of his protestations, to enter, and was confronted by Jack Folinsbee, much to our mutual astonishment.

His greeting was hearty. "Come in. Don't mind that barkeep. I'm running this yer concern until the train comes in. He tried to turn me off at first, too. But I asked him what he reckoned the rent of this old shebang would be for two hours. He tore round and thought I was crazy, I s'pose, until he saw I meant business, and he fixed his price. I paid him and took possession. Now, what'll you take, old boy! Name your pizen. This is my treat. And I didn't think when I left Californy that I'd be running a railroad restaurant in France."

It was true; he had, after his Californian fashion, gratified his present whim at a pretty price. The landlord, looking upon him as a spendthrift savage, was, I think, a little relieved when my appearance took some of the responsibility off his hands. By the light of the blazing fire, in a comfortable armchair, I did not propose to question the propriety of his impulses.

Our talk naturally fell upon old days and old friends.

"You remember Dutch Pete, don't you?" asked Folinsbee. I did remember Peter Schroeder. "You know," continued Jack, "how he took the money he made in that big strike, and, instead of getting away with it, goes off in a wildgoose chase to fight in the war?"

"Yes."

"Well, he had fool's luck then. Got off without a scratch; went back to Germany a rich man, married and settled down, and might have been all right now. But this yer last foolishness of his has fixed him, sent him up the flume, sure!"

I begged Folinsbee to explain.

"Well, I reckon perhaps I'm a little to blame for it too. You remember Johnson, T. Barker Johnson, that old filibuster?"

"Yes."

"He failed, don't yer know, with Walker in Nicaragua, but came mighty near fixing things his own way in Costa Rica. Yes, sir," continued Jack, becoming excited, "it was a big thing he did down there. All alone, too. Got a canoe, by gum! and pulled out to a ship's yawl, and sorter revolutionizes the yawl's crew; then he takes that crew to the ship and raises a mutiny in the ship, takes command of the ship, and calls himself Admiral of the Ometepe Navy, and summons a fort to surrender! And it surrenders blank it all! the whole garrison and the Ometepe army surrenders. And he was such a quiet man such a very qui-et man! You remember him, major, don't you? such a qui-et man just the

faintest little snicker round his mouth, but allus so qui-et just a lamb."

I ventured to remind Jack that we were talking of Peter Schroeder.

"That's so. Well, Johnson got hisself made president or dictator of the Ometepe Confederacy or at least one wing of it and came over here incog., to negotiate bonds and get money. Well, it was jest my luck about that time to meet Mrs. Johnson and a party of nice girls, traveling, and I took em to see Peter just for a pasear. Peter was just about as big a fool as ever, and showed us his army duds, and spouted patriotic hog-wash; and I reckon Mrs. Johnson sorter took Peter's measure then and thar. But she says nothing, and it comes about in some way that she meets Mrs. Peter, who, I reckon, man ages Peter and keeps him in bounds, and she captures her, and Johnson captures Peter, and the game is made. For in less than ten months by gosh! the Johnsons have got Peter made over, capital and all, to the Ometepe Confederacy. And, as if that wasn t enough, d n me! if they didn't rope in the whole Schroeder family generally, old Frau Schroeder, aunts, uncles, cousins, and all. By Jingo! there was a whole German colony started out to Ometepe to settle, and Peter was made Secretary of the Treasury!"

"And then"

Folinsbee looked at me in contemptuous surprise. "And then? Why, of course, the whole thing goes up. It might have been a month I reckon it was n t more than three weeks that they had a stable government in Ometepe. But it busted at the end of that time, busted clean!"

"And Peter?"

"That's just it! You see, all the Germans skedaddled except Peter. Even Johnson, I reckon, got clean away. But Peter and that's where his God-forsaken foolishness comes in hangs round and gets captured. At least, you don't hear any more about him."

Folinsbee was wrong. More was heard of Peter Schroeder. For, when captured and led out to be shot as an insurgent, one of his comrades made an attempt to save him, on the plea of his being an innocent German emigrant. The general was inexorable; the firing party was waiting, but Peter's friend still pleaded.

"Let him step to the front!"

Peter stepped calmly before the loaded muskets. But his friend saw in dismay that he had changed his clothes, and wore his faded blouse and blue army cap of an American sergeant.

"Prisoner, to what nation do you claim to belong?"

Peter's blue eyes kindled. "Dot's it! I claim to be an American citi"

The officer's sword waved, there was a crackle of musketry and the rising of a pale blue smoke. And on its wings the soul of Peter Schroeder went in quest of his ideal republic.