

eBook

Beth Norvell

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A CHANCE MEETING

There were nine altogether in the party registering. This number included the manager, who, both on and off the stage, quite successfully impersonated the villain---a rather heavy-jawed, middle-aged fellow, of foreign appearance, with coarse, gruff voice; three representatives of the gentler sex; a child of eight, exact species unknown, wrapped up like a mummy; and four males. Beyond doubt the most notable member of the troupe was the comedian "star," Mr. T. Macready Lane, whose well-known cognomen must even now awaken happy histrionic memories throughout the western circuit. The long night's ride from their previous stand, involving as it did two changes of trains, had proven exceedingly wearisome; and the young woman in the rather natty blue toque, the collar of her long gray coat turned up in partial concealment of her face, was so utterly fatigued that she refused to wait for a belated breakfast, and insisted upon being at once directed to her room. There was a substantial bolt decorating the inside of the door, but, rendered careless by sheer exhaustion of both mind and body, she forgot everything except her desire for immediate rest, dropped her wraps upon the only chair visible, and flung herself, fully dressed, upon the bed. Her cheek had barely pressed the hard pillow before she was sleeping like a tired child.

It must have been an hour later when Winston drove in from Flat Rock, shook the powdery snow from off his long fur overcoat, his cheeks still tingling from the sharp wind, and, with fingers yet stiffened by cold, wrote his name carelessly across the lower line of the dilapidated hotel register.

"Can you let me have the same room, Tom?" he questioned familiarly of the man ornamenting the high stool behind the desk.

The latter, busy with some figures, nodded carelessly, and the last arrival promptly picked up his valise from the floor and began climbing the stairs, whistling softly. He was a long-limbed, broad-chested young fellow, with clean-shaven face, and a pair of dark-gray eyes that looked straight ahead of him; and he ran up the somewhat steep steps as though finding such exercise a pleasure. Rounding the upper railing, he stopped abruptly before Number Twenty-seven, flung open the door, took a single step within, and came to a sudden pause, his careless whistling suspended in breathless surprise. With that single glance the complete picture became indelibly photographed upon his memory,---the narrow, sparsely furnished room with roughly plastered walls; the small, cheap mirror; the faded-green window curtain, torn half in two; the sheet-iron wash-stand; the wooden chair, across which rested the gray coat with the blue toque on top; and the single cot bed bearing its unconscious occupant.

Somehow as he gazed, his earliest conscious emotion was that of sympathy---it all appeared so unspeakably pathetic, so homesick, so dismally forlorn and barren. Then that half-upturned face riveted his attention and seemed to awaken a vague, dreamy memory he found himself unable to localize; it reminded him of some other face he had known, tantalizing from its dim indistinctness. Then this earlier impression slightly faded away, and he merely beheld her alone, a perfect stranger appropriating little by little her few claims to womanly beauty. There was no certain guessing at her age as she lay thus, one hand pressed beneath her cheek, her eyes closed, the long, dark lashes clearly outlined against the white flesh, her bosom rising and falling with the steady breathing of absolute exhaustion. She appeared so extremely tired, discouraged, unhappy, that the young man involuntarily closed his teeth tightly, as though some wrong had been personally done to himself. He marked the dense blackness of her heavy mass of hair; the perfect clearness of her skin; the shapeliness of the slender, outstretched figure; the narrow boot, with its high-arched instep, peeping shyly beneath the blue skirt; the something rarely interesting, yet which scarcely made for beauty, revealed unconsciously in the upturned face with its rounded chin and parted lips.

There was no distinct regularity of features, but there was unquestionably character, such character as we recognize vaguely in a sculptured face, lacking that life-like expression which the opened eyes alone are capable of rendering. All this swept across his mind in that instant during which he remained irresolute from surprise. Yet Winston was by nature a gentleman; almost before he had grasped the full significance of it all he stepped silently backward, and gently closed the door. For an uncertain moment he remained there staring blankly at the wood, that haunting memory once again mocking every vain attempt to associate this girl-face with some other he had known before. Finally, leaving valise and overcoat lying in the hall, he retraced his way slowly down the stairs.

"Tom," and the young man leaned against the rough counter, his voice grown graver, "there chances to be a woman at present occupying that room you just assigned me."

"No! Is that so?" and the clerk swung easily down from his high stool, drawing the register toward him. "Must be one of the troupe, then. Let's see---Number Twenty-seven, was n't it? Twenty-seven---oh, yes, here it is. That's a fact," and his finger slowly traced the line as he spelled out the name, "'Miss Beth Norvell.' Oh, I remember her now---black hair, and a long gray coat; best looker among 'em. Manager said she 'd have to be given a room all to herself; but I clean forgot I assigned her to Twenty-seven. Make much of a row?"

The other shook his head, bending down so as to read the name with his own eyes. There was nothing in the least familiar about the sound of it, and he became faintly conscious of an undefined feeling of disappointment. Still, if she was upon the stage, the name quite probably was an assumed one; the very utterance of it left that impression. He walked over toward the cigar stand and picked out a weed, thinking gravely while he held a flaming match to the tip. Somehow he was not altogether greatly pleased with this information; he should have preferred to discover her to be some one else. He glanced at the clerk through the slight haze of blue smoke, his increasing curiosity finding reluctant utterance.

"What troupe is it?" he questioned with seeming carelessness.

"'Heart of the World,'" answered Tom with some considerable increase of enthusiasm. "A dandy play, and a blamed good company, they tell me. Got some fine press notices anyhow, an' a carload o' scenery. Played in Denver a whole month; and it costs a dollar and a half to buy a decent seat even in this measly town, so you can bet it ain't no slouch of a show. House two-thirds sold out in advance, but I know where I can get you some good seats for just a little extra. Lane is the star. You 've heard of Lane, have n't you? Funniest fellow you ever saw; makes you laugh just to look at him. And this---this Miss Norvell, why she's the leadin' lady, and the travellin' men tell me she's simply immense. There's one of their show bills hanging over there back of the stove."

Winston sauntered across to the indicated red and yellow abomination, and dumbly stood staring at it through the blue rings of his cigar. It represented a most thrilling stage picture, while underneath, and in type scarcely a shade less pronounced than that devoted to the eminent comedian T. Macready Lane, appeared the announcement of the great emotional actress, Miss Beth Norvell, together with several quite flattering Western press notices. The young man read these slowly, wondering why they should particularly interest him, and on a sudden his rather grave face brightened into a smile, a whimsical thought flashing into his mind.

"By Jove, why not?" he muttered, as if arguing the matter out with himself. "The report has gone East, and there is nothing more to be accomplished in Flat Rock for at least a month. This snow will have to melt away before they can hope to put any miners to work, and in the meanwhile I might just as well be laying up experiences on the road as wasting my substance in riotous living at Denver. It ought to prove a great lark, and I 've always had ambition to have a try at something of the kind. Well, here 's my chance; and besides, I can't help believing that that girl might prove interesting; her face is, anyhow."

He walked back to where Tom still hung idly over the cigar case.

"Who is running this show outfit?"

"That big fellow writing at the table. His name 's Albrecht," suspiciously. "But see here, I tell you there ain't any use of your hittin' him for 'comps'; he 's tighter than a drum."

"Comps'? Oh, ye of little faith!" exclaimed Winston genially. "It is n't 'comps' I 'm after, Tommy, it's a job."

Albrecht looked up from his writing, scowling somewhat under his heavily thatched brows, and revealing a coarse face, with little glinting eyes filled with low cunning. At that first glance Winston instinctively disliked the fellow; yet he put his case in a few brief sentences of explanation, and, as the other listened, the managerial frown slightly relaxed.

"Actor?" he questioned laconically, when the younger man paused, his glance wandering appreciatively over the sturdy, erect figure.

"Well, hardly that; at least, merely in an amateur way," and the applicant laughed lightly. "You see, I imagined you might possibly make use of me in some minor capacity until I learn more about the business. I don't care very much regarding pay, but I desire to get a taste of the life."

"Oxactly, mein frient." And the worthy Albrecht became almost briskly cordial in manner. Perhaps here was an "angel" waiting to be plucked in the holy name of art; at least, he appeared well dressed, looked intellectually promising, and expressed himself as totally indifferent regarding salary. Such visitors were indeed few and far between, and the astute manager sufficiently understood his business to permit his heavy features to relax into a hearty, welcoming smile.

"Oxactly, young man. Sit down, und I vill see yoost vat vos pest for us both. You would be an actor; you haf the ambition. Ah! I see it in your eyes, and it gif me great bleasure. But, young man, it vos unfortunate dot I haf not mooch just now to gif you, yet the vay vill open if you only stays mit me. Sure; yaw, I, Samuel Albrecht, vill make of you a great actor. I can see dot in your face, und for dot reason I vill now gif you the chance. You begin at the pottom, but not for long; all I wants now vos a utility man---some one to take small barts, understudy, und be ready to help out mit der scenery und der trunks. I could not bay moch monies for dot," and he spread his beringed hands deprecatingly, "but it vos only der first step on der ladder of fame. Every day I teach you de great art of de actor. You come with me dot way, mein frient?"

"Certainly; that will be perfectly satisfactory."

"Ah," delightedly, "you vos a goot poy, villin' to learn, I see. Next season, who knows, you might be leading man if you vork hardt. I bay you now after one veek's trial, when I know petter vot you are vort, hey?"

Winston carelessly nodded his acceptance of these rather indefinite terms, his hands thrust into his pockets, his gray eyes smiling their appreciation of the situation. Albrecht was deliberately looking him over, as he might a horse he had just purchased.

"You are kinder slim to look at," he confessed at last, thoughtfully. "Are you bretty strong?"

The younger man silently held forth his right arm to the inspection of the other, who fingered the iron rigidity of muscle under the cloth with evident respect.

"God of Yacob!" the manager muttered in unconcealed surprise, "it is vonderful, and you such a slender young man to look at. I vos most afraidt you could not do mein vork, but it is all right. You vill eat mit us at the long table," he waved his hand indefinitely toward the dining-room, "at 12:30, and then I valk mit you over py der Obera House, und show you vat der is to be done mit dot scenery und dem trunks. Mein Gott! it vos vonderful dot muscles vot you haf got---you would make a great Davy Crockett ven I learns you de business, mein frient."

The manager's appreciation of his new acquisition was so clearly evident that Winston felt compelled to notice it.

"I am rejoiced you appear so well satisfied," he said, rising to his feet.

"Satisfied! Mein Gott," and the overjoyed Albrecht cordially clasped the hand of his new recruit. "It vos a great season of luck for me, mein frient. Dot Meess Norvell, she makes me mooch monies vile I shows her how to be an actress,---oh, it vos yoost beautiful to see her act,---und now you comes mit me also, und cares nottings for vot I bay you, und I can see you haf der actor genius. Mein Gott! it vos too goot to be true."

Winston broke away gladly, and drifted back toward the cigar stand, where the mystified Tommy yet stood staring at him.

"Well, did you get it?" the latter questioned, grinning.

"Thomas," returned the other loftily. "You can hand me out another cigar, and I will thank you not to be quite so familiar in the future. I am now general utility man with the 'Heart of the World' company, and consequently entitled to greater respect."

CHAPTER II

OUT WITH A ROAD COMPANY

Miss Norvell failed to appear at the noon meal, though Winston met the other members of the company. He found them genial enough, even somewhat boisterous, with the single exception of Mr. Lane, who maintained a dignified and rather gloomy silence, such as became one of his recognized professional standing, after having favored the newcomer with a long, impertinent stare, apparently expressing disapproval. The manager was outwardly in most excellent humor, narrating several stories, at which all, excepting the reserved comedian, laughed quite heartily. At the conclusion of the repast, Albrecht condescended to purchase his new recruit a cigar, and then walked beside him toward the Opera House, where the necessary instructions in new duties promptly began. If Winston had previously imagined his earlier steps toward histrionic honors were destined to be easy ones, he was very soon undeceived under the guidance of the enthusiastic manager. It proved a strenuous afternoon, yet the young fellow had the right stuff in him to make good, that stubborn pride which never surrenders before difficulties; he shut his teeth, rolled up his shirt-sleeves, and went earnestly to work.

It was a small, cheaply built theatre, having restricted stage space, while a perfect riff-raff of trunks and detached pieces of canvas scenery littered the wings. At first sight it appeared a confused medley of odds and ends, utterly impossible to bring into any conformity to order, but Albrecht recognized each separate piece of luggage, every detached section of canvas, recalling exactly where it properly belonged during the coming performance. For more than an hour he pranced about the dirty stage, shouting minute directions, and giving due emphasis to them by growling German oaths; while Winston, aided by two local assistants, bore trunks into the various dressing-rooms, hung drop curtains in designated positions, placed set pieces conveniently at hand, and arranged the various required properties where they could not possibly be overlooked during the rush of the evening's performance. Thus, little by little, order was evolved from chaos,

and the astute manager chuckled happily to himself in quick appreciation of the unusual rapidity with which the newly engaged utility man grasped the situation and mastered the confusing details. Assuredly he had discovered a veritable jewel in this fresh recruit. At last, the affairs of principal importance having been attended to, Albrecht left some final instructions, and departed for the hotel, feeling serenely confident that this young man would carry out his orders to the letter.

And Winston did. He was of that determined nature which performs thoroughly any work once deliberately undertaken; and, although the merest idle whim had originally brought him to this position of utility man in the "Heart of the World" company, he was already beginning to experience a slight degree of interest in the success of the coming show, and to feel a faint *esprit de corps*, which commanded his best efforts. Indeed, his temporary devotion to the preparation of the stage proved sufficiently strong to obscure partially for the time being all recollection of that first incentive which had suggested his taking such a step--the young lady discovered asleep in Number Twenty-seven. The remembrance of her scarcely recurred to him all through the afternoon, yet it finally returned in overwhelming rush when, in the course of his arduous labors, he raised up a small leather trunk and discovered her name painted plainly upon the end of it. The chalk mark designating where it belonged read "Dressing-room No. 2," and, instead of rolling it roughly in that direction, as he had rolled numerous others, the new utility man lifted it carefully upon his shoulder and deposited it gently against the farther wall. He glanced with curiosity about the restricted apartment to which Miss Beth Norvell had been assigned. It appeared the merest hole of a place, narrow and ill-ventilated, the side walls and ceiling composed of rough lumber, and it was evidently designed to be lit at night by a single gas jet, inclosed within a wire netting. This apartment contained merely a single rude chair, of the kitchen variety, and an exceedingly small mirror cracked across one corner and badly fly-specked. Numerous rusty spikes, intended to hold articles of discarded clothing, decorated both side walls and the back of the door. It was dismally bare, and above all, it was abominably dirty, the dust lying thick everywhere, the floor apparently unswept for weeks. With an exclamation of disgust Winston hunted up broom and dust-rag, and gave the gloomy place such a cleansing as it probably had not enjoyed since the house was originally erected. At the end of these arduous labors he looked the scene over critically, the honest perspiration streaming down his face, glancing, with some newly awakened curiosity, into the surrounding dressing-rooms. They were equally filthy and unfit for occupancy, yet he did not feel called upon to invade them with his cleansing broom. By four o'clock everything was in proper position, the stage set in perfect order for the opening act, and Winston returned with his report to the hotel, and to the glowing Albrecht.

Miss Norvell joined the company at the supper table, sitting between the manager and Mr. T. Macready Lane, although Winston was quick to observe that she gave slight attention to either, except when addressed directly. She met the others present with all necessary cordiality and good-fellowship, yet there appeared a certain undefined reserve about her manner which led to an immediate hush in the rather free conversation of what Albrecht was pleased to term the "training table," and when the murmur of voices was resumed after her entrance, a somewhat better choice of subjects became immediately noticeable. Without so much as either word or look, the silent influence of the actress was plainly for refinement, while her mere presence at the table gave a new tone to Bohemianism. Winston, swiftly realizing this, began observing the lady with a curiosity which rapidly developed into deeper interest. He became more and more attracted by her unique personality, which persistently appealed to his aroused imagination, even while there continued to haunt him a dim tantalizing remembrance he was unable wholly to master. He assuredly had never either seen or heard of this young woman before, yet she constantly reminded him of the past. Her eyes, the peculiar contour of her face, the rather odd trick she had of shaking back the straying tresses of her dark, glossy hair, and, above all, that quick smile with which she greeted any flash of humor, and which produced a fascinating dimple in her cheek, all served to puzzle and stimulate him; while admiration of her so apparent womanliness began as instantly to replace the vague curiosity he had felt toward her as an actress. She was different from what he had imagined, with absolutely nothing to suggest the glare and glitter of the footlights. Until this time he had scarcely been conscious that she possessed any special claim to beauty; yet now, her face, illumined by those dark eyes filled with quick intelligence, became most decidedly attractive, peculiarly lovable and womanly. Besides, she evidently possessed a rare taste in dress, which met with his masculine

approval. Much of this, it is true, he reasoned out later and slowly, for during that first meal only two circumstances impressed him clearly--the depth of feeling glowing within those wonderfully revealing eyes, and her complete ignoring of his presence. If she recognized any addition to their number, there was not the slightest sign given. Once their eyes met by merest accident; but hers apparently saw nothing, and Winston returned to his disagreeable labors at the Opera House, nursing a feeling akin to disappointment.

Concealed within the gloomy shadows of the wings, he stood entranced that night watching her depict the character of a wife whose previous happy life had been irretrievably ruined by deceit; and the force, the quiet originality of her depiction, together with its marvellous clearness of detail and its intense realism, held him captive. The plot of the play was ugly, melodramatic, and entirely untrue to nature; against it Winston's cultivated taste instantly revolted; yet this woman interpreted her own part with the rare instinct of a true artist, picturing to the very life the particular character intrusted to her, and holding the house to a breathless realization of what real artistic portrayal meant. In voice, manner, action, in each minute detail of face and figure, she was truly the very woman she represented. It was an art so fine as to make the auditors forget the artist, forget even themselves. Her perfect workmanship, clear-cut, rounded, complete, stood forth like a delicate cameo beside the rude buffoonery of T. Macready Lane, the coarse villany of Albrecht, and the stiff mannerisms of the remainder of the cast. They were automatons as compared with a figure instinct with life animated by intelligence. She seemed to redeem the common clay of the coarse, unnatural story, and give to it some vital excuse for existence, the howls of laughter greeting the cheap wit of the comedian changed to a sudden hush of expectancy at her mere entrance upon the stage, while her slightest word, or action, riveted the attention. It was a triumph beyond applause, beyond any mere outward demonstration of approval. Winston felt the spell deeply, his entire body thrilling to her marvellous delineation of this common thing, her uplifting of it out of the vile ruck of its surroundings and giving unto it the abundant life of her own interpretation. Never once did he question the real although untrained genius back of those glowing eyes, that expressive face, those sincere, quiet tones which so touched and swayed the heart. In other days he had seen the stage at its best, and now he recognized in this woman that subtle power which must conquer all things, and eventually "arrive."

Early the following morning, tossing uneasily upon a hard cot-bed in the next town listed in their itinerary, he discovered himself totally unable to divorce this memory from his thoughts. She even mingled with his dreams,--a rounded, girlish figure, her young face glowing with the emotions dominating her, her dark eyes grave with thoughtfulness,--and he awoke, at last, facing another day of servile toil, actually rejoicing to remember that he was part of the "Heart of the World." That which he had first assumed from a mere spirit of play, the veriest freak of boyish adventure, had suddenly developed into a real impulse to which his heart gave complete surrender.

To all outward appearances Miss Beth Norvell remained serenely unconscious regarding either his admiration or his presence. It was impossible to imagine that in so small a company he could continually pass and repass without attracting notice, yet neither word nor look passed between them; no introduction had been accorded, and she merely ignored him, under the natural impression, without doubt, that he was simply an ignorant roustabout of the stage, a wielder of trunks, a manipulator of scenery, in whom she could feel no possible interest. A week passed thus, the troupe displaying their talents to fair business, and constantly penetrating into more remote regions, stopping at all manner of hotels, travelling in every species of conveyance, and exhibiting their ability, or lack of it, upon every makeshift of a stage. Sometimes this was a bare hall; again it was an armory, with an occasional opera house--like an oasis in the vast desert--to yield them fresh professional courage. Small cities, straggling towns, boisterous mining camps welcomed and speeded them on, until sameness became routine, and names grew meaningless. It was the sort of life to test character thoroughly, and the "Heart of the World" troupe of strollers began very promptly to exhibit its kind. Albrecht, who was making money, retained his coarse good-nature unruffled by the hardships of travel; but the majority of the stage people grew morose and fretful,--the eminent comedian, glum and unapproachable as a bear; the leading gentleman swearing savagely over every unusual worry, and acting the boor generally; the *ingenue*, snappy and cat-like. Miss Norvell alone among them all appeared as at first, reserved, quiet, uncomplaining, forming no intimate friendships,

yet performing her nightly work with constantly augmenting power. Winston, ever observing her with increasing interest, imagined that the strain of such a life was telling upon her health, exhibiting its baleful effect in the whitening of her cheeks, in those darker shadows forming beneath her eyes, as well as in a shade less of animation in her manner. Yet he saw comparatively little of her, his own work proving sufficiently onerous; the quick jumps from town to town leaving small opportunity for either rest or reflection. He had been advanced to a small speaking part, but the remainder of his waking hours, while he was attired in working-clothes, was diligently devoted to the strenuous labor of his muscles. The novelty of the life had long since vanished, the so eagerly expected experience had already become amply sufficient; again and again, flinging his wearied body upon a cot in some strange room, he had called himself an unmitigated ass, and sworn loudly that he would certainly quit in the morning. Yet the girl held him. He did not completely realize how or why, yet some peculiar, indefinite fascination appeared to bind his destinies to her; he ever desired to see her once again, to be near her, to feel the charm of her work, to listen to the sound of her voice, to experience the thrill of her presence. So strong and compelling became this influence over him that day after day he held on, actually afraid to sever that slight bond of professional companionship.

This was most assuredly through no fault of hers. It was at Shelbyville that she first spoke to him, first gave him the earliest intimation that she even so much as recognized his presence in the company. The house that particular night was crowded to the doors, and she, completing a piece of work which left her cheeks flushed, her slender form trembling from intense emotion, while the prolonged applause thundered after her from the front, stepped quickly into the gloomy shadows of the wings, and thus came face to face with Winston. His eyes were glowing with unconcealed appreciation of her art. Perhaps the quick reaction had partially unstrung her nerves, for she spoke with feverish haste at sight of his uprolled sleeves and coarse woollen shirt.

"How does it occur that you are always standing directly in my passage whenever I step from the stage?" she questioned impetuously. "Is there no other place where you can wait to do your work except in my exit?"

For a brief moment the surprised man stood hesitating, hat in hand.

"I certainly regret having thus unintentionally offended you, Miss Norvell," he explained at last, slowly. "Yet, surely, the occasion should bring you pleasure rather than annoyance."

"Indeed! Why, pray?"

"Because I so greatly enjoy your work. I stood here merely that I might observe the details more carefully."

She glanced directly at him with suddenly aroused interest.

"You enjoy my work?" she exclaimed, slightly smiling. "How extremely droll! Yet without doubt you do, precisely as those others, out yonder, without the slightest conception of what it all means. Probably you are equally interested in the delicate art of Mr. T. Macready Lane?"

Winston permitted his cool gray eyes to brighten, his firmly set lips slightly to relax.

"Lane is the merest buffoon," he replied quietly. "You are an artist. There is no comparison possible, Miss Norvell. The play itself is utterly unworthy of your talent, yet you succeed in dignifying it in a way I can never cease to admire."

She stood staring straight at him, her lips parted, apparently so thoroughly startled by these unexpected words as to be left speechless.

"Why," she managed to articulate at last, her cheeks flushing, "I supposed you like the others we have had with us---just---just a common stage hand. You speak with refinement, with meaning."

"Have you not lived sufficiently long in the West to discover that men of education are occasionally to be found in rough clothing?"

"Oh, yes," doubtfully, her eyes still on his face, "miners, stockmen, engineers, but scarcely in your present employment."

"Miss Norvell," and Winston straightened up, "possibly I may be employed here for a reason similar to that which has induced you to travel with a troupe of barn-stormers."

She shrugged her shoulders, her lips smiling, the seductive dimple showing in her cheeks.

"And what was that?"

"The ambition of an amateur to attain a foothold upon the professional stage."

"Who told you so?"

"Mr. Samuel Albrecht was guilty of the suggestion.

"It was extremely nice of him to discuss my motives thus freely with a stranger. But he told you only a very small portion of the truth. In my case it was rather the imperative necessity of an amateur to earn her own living---a deliberate choice between the professional stage and starvation."

"Without ambition?"

She hesitated slightly, yet there was a depth of respect slumbering within those gray eyes gazing so directly into her darker ones, together with a strength she felt.

"Without very much at first, I fear," she confessed, as though admitting it rather to herself alone, "yet I acknowledge it has since grown upon me, until I have determined to succeed."

His eyes brightened, the admiration in them unconcealed, his lips speaking impulsively.

"And what is more, Miss Norvell, you 'll make it."

"Do you truly believe so?" She had already forgotten that the man before her was a mere stage hand, and her cheeks burned eagerly to the undoubted sincerity of his utterance. "No one else has ever said that to me---only the audiences have appeared to care and appreciate. Albrecht and all those others have scarcely offered me a word of encouragement."

"Albrecht and the others are asses," ejaculated Winston, with sudden indignation. "They imagine they are actors because they prance and bellow on a stage, and they sneer at any one who is not in their class. But I can tell you this, Miss Norvell, the manager considers you a treasure; he said as much to me."

She stood before him, the glare of the stage glinting in her hair, her hands clasped, her dark eyes eagerly reading his face as though these unexpected words of appreciation had yielded her renewed courage, like a glass of wine.

"Really, is that true? Oh, I am so glad. I thought, perhaps, they were only making fun of me out in front, although I have always tried so hard to do my very best. You have given me a new hope that I may indeed master the art. Was that my cue?"

She stepped quickly backward, listening to the voices droning on the stage, but there remained still a moment of liberty, and she glanced uncertainly about at Winston.

"Am I to thank you for giving me such immaculate dressing-rooms of late?" she questioned, just a little archly.

"I certainly wielded the broom."

"It was thoughtful of you," and her clear voice hesitated an instant. "Was---was it you, also, who placed those flowers upon my trunk last evening?"

He bowed, feeling slightly embarrassed by the swift returning restraint in her manner.

"They were most beautiful. Where did you get them?"

"From Denver; they were forwarded by express, and I am only too glad if they brought you pleasure."

"Miracle of miracles! A stage-hand ordering roses from Denver! It must have cost you a week's salary."

He smiled:

"And, alas, the salary has not even been paid."

Her eyes were uplifted to his face, yet fell as suddenly, shadowed behind the long lashes.

"I thank you very much," she said, her voice trembling, "only please don't do it again; I would rather not have you."

Before he could frame a satisfactory answer to so unexpected a prohibition she had stepped forth upon the stage.

This brief interview did not prove as prolific of results as Winston confidently expected. Miss Norvell evidently considered such casual conversation no foundation for future friendship, and although she greeted him when they again met, much as she acknowledged acquaintanceship with the others of the troupe, there remained a quiet reserve about her manner, which effectually barred all thought of possible familiarity. Indeed, that she ever again considered him as in any way differing from the others about her did not once occur to Winston until one evening at Bluffton, when by chance he stood resting behind a piece of set scenery and thus overheard the manager as he halted the young lady on the way to her dressing room.

"Meess Norvell," and Albrecht stood rubbing his hands and smiling genially, "at Gilchrist we are pilled to blay for dwo nights, und der second blay vill be der 'Man from der Vest'---you know dot bart, Ida Somers?"

"Yes," she acknowledged, "I am perfectly acquainted with the lines, but who is to play Ralph Wilde?"

"Mister Mooney, of course. You tink dot I import some actors venever I change der pill?"

She lifted her dark, expressive eyes to his mottled face, slowly gathering up her skirts in one hand.

"As you please," she said quietly, "but I shall not play Ida Somers to Mr. Mooney's Ralph Wilde. I told you as much plainly before we left Denver, and it was for that special reason the 'Heart of the World' was substituted. The more I have seen of Mr. Mooney since we took the road, the less I am inclined to yield in this matter."

Albrecht laughed coarsely, his face reddening.

"Oh, bah!" he exclaimed, gruffly derisive. "Ven you begome star then you can have dem tantrums, but not now, not mit me. You blay vat I say, or I send back after some von else. You bedder not get too gay, or you lose your job damn quick. You don't vant Mooney to make lofe to you? You don't vant him to giss you?---hey, vos dot it?"

"Yes, that was exactly it."

"Ach!---you too nice to be brofessional; you like to choose your lofer, hey? You forget you earn a livin' so. Vot you got against Mooney?"

Miss Norvell, her cheeks burning indignantly, her eyes already ablaze, did not mince words.

"Nothing personally just so long as he keeps away from me," she retorted clearly. "He is coarse, vulgar, boorish, and I have far too much respect for myself to permit such a man to touch me, either upon the stage or off; to have him kiss me would be an unbearable insult."

Albrecht, totally unable to comprehend the feelings of the girl, shifted uneasily beneath the sharp sting of her words, yet continued to smile idiotically.

"Dot is very nice, quite melodramatic, but it is not brofessional, Meess," he stammered, striving to get hold of some satisfactory argument. "Vy, Mooney vos not so pad. Meess Lyle she act dot bart mit him all der last season, and make no kick. Dunder! vat you vant---an angel? You don't hafe to take dot bart mit me, or Meester Lane either, don 't it, hey?"

Miss Norvell turned contemptuously away from him, her face white with determination.

"If you really want to know, there is only one man in all your troupe I would consent to play it with," she declared calmly.

"Und dot is?"

"I do not even know his name," and she turned her head just sufficiently to look directly into Albrecht's surprised face; "but I refer to your new utility man; he, at least, possesses some of the ordinary attributes of a gentleman."

The door of her dressing-room opened and closed, leaving the startled manager standing alone without, gasping for breath, his thick lips gurgling impotent curses, while Winston discreetly drew farther back amid the intricacy of scenery.

CHAPTER III

A BREAKING OF ICE

The troupe in its wandering arrived at Bolton Junction early on a Saturday afternoon, and Winston, lingering a moment in the hotel office, overheard Miss Norvell ask the manager if they would probably spend Sunday there; and later

question the hotel clerk regarding any Episcopalian services in the town. Their rather late arrival, however, kept him so exceedingly busy with stage preparation for the evening's performance that this conversation scarcely recurred to mind until his night's labor had been completed. Then, in the silence of his room, he resolved upon an immediate change in conditions, or else the deliberate giving up of further experiment altogether. He was long since tired enough of it, yet a strange, almost unaccountable attraction for this young woman continued binding him to disagreeable servitude.

He came down stairs the following morning, his plans completely determined upon. He was carefully dressed in the neat business suit which had been packed away ever since his first reckless plunge into theatrical life, and thus attired he felt more like his old self than at any moment since his surrender to the dictation of Albrecht. In some degree self-confidence, audacity, hope, came promptly trooping back with the mere donning of clean linen and semi-fashionable attire, so that Winston "utility" became Winston gentleman, in the twinkling of an eye. The other members of the troupe slept late, leaving him to breakfast alone after vainly loitering about the office in the hope that Miss Norvell might by some chance appear and keep him company. It was almost mortifying to behold that young woman enter the deserted dining-room soon after he had returned to the lonely office, but she gave no sign of recognition in passing, and his returned audacity scarcely proved sufficient to permit his encroachment upon her privacy. He could only linger a moment at the desk in an effort to catch a better view of her through the partially open door.

Nervously gripping a freshly lighted cigar, Winston finally strolled forth upon the wide porch to await, with all possible patience, the opportunity he felt assured was fast approaching. It was a bright spring morning, sufficiently warm to be comfortable without in the sunshine, although the mountains overshadowing the town were yet white with snow. The one long, straggling business street appeared sufficiently lonely, being almost deserted, the shops closed. The notable contrast between its present rather dreary desolation and the wild revelry of the previous night seemed really painful, while the solemn prevailing stillness served to weaken Winston's bold resolutions and brought him a strange timidity. He slowly strolled a block or more, peering in at the shop windows, yet never venturing beyond easy view of the hotel steps. Then he sauntered as deliberately back again. Lane and Mooney were now stationed upon the porch, tipping far back in their chairs, their feet deposited on the convenient railing, smoking and conversing noisily with a group of travelling men. Winston, to his disgust, caught little scraps of the coarse stories exchanged, constantly greeted by roars of laughter, but drew as far away from their immediate vicinity as possible, leaning idly against the rail. Far down the street, from some unseen steeple, a church bell rang solemnly. Listening, he wondered if she would come alone, and a dread lest she might not set his heart throbbing.

Albrecht, looking not unlike a fat hog newly shaven, sauntered out of the open office door, and stared idly about. He spoke a gracious word or two to his rather silent utility man, viewing his well-cut clothing with some apparent misgiving, finally drifting over to join the more congenial group beyond. Winston did not alter his chosen position, but remained with watchful eyes never long straying from off the ladies' entrance, a few steps to his left. All at once that slightly used door opened, and the hot blood leaped through his veins as Miss Norvell stepped forth unaccompanied. She appeared well groomed, looking dainty enough in her blue skirt and jacket, her dark hair crowned by the tasteful blue toque, a prayer-book clasped in one neatly gloved hand. As she turned unconsciously toward the steps, Winston lifted his hat and bowed. With a quick upward glance of surprise the girl recognized him, a sudden flush crimsoning her cheeks, her eyes as instantly dropping before his own. In that sudden revelation the young man appeared to her an utterly different character from what she had formerly considered him; the miracle of good clothing, of environment, had suddenly placed them upon a level of companionship. That Winston likewise experienced something of this same exaltation was plainly evident, although his low voice trembled in momentary excitement.

"I trust you will pardon my presumption," he said, taking the single step necessary to face her, "but I confess having been deliberately waiting here to request the privilege of walking to church beside you."

"Beside me? Indeed!" and both lips and eyes smiled unreservedly back at him. "And how did you chance to guess it was my intention to attend? Is it a peculiarity of leading ladies?"

"As to that I cannot safely say, my acquaintance among them being limited." He was acquiring fresh confidence from her cordial manner. "But I chanced to overhear your questioning the clerk last night, and the bold project at once took possession of me. Am I granted such permission?"

Her dark eyes wandered from their early scrutiny of his eager face toward that small group of interested smokers beyond. What she may have beheld there was instantly reflected in a pursing of the lips, a swift decision.

"I shall be delighted to have your company," she responded, frankly meeting his eyes, "but longer delay will probably make us late, and I abominate that."

As they passed down the steps to the street Winston caught a glimpse of the others. They were all intently gazing after them, while Mooney had even risen to his feet and taken a step forward, his cigar still in his mouth. Then the group behind laughed loudly, and the younger man set his teeth, his cheeks flushed from sudden anger. He would have enjoyed dashing back up the steps, and giving those grinning fools a much-needed lesson, but he glanced aside at his companion, her eyes downcast, seemingly utterly unconscious of it all, and gripped himself, walking along beside her, erect and silent. They traversed the entire deserted block without speaking, each busied indeed with the intricacies of the board walk. Then Winston sought to break the somewhat embarrassing silence, his first words sounding strangely awkward and constrained.

"It was exceedingly kind of you to grant such privilege when we have scarcely even spoken to each other before."

She glanced aside at his grave face, a certain coquettish smile making her appear suddenly girlish.

"Possibly if you realized the exact cause of my complete surrender you might not feel so highly flattered," she confessed, shyly.

"Indeed! You mean why it was you consented so easily? Then possibly you had better inform me at once, for I acknowledge feeling quite conceited already at my good fortune."

She lifted her eyes questioningly, and for the first time he looked directly down into their unveiled depths.

"Then I must certainly make confession. What if I should say, I merely accepted the lesser of two evils---in short, preferred your company to something I considered infinitely worse?"

"You refer to Mooney?"

She nodded, her dark eyes once again shadowed, her cheeks slightly reddening beneath his steady gaze.

"Why, I can scarcely feel greatly flattered at being made the subject of such a choice," Winston acknowledged with frankness. "The very conception brings me uneasiness in fear lest my presence may be unwelcome now that Mooney has been safely left behind. Yet it yields me boldness also, and I venture to ask Miss Norvell what she would probably have answered had Mooney been left out of the problem entirely?"

His low voice held a ring of subdued earnestness, and the face of the woman as quickly lost its smile. An instant she hesitated, her eyes downcast, fully conscious he was anxiously searching her countenance for the exact truth.

"And under those conditions," she responded finally, "Miss Norvell would very probably have answered yes, only it would have been more deliberately uttered, so that you should have realized the measure of her condescension."

Winston laughed.

"You can have small conception of the intense relief brought me by that last acknowledgment," he explained cheerfully. "Now I can proceed with clear conscience, and shall undoubtedly discover in the church service an expression of my own devout gratitude."

It was an exceedingly alert exchange of words which followed, each cautiously exploring a way in toward a somewhat clearer understanding of the other, yet both becoming quickly convinced that they were not destined for ordinary acquaintanceship. To Miss Norvell observing her companion with shy intentness, this erect, manly young fellow with weather-browned, clean-shaven face and straightforward gray eyes seemed to evince a power of manhood she instinctively felt and surrendered to. His were those elements which a woman of her nature must instantly recognize---physical strength and daring, combined with mental acuteness and indomitable will. The fact of his present unworthy employment added the fascination of mystery to his personality, for it was manifestly impossible to conceive that such a position was all this man had ever achieved in life. And Winston wondered likewise at her, his earlier admiration for the bright attractiveness of face and manner broadening as her mind gave quick response to his leadership. Here was certainly no commonplace girl of the stage, but an educated, refined, ambitious woman, matured beyond her years by experience, her conversation exhibiting a wide range of reading, interwoven, with a deep knowledge of life. They spoke of ideals, of art, of literature, of secret aspirations, not often mentioned during such early acquaintanceship, breaking through that mental barrenness which had characterized their living for weeks, this common ground of thought and interest awakening between them an immediate friendliness and frankness of utterance delightfully inspiring. Almost without comprehending how it occurred they were chatting together as if the eventful years had already cemented their acquaintanceship. With cheeks flushed and eyes glowing from aroused interest Miss Norvell increased in beauty, and Winston observed her with an admiration finding frank expression in his eyes.

It was a small chapel they sought, situated at the extreme end of the straggling street, and the worshippers were few. At the conclusion of the ritual and the sermon the two walked forth together in silence, their former brief intimacy a mere memory, neither realizing exactly how best to resume a conversation which had been interrupted by so solemn a service. It was Miss Norvell who first broke the constraint.

"You are evidently well acquainted with the intricacies of the prayer-book," she remarked quietly, "and hence I venture to inquire if you are a churchman."

"Not exactly, although my parents are both communicants, and I was brought up to attend service."

"Do you know, I am glad even of that? It is a little additional bond between us merely to feel interested in the same church, isn't it? I was guilty during the service of thinking how exceedingly odd it was for us to talk so frankly together this morning when we knew absolutely nothing regarding each other. Would you mind if I questioned you just a little about yourself?"

He glanced aside at her in surprise, all remembrance that they were comparatively strangers having deserted his mind. It seemed as if he had already known her for years.

"Most certainly question; I had no thought of any concealment."

She smiled at the confusedness of his words, yet her own speech was not entirely devoid of embarrassment.

"It does appear almost ridiculous, but really I do not even know your name."

"It is Ned Winston."

"Not so bad a name, is it? Do you mind telling me where your home is?"

"I can scarcely lay claim to such a spot, but my people live in Denver."

She drew a quick, surprised breath, her eyes instantly falling, as though she would thus conceal some half-revealed secret. For a moment her parted lips trembled to a question she hesitated asking.

"I---I believe I have heard of a Colonel Daniel Winston in Denver, a banker," she said finally. "I---I have seen his house."

"He is my father."

Her shadowing lashes suddenly uplifted, the color once again flooding the clear cheeks.

"You are, indeed, becoming a man of mystery," she exclaimed, affecting lightness of utterance. "The son of Colonel Winston acting as utility for a troupe of strollers! I can hardly believe it true."

Winston laughed.

"It does seem a trifle out of proportion," he confessed, "and I can hardly hope to make the situation entirely clear. Yet I am not quite so unworthy my birthright as would appear upon the surface. I will trust you with a portion of the story, at least, Miss Norvell. I am by profession a mining engineer, and was sent out, perhaps a month ago, by a syndicate of Denver capitalists to examine thoroughly into some promising claims at Shell Rock. I made the examination, completed and mailed my report, and finally, on the same day your company arrived there, I discovered myself in Rockton with nothing to do and several weeks of idleness on my hands. I had intended returning to Denver, but a sudden temptation seized me to try the experiment of a week or two in wandering theatrical life. I had always experienced a boyish hankering that way, and have a natural inclination to seek new experiences. Albrecht was favorably impressed with my application, and hence I easily attained to my present exalted position upon the stage."

"And is that all?"

"Not entirely; there yet remains a chapter to be added to my confessions. I acknowledge I should have long since tired of the life and its hardships, had you not chanced to be a member of the same troupe."

"I, Mr. Winston? Why, we have scarcely spoken to each other until to-day."

"True, yet I strenuously deny that it was my fault. In fact, I had firmly determined that we should, and, having been a spoiled child, I am accustomed to having my own way. This, perhaps, will partially account for my persistency and for my still being with 'The Heart of the World.' But all else aside, I early became intensely interested in your work, Miss Norvell, instantly recognizing that it required no common degree of ability to yield dignity to so poor a thing as the play in which you appear. I began to study you and your interpretation; I never tired of noting those little fresh touches with which you constantly succeeded in embellishing your lines and your 'business,' and how clearly your conception of character stood forth against the crude background of those mummies surrounding you. It was a lesson in interpretative art to me, and one I never wearied of. Then, I must likewise confess, something else occurred."

He paused, looking aside at her, and, as though she felt the spell of that glance, she turned her own face, brightened by such earnest words of praise, their eyes meeting frankly.

"What?"

"The most natural thing in the world--my admiration for the art only served to increase my early interest in the artist. I began to feel drawn not only to the actress but to the woman," he said gravely.

Her eyes never faltered, but faced him bravely, although her cheeks were like poppies, and her lips faltered in their first bold effort at swift reply.

"I am so glad you honestly think that about my work; so glad you told me. It is a wonderful encouragement, for I know now that you speak as a man of education, of cultivation. You must have seen the highest class of stage interpretation, and, I am sure, have no desire merely to flatter me. You do not speak as if you meant an idle compliment. Oh, you can scarcely conceive how much success will spell to me, Mr. Winston," her voice growing deeper from increasing earnestness, her eyes more thoughtful, "but I am going to tell you a portion of my life-story in order that you may partially comprehend. This is my first professional engagement; but I was no stage-struck girl when I first applied for the position. Rather, the thought was most repugnant to me. My earlier life had been passed under conditions which held me quite aloof from anything of the kind. While I always enjoyed interpreting character as a relaxation, and even achieved, while at school in the East, a rather enviable reputation as an amateur, I nevertheless had a distinct prejudice against the professional stage, even while intensely admiring its higher exponents. My turning to it for a livelihood was a grim necessity, my first week on the road a continual horror. I abhorred the play, the making of a nightly spectacle of myself, the rudeness and freedom of the audiences, the coarse, common-place people with whom I was constantly compelled to consort. You know them, and can therefore realize to some extent what daily association with them must necessarily mean to one of my early training and familiarity with quieter social customs. But my position in the troupe afforded me certain privileges of isolation, while my necessities compelled me to persevere. As a result, the dormant art-spirit within apparently came to life; ambition began to usurp the place of indifference; I became more and more disgusted with mediocrity, and began an earnest struggle toward higher achievements. I had little to guide me other than my own natural instincts, yet I persevered. I insisted on living my own life while off the stage, and, to kill unhappy thought, I devoted all my spare moments to hard study. Almost to my surprise, the very effort brought with it happiness. I began to forget the past and its crudities, to blot out the present with its dull, unpleasant realities, and to live for the future. My ideals, at first but vague dreams, took form and substance. I determined to succeed, to master my art, to develop whatever of talent I might possess to its highest possibility, to become an actress worthy of the name. This developing ideal has already made me a new woman--it has given me something to live for, to strive toward."

She came to a sudden pause, perceiving in the frank gray eyes scanning her animated face a look which caused her own to droop. Then her lips set in firmer resolution, and she continued as though in utter indifference to his presence.

"You may not comprehend all this, but I do. It was the turning-point in my life. And I began right where I was. I endeavored to make the utmost possible out of that miserable melodramatic part which had been assigned to me. I elected to play it quietly, with an intensity to be felt and not heard, the very opposite from the interpretation given by Miss Lyle last season, and I felt assured my efforts were appreciated by the audiences. It encouraged me to discover them so responsive; but Albrecht, Lane, and Mooney merely laughed and winked at each other, and thus hurt me cruelly, although I had little respect for their criticisms. Still, they were professional actors of experience, and I was not yet certain that my judgment might not be wrong. Miss Head, the *ingenue*, a girl of sweet disposition but little education, praised my efforts warmly, but otherwise your evident appreciation is my only real reward. I spoke to you that evening in the wings not so much to scold you for being in the way, as from a hungry, despairing hope that you might speak some word of encouragement. I was not disappointed, and I have felt stronger ever since."

"I should never have suspected any such purpose. We have never so much as exchanged speech since, until to-day, and then I forced it."

She shook her head, a vagrant tress of her black hair loosening.

"You must be a very young and inexperienced man to expect to comprehend all that any woman feels merely by what she says or does."

"No," smilingly, "I have advanced beyond that stage of development, although the mystery of some womanly natures may always remain beyond me. But can I ask you a somewhat personal question, also?"

"Most assuredly, yet I expressly reserve the privilege of refusing a direct reply."

"Is Beth Norvell your real, or merely your stage name?"

"Why do you ask? That is a secret which, I believe, an actress is privileged to keep inviolate."

"For one particular reason---because I cannot escape a vague impression that somewhere we have met before."

She did not respond immediately, her gloved fingers perceptibly tightening about the prayer-book, her eyes carefully avoiding his own.

"You are mistaken in that, for we have never met," she said slowly, and with emphasis. "Moreover, Beth Norvell is my stage name, but in part it is my true name also." Suddenly she paused and glanced aside at him. "I have spoken with unusual frankness to you this morning, Mr. Winston. Most people, I imagine, find me diffident and uncommunicative---perhaps I appear according to my varying moods. But I have been lonely, and in some way you have inspired my confidence and unlocked my life. I believe you to be a man worthy of trust, and because I thus believe I am now going to request you not to ask me any more. My past life has not been so bright that I enjoy dwelling upon it. I have chosen rather to forget it entirely, and live merely for the future."

They were standing before the door of the ladies' entrance to the hotel by this time, and the young man lifted his hat gravely.

"Your wish shall certainly be respected," he said with courtesy, "yet that does not necessarily mean that our friendship is to end here."

Her face became transfigured by a sudden smile, and she impulsively extended her hand.

"Assuredly not, if you can withstand my vagaries. I have never made friends easily, and am the greater surprised at my unceremonious frankness with you. Yet that only makes it harder to yield up a friendship when once formed. Do you intend, then, to remain with the company? I have no choice, but you have the whole world."

"Yet, my intense devotion to the art of the Thespian holds me captive."

Their eyes met smilingly, and the next instant the door closed quietly between them.

Winston turned aside and entered the gloomy hotel office, feeling mentally unsettled, undetermined in regard to his future conduct. Miss Norvell had proven frankly intimate, delightfully cordial, yet overshadowing it all there remained

unquestionably a certain constraint about both words and actions which continued to perplex and tantalize. She had something in her past life to conceal; she did not even pretend to deceive him in this regard, but rather held him off with deliberate coolness. The very manner in which this had been accomplished merely served to stimulate his eagerness to penetrate the mystery of her reserve, and caused him to consider her henceforth as altogether differing from other girls. She had become a problem, an enigma, which he would try to solve; and her peculiar nature, baffling, changeable, full of puzzling moods, served to fascinate his imagination, to invite his dreaming. A strange thrill swept him when he caught a fleeting glimpse of white skirt and well-turned ankle as she ran swiftly up the steep staircase, yet, almost at the same instant, he returned to earth with a sudden shock, facing Mooney, when the latter turned slowly away from the window and sneeringly confronted him. The mottled face was unpleasantly twisted, a half-smoked cigar tilted between his lips. An instant the half-angry eyes of the two men met.

"Must have made a conquest, from all appearances," ventured the leading man with a knowing wink. "Not so damned hard to catch on with, is she, when the right man tries it?"

There was a swift, passionate blow, a crash among the overturned chairs, and Mooney, dazed and trembling, gazed up from the floor at the rigid, erect figure towering threateningly above him, with squared shoulders and clenched fists.

"Utter another word like that, you cur," said Winston, sternly, "and I'll break your head. Don't you dare doubt that I'll keep my word."

For a breathless moment he stood there, glowering down at the shrinking wretch on the floor. Then, his face, still set and white with passion, he turned contemptuously away. Mooney, cursing cowardly behind his teeth, watched him ascend the stairs, but the younger man never so much as glanced below.

CHAPTER IV

A NEW DEAL OF THE CARDS

For the two performances following there occurred an enforced shift of actors, owing to Mr. Mooney's being somewhat indisposed; and Winston, aided by considerable prompting from the others, succeeded in getting through his lines, conscious of much good-natured guying out in front, and not altogether insensible to Miss Norvell's efforts not to appear amused. This experience left him in no pleasanter frame of mind, while a wish to throw over the whole thing returned with renewed temptation. Why not? What was he continuing to make such a fool of himself for, anyhow? He was assuredly old enough to be done with chasing after will-o'-the-wisps; and besides, there was his constant liability to meet some old acquaintance who would blow the whole confounded story through the Denver clubs. The thought of the probable sarcasm of his fellows made him wince. Moreover, he was himself ashamed of his actions. This actress was nothing to him; he thoroughly convinced himself of that important fact at least twenty times a day. She was a delightful companion, bright, witty, full of captivating character, attractively winsome, to be sure, yet it was manifestly impossible for him ever to consider her in any more serious way. This became sufficiently clear to his reasoning, yet, at the same time, he could never quite break free. She seldom appeared to him twice the same---proving as changeable as the winds, her very nature seeming to vary with a suddenness which never permitted his complete escape from her fascinations, but left him to surmise how she would greet him next. Frank or distant, filled with unrestrained gayety or dignified by womanly reserve, smiling or grave, the changeable vagaries of Miss Norvell were utterly beyond his guessing, while back of all these outward manifestations of tantalizing personality, there continually lurked a depth of hidden womanhood, which as constantly baffled his efforts at fathoming. It piqued him to realize his own helplessness, to comprehend how completely this girl turned aside his most daring efforts at uncovering the true trend of her heart and life. She refused to be read, wearing her various masks with a cool defiance which apparently bespoke utter indifference to his good opinion, while constantly affording him brief, tantalizing glimpses into half-revealed depths that caused his

heart to throb with anticipation never entirely realized.

It did not once occur to his mind that such artifices might be directed as much toward herself as him; he lacked the conceit which could have convinced him that they merely marked a secret struggle for mastery, a desperate effort to crush an inclination to surrender before the temptation of the moment. It was a battle for deliverance being fought silently behind a mask of smiles, an exchange of sparkling commonplace; yet ever beneath this surface play she was breathing a fervent prayer that he would go away of his own volition and leave her free. Far more clearly than he, the woman recognized the utter impossibility of any serious purpose between them, and she fought his advances with every weapon in her armory, her very soul trembling behind the happy smiling of her lips. It was bravely attempted, and yet those dull weapons of defence served merely to increase his interest, to awaken his passion, and thus bind him more strongly to her. Safe once again from general observation, he returned to the obscurity of the wings and to the routine handling of trunks and scenery, feeling totally unable to permit her to pass entirely out of his life. Within her own room she dampened her pillow with tears of regret and remorse, yet finally she sank to sleep strangely happy because he lingered. It was the way of a woman; it was no less the way of a man.

It was thus that the "Heart of the World" players came to fulfil their engagement at San Juan upon a Saturday night. This was the liveliest camp in all that mountain region, a frantic, feverish, mushroom city of tents and shacks, sprawling frame business blocks, and a few ugly brick abominations, perched above the golden rocks of the Vila Valley, bounded on one side by the towering cliffs, on the other by the pitiless desert. In those days San Juan recognized no material distinction between midnight and noon-day. All was glitter, glow, life, excitement along the streets; the gloomy overhanging mountains were pouring untold wealth into her lap, while vice and crime, ostentation and lawlessness, held high carnival along the crowded, straggling byways. The exultant residents existed to-day in utter carelessness of the morrow, their one dominant thought gold, their sole acknowledged purpose those carnal pleasures to be purchased with it. Everything was primitive, the animal yet in full control, the drinking, laughing, fighting animal, filled with passion and blood-lust, worshipping bodily strength, and governed by the ideals of a frontier society wherein the real law hung dangling at the hip. Saloons, gambling halls, dance halls, and brothels flaunted themselves shamelessly upon every hand; the streets exhibited one continual riot, while all higher life was seemingly rendered inactive by inordinate grasping after wealth, and reckless squandering of it on appetite and vice; over all, as if blazoned across the blue sky, appeared the ever-recurring motto of careless humanity, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow ye die." Hardly a week before a short railroad spur had been constructed up the narrow, rock-guarded valley from Bolton Junction, eighteen miles to the northward, and over those uneven rails the "Heart of the World" troupe of adventurous strollers arrived at San Juan, to find lodgment in that ramshackle pile of boards known locally as the "Occidental Hotel."

The San Juan Opera House, better known as the Gayety, was in truth merely an adjunct to the Poodle-Dog Saloon, the side-doors from the main floor opening directly into the inviting bar-room, while those in the gallery afforded an equally easy egress into the spacious gambling apartments directly above. It was a monstrous ugly building, constructed entirely of wood most hastily prepared; the stage was utilized both night and day for continuous variety entertainments of the kind naturally demanded by the motley gathering. These, however, were occasionally suspended to make room for some adventurous travelling company to appear in the legitimate drama, but at the close of every evening performance the main floor was promptly cleared, the rows of chairs pushed hastily back from the centre, and the space thus vacated utilized for a general dance, which invariably continued until dawn.

When the drop-curtain slowly rose that Saturday evening fully three thousand people crowded the hall, eager for any fresh excitement; and ready enough either to taunt or applaud a performer, as the whim moved them. Bearded miners conspicuous in red shirts; cattlemen wearing wide sombreros and hairy "chaps"; swarthy Mexicans lazily puffing the inseparable cigarette; gamblers attired in immaculate linen, together with numerous women gaudy of cheek and attire, composed a frontier audience full of possibilities. The result might easily prove good or evil, according to the prevailing temper, but fortunately the "Heart of the World" quickly caught the men's fancy, the laughter ringing loud in appreciation

of Mr. Lane's ardent buffoonery, while the motley crowd sat in surprised silence evincing respect, as Miss Norvell drove home to their minds the lesson of a woman's sorrow and struggle against temptation. It was well worth while looking out across the oil-lamp footlights upon those hard-faced, bearded men, those gaudily attired women, thus held and controlled by perfectly depleted emotion, the vast audience so silent that the click of the wheel, the rattle of ivory chips in the rooms beyond, became plainly audible. There was inspiration in it likewise, and never before did Beth Norvell more clearly exhibit her native power, her spark of real genius.

Winston found little to do in his department that night, either on or off the stage, as the company expected to spend Sunday in the place. Consequently, he was only slightly behind the other members of the troupe in attaining the hotel at the conclusion of the evening's performance. Indeed, he was earlier than many, for most of the male members had promptly adjourned to the convenient bar-room, with whatsoever small sums of money they could wring from out the reluctant palm of Albrecht. Winston chanced to pause for a moment at the cigar stand to exchange a pleasant good-night word with the seemingly genial clerk.

"You one of the actors?" questioned the latter, exhibiting some slight interest.

The young man nodded indifferently, not feeling unduly proud of the distinction.

"Sorry I couldn't have been there," the other went on cordially. "The boys tell me you gave 'em a mighty fine show, but I 'm here to bet that some of your people wish they 'd steered clear of San Juan."

"How's that?"

"Why, that fat fellow---what's his name?---oh, yes, Albrecht---the sheriff was in here hunting him with some papers he had to serve, and it would have made you laugh just to see that duck climb out when I met him yonder on the street a few minutes ago, and gave him the highball. Guest of the house, you know, and we did n't want him pinched in here; besides, we understood he carried the scads for the rest of your bunch, and we naturally wanted our share. The sheriff's out tryin' to find him now; but Lord! the fellow 's safe enough out of the county by this time, if he skipped the way I advised him he 'd better. There was an extra ore train goin' down to Bolton to-night, and he just had time to catch it on the run."

The dramatic situation slowly dawned on Winston while the clerk was speaking.

"Do you mean to tell me Albrecht has actually skipped out?" he questioned, anxiously. "Did he leave any money?"

"Sure; he paid your folks' board till Monday. You bet I looked after that."

"Board till Monday!" and Winston totally forgot himself. "That is n't salary, man; there is something infernally dirty about this whole deal. Why, he took in over three thousand dollars to-night, and he's got all of that, and at least a week's receipts besides---the infernal cur! Was he alone?"

"Tall fellow with clipped black moustache, and bald head."

"Lane; I expected as much; they're birds of a feather. When can they get out of the Junction?"

"Well, the first train scheduled goes east at four o'clock, but it 's generally late."

Winston walked twice across the floor, alternately swearing and thinking.

"Is there any way I could get there before that time?" he questioned, finally, his square jaw setting firm.

"Well, I reckon you might, by goin' hossback across the old trail, but you 'd need to have a guide in the dark, and you 'd find it a hell of a hard ride."

The young engineer stood a moment staring out of the window into the night. The street was well illumined by the numerous saloon lights, and he could perceive scattering flakes of snow in the air, blown about by the gusty wind. He no longer felt the slightest doubt regarding Albrecht's desertion, and a wave of indignation swept over him. He did not greatly care himself regarding the small amount of money due for his services, but it was a dirty, contemptible trick, and he resented being so easily made the victim of such a scheme. Suddenly he wondered how this unexpected occurrence might affect the others. With one of them alone in mind he strode back to the counter, his teeth clinched savagely.

"What is the number of Miss Norvell's room?"

"Fifty-four---first door to the right of the stairs."

He took the steep flight of steps at a run, caught a glimpse of dimly reflected light shining through the closed transom, and rapped sharply. There was a hurried movement within, and her voice spoke.

"What is wanted?"

"I am Mr. Winston, and I must speak with you at once."

His tone was sufficiently low and earnest to make her realize instantly some grave emergency. Without hesitation the door was held open, and she stood before him in the faint light of the single lamp, wearing a fleecy white wrapper, her dark hair partially disarranged, her eyes seeking his own in bewilderment.

"What is it?"

"Are you aware that both Albrecht and Lane have skipped out?"

"Why, no," her cheeks suddenly paling, her fingers clasping the edge of the door. "Do you mean they have deserted us here to---to take care of ourselves?"

He nodded. "Yes, that's about it. What I came to ask was, does that fellow owe you any money?"

For an instant she hesitated, as if in lingering distrust of his exact purpose, her lips parted, her face still plainly picturing the shock of discovery.

"What difference can that possibly make now? Why do you require to know?"

"Because I half believe you have been left penniless. Albrecht has not even spoken about any pay to me since I joined the company; and when I learned he had deliberately left us stalled here, my first thought was of your unpleasant situation if my suspicions proved true."

"If they were, what is there you can do?"

"The hotel clerk says it is possible to reach the Junction on horseback before any trains leave there on the main line. I propose to make him disgorge, but I must know first exactly how things stand. Have you any money?"

She stood gazing at him, her anger, shame, all forgotten in the fascination of Winston's determined face. For the first time she thoroughly comprehended the cool, compelling power of this man, and it mastered her completely. She felt no longer the slightest doubt of what he purposed doing, and her woman heart swelled responsively to his masculine strength.

"I--I have n't got a dollar," she confessed simply, her lashes drooping over her lowered eyes.

"What does that fellow owe you?"

"Two hundred and sixty dollars; he has merely dribbled out what little I have been actually compelled to ask for."

A moment he remained standing there, breathing hard. Once she ventured to glance up inquiringly, only to catch his stern eyes, and as instantly lower her own.

"All right, Miss Norvell," he said finally, the words seeming fairly to explode from between his lips. "I understand the situation now, and you are to remain here until I come back. I'll get your money, don't fear, if I have to trail him clear to Denver, but I'll take what little the miserable thief owes me out of his hide."

The next moment he was down below in the office rapidly preparing for action, and Miss Norvell, leaning far out across the banister, listened to his quick, nervous words of instruction with an odd thrill of pride that left her cheeks crimson.

CHAPTER V

IN OPEN REBELLION

"It wus about the durndest fight as ever I see," explained Bill Hicks confidentially to a group of his cronies in the bar-room of the Poodle-Dog, while he tossed down a glass of red liquor, and shook the powdered snowflakes from his bearskin coat. "He wus a sorter slim, long-legged chap, thet young actor feller I showed the trail down ter Bolton ter, an' he scurcely spoke a word all durin' thet whol' blame ride. Search me, gents, if I c'd git either head er tail outer jist whut he wus up to, only thet he proposed ter knock thet block off some feller if he had the good luck ter ketch 'im. Somehow, I reckoned he 'd be mighty likely ter perform the job, the way his jaw set an' his eyes flared. Leastwise, I didn't possess no rip-roarin' ambition fer ter be thet other feller. Still, I didn't suppose he was no whirlwind."

Bill mechanically held out his drained glass, and, warming up somewhat, flung his discarded overcoat across a vacant bench, his eyes beginning to glow with reawakened enthusiasm.

"But, by gory, he wus! He wus simply chain lightnin', thet kid, an' the way he handed out his dukes wus a sight fer sore eyes. I got onto the facts sorter slow like, neither of us bein' much on the converse, but afore we hed reached Bolton I managed to savvy the most of it. It seems thet feller Albrecht--the big, cock-eyed cuss who played Damon, ye recollect, gents--wus the boss of the show. He wus the Grand Moke, an' held the spuds. Well, he an' thet one they call Lane jumped the ore train last night, carryin' with 'em 'bout all the specie they'd been corrallin' fer a week past, and started hot-foot fer Denver, intendin' ter leave all them other actor people in the soup. This yere lad hed got onter the racket somehow, an' say, he wus plumb mad; he wus too damn mad ter talk, an' when they git thet fur gone it's 'bout time fer the innocent spectator ter move back outen range. So he lassoed me down at Gary's barn fer ter show him the ol' trail, an' we had one hell of a night's ride of it. But, gents, I would n't o' missed bein' thar fer a heap. It was a great scrape let

me tell you. We never see hide ner hair of thet Albrecht or his partner till jist afore the main-line train pulled in goin' north. The choo-choo was mighty nigh two hours late, so it wus fair daylight by then, an' we got a good sight o' them two fellers a-leggin' it toward the station from out the crick bottom, whar they 'd been layin' low. They wus both husky-lookin' bucks, an' I was sufficient interested by then ter offer ter sorter hold one of 'em while the kid polished off the other. But Lord! that wan't his style, no how, and he just politely told me ter go plumb ter hell, an' then waltzed out alone without nary a gun in his fist. He wus purty white round the lips, but I reckon it wus only mad, fur thar wus n't nothin' weak about his voice, an' the way he lambasted thet thief wus a caution ter snakes. Say, I 've heerd some considerable ornate language in my time, but thet kid had a cinch on the dictionary all right, an' he read them two ducks the riot act good an' plenty. Thet long-legged Lane, he did n't have no sand, an' hung back and did n't say much, but the other feller tried every sneakin' trick a thief knows, only he bucked up agin a stone wall every time. Thet young feller just simply slathered him; he called him every name I ever heerd, an' some considerable others, an' finally, when the train was a-pullin' in, the cuss unlimbered his wad, an' began peelin' off the tens an' twenties till I thought the whole show wus over fer sure. But Lord! I didn't know thet kid---no more did thet Albrecht."

Hicks wet his lips with his tongue, pausing, after the manner of a good *raconteur*, to gaze calmly about upon the faces of his auditors.

"I could n't see jist how much the feller disgorged, but he wus almighty reluctant an' nifty about it; an' then I heerd him say, sneerin'-like, 'Now, damn yer, how much more do *you* want?' An', gents, what do yer think thet actor kid did? Cop the whole blame pile? Not on yer whiskers, he didn't. He jist shoved them scads what hed been given him careless-like down inter his coat pocket, an' faced Mister Manager. 'Not a dirty penny, Albrecht,' he said, sorter soft-like; 'I 'm a-goin' to take whut yer owe me out of yer right now.' An', by gory, gents, he sure did. I can't say as how I see much o' the fracas, 'ceptin' the dust, but when thet long-legged Lane jerked out a pearl-handled pop-gun I jist naturally rapped him over the knuckles with my '45.' an' then tossed him over inter the bunch. Say, thet beat any three-ringed circus ever I see. The kid he pounded Albrecht's head on the platform, occasionally interestin' Lane by kickin' him in the stomick, while I jist waltzed 'round promiscuous-like without seein' no special occasion to take holt anywhar. I reckon they 'd a been thar yit, if the train hands had n't pried 'em apart, an' loaded the remains onto a keer. An' then thet actor kid he stood thar lookin' fust at me, an' then after them keers. 'Hicks,' he panted, 'did I git fifty dollars' worth?' 'I rather reckon ye did,' I said, thoughtfully, 'en maybe it mought be a hundred.' An' then he laughed, an' brushed the dust off his clothes. 'All right, then,' says he; 'let's eat.' An' I never see no nicer feller after he got thet load offen his mind."

Winston, totally unconscious that he had thus achieved an enviable reputation in certain rather exclusive social circles of San Juan, proceeded straight to the hotel, pausing merely a moment in the wash-room to make himself a trifle more presentable, tramped up the stairs, and rapped briskly at Miss Norvell's door. He was still flushed with victory, while the natural confidence felt in her appreciation of his efforts yielded him a sense of exhilaration not easily concealed. The door was promptly opened, and, with her first glance, she read the success of his mission pictured within his face. As instantly her eyes smiled, and her hand was extended in the cordiality of welcome.

"I can perceive without a word being spoken that you discovered your man," she exclaimed, "and I am so glad!"

"Yes," he returned, stepping past, and emptying his pockets on the white coverlet of the bed. "There is the money."

She glanced at the pile doubtfully.

"What money?"

"Why, yours, of course. The money you told me Albrecht owed you."

She turned, somewhat embarrassed, her eyes upon his surprised face.

"Do you mean that was all you got?" she questioned finally. "Did he send nothing for the others? Did n't you know he was equally in debt to every member of the company?"

With these words the entire situation dawned upon him for the first time. He had been thinking only about Miss Norvell, and had permitted the rascally manager to escape with the greater portion of his stolen goods. The realization of how easily he had been tricked angered him, his face darkening. She read the truth as quickly, and, before he found speech in explanation, had swept the little pile of loose bills into her lap.

"Wait here a moment, please," she exclaimed quickly; "I shall be right back."

He remained as bidden, wondering dimly as to her purpose, yet her brief absence yielded but little opportunity for thought. He met her at the door with an indignantly suspicious question:

"What have you been doing? Surely, you have n't given all that money away?"

The girl smiled, a gleam of defiance visible in the uplifted eyes.

"Every cent of it. Why, what else could I do? They actually have nothing, and must get back to Denver or starve."

For an instant he completely lost his self-control.

"Why did n't you tell me first?" he asked sharply. "Did you suppose I collected my own money, and could therefore meet your expenses?"

He never forgot the expression which swept instantly into her face---the quick indignation that leaped from the depths of those dark eyes.

"I was not aware I had ever requested any help from Mr. Winston," she returned clearly, her slight form held erect. "Your following after Albrecht was entirely voluntary, but I naturally presumed the money you brought back belonged to me. You said it did, and hence I supposed it could be disposed of at my own discretion."

"You have exhibited none."

"That would seem to depend entirely upon the point of view. Until I request your aid, however, your criticism is not desired."

Both voice and manner were so cold that they were equivalent to dismissal, but Winston hesitated, already beginning to regret the bitter harshness of his speech. Beneath his steady gaze her cheeks flamed hotly.

"We have been friends," he began more humbly. "Would you mind telling me something regarding your plans? Just now I feel unable to offer you either aid or advice."

Her face perceptibly brightened, as if this new mood quickly appealed to her.

"That sounds ever so much better," she admitted, glancing up into his face. "I have never enjoyed being scolded, as though I were a child who had done wrong. Besides, I am quite convinced in this case I have done precisely right. I

think you would admit it also if you only had patience to hear my story. I know exactly what I intend doing, or I should never have given all that money away. I have an engagement."

"An engagement? Where? Is there another troupe playing here?"

She shrugged her shoulders, her hands clasped.

"No, not in the sense you mean; not the legitimate. I am going to appear at the Gayety."

Winston stood grasping the back of the chair, staring straight at her, his body motionless. For an instant he was conscious of a sudden revulsion of feeling, a vague distrust of her true character, a doubt of the real nature of this perverse personality. Such a resolution on her part shocked him with its recklessness. Either she did not in the least appreciate what such action meant, or else she woefully lacked in moral judgment. Slowly, those shadowed dark eyes were uplifted to his face, as if his very silence had awakened alarm. Yet she merely smiled at the gravity of his look, shaking her dark hair in coquettish disdain.

"Again you apparently disapprove," she said with pretence of carelessness. "How easily I succeed in shocking you to-day! Really, a stranger might imagine I was under particular obligations to ask your permission for the mere privilege of living. We have known each other by sight for all of two weeks, and yet your face already speaks of dictation. Evidently you do not like the Gayety."

"No; do you?"

"I?" she replied doubtfully, with a slight movement of the body more expressive than words. "There are times when necessity, rather than taste, must control the choice. But truly, since you ask the question, I do not like the Gayety. It is far too noisy, too dirty, too gaudy, and too decidedly primitive. But then, beggars may not always be choosers, you know. I am no bright, scintillating 'star'; I am not even a mining engineer possessing a bank account in Denver; I am merely an unknown professional actress, temporarily stranded, and the good angel of the Gayety offers me twenty dollars a week. That is my answer."

The young man flushed to the roots of his fair hair, his teeth meeting firmly.

"There is no 'good angel' of the Gayety---the very atmosphere of that place would soil an angel's wing," he exclaimed hotly. "Besides, you are not driven by necessity to any such choice. There is another way out. As you gently suggested, I am a mining engineer possessing a bank account at Denver. I will most gladly draw a sight draft to-morrow, and pay your expenses back to that city, if you will only accept my offer. Is this fair?"

"Perfectly so; yet supposing I refuse?"

"And deliberately choose the Gayety instead?"

"Yes, and deliberately choose the Gayety instead---what then?"

She asked the momentous question calmly enough, her mouth rigid, her eyes challenging him to speak the whole truth. He moistened his dry lips, realizing that he was being forced into an apparently brutal bluntness he had sincerely hoped to avoid.

"Then," he replied, with quiet impressiveness, "I fear such deliberate action would forfeit my respect."

She went instantly white before the blow of these unexpected words, her fingers clasping the door, her eyes as full of physical pain as if he had struck her with clinched hand.

"Forfeit your respect!" she echoed, the slender figure quivering, the voice tremulous. "Rather should I forever forfeit my own, were I to accept your proffer of money." Her form straightened, a slight tinge of color rising to the cheeks. "You totally mistake my character. I have never been accustomed to listening to such words, Mr. Winston, nor do I now believe I merit them. I choose to earn my own living, and I retain my own self-respect, even although while doing this I am unfortunate enough to forfeit yours."

"But, Miss Norvell, do you realize what the Gayety is?"

"Not being deprived of all my natural powers of observation, I most certainly believe I do---we were there together last evening."

She puzzled, confused him, outwardly appearing to trifle with those matters which seemed to his mind most gravely serious. Yet, his was a dogged resolution that would not easily confess defeat.

"Miss Norvell," he began firmly, and in the depth of his earnestness he touched her hand where it yet clung to the door, "I may, indeed, be presuming upon an exceedingly brief friendship, but my sole excuse must be the very serious interest I feel in you, especially in your undoubted ability and future as an actress. It is always a great misfortune for any man to repose trust and confidence in the character of a woman, and then suddenly awaken to discover himself deceived. Under these circumstances I should be unworthy of friendship did I fail in plain speaking. To me, your reckless acceptance of this chance engagement at the Gayety seems inexpressibly degrading; it is a lowering of every ideal with which my imagination has heretofore invested your character. I am not puritanical, but I confess having held you to a higher plane than others of my acquaintance, and I find it hard to realize my evident mistake. Yet, surely, you cannot fully comprehend what it is you are choosing, I was with you last night, true, but I considered it no honor to appear upon *that* stage, even with the 'Heart of the World,' and it hurt me even then to behold you in the midst of such surroundings. But deliberately to take part in the regular variety bill is a vastly more serious matter. It is almost a total surrender to evil, and involves a daily and nightly association with vice which cannot but prove most repugnant to true womanhood. Surely, you do not know the true nature of this place?"

"Then tell it to me."

"I will, and without any mincing of words. The Gayety is a mere adjunct to the Poodle-Dog saloon and the gambling hell up-stairs. They are so closely connected that on the stage last evening I could easily hear the click of ivory chips and the clatter of drinking glasses. One man owns and controls the entire outfit, and employs for his variety stage any kind of talent which will please the vicious class to which he caters. All questioning as to morality is thoroughly eliminated. Did you comprehend this?"

The young girl bowed slightly, her face as grave as his own, and again colorless, the whiteness of her cheeks a marked contrast to her dark hair.

"I understood those conditions fully."

"And yet consented to appear there?"

She shook back her slightly disarranged hair, and looked him directly in the eyes, every line of her face stamped with resolve.

"Mr. Winston, in the first place, I deny your slightest right to question me in this manner, or to pass moral judgment upon my motives. I chance to possess a conscience of my own, and your presumption is almost insulting. While you were absent in pursuit of Albrecht, the manager of the Gayety, having chanced to learn the straits we were in, called upon me here with his proposal. It appeared an honorable one, and the offer was made in a gentlemanly manner. However, I did not accept at the time, for the plain reason that I had no desire whatever to appear upon that stage, and in the midst of that unpleasant environment. I decided to await your return, and learn whether such a personal sacrifice of pride would be necessary. Now, I believe I recognize my duty, and am not afraid to perform it, even in the face of your displeasure. I am going to deliver the parting scene from the 'Heart of the World,' and I do not imagine my auditors will be any the worse for hearing it. I certainly regret that the Gayety is an adjunct to a saloon; I should greatly prefer not to appear there, but, unfortunately, it is the only place offering me work. I may be compelled to sink a certain false pride in order to accept, but I shall certainly not sacrifice one iota of my womanhood. You had no cause even to intimate such a thing."

"Possibly not; yet had you been my sister I should have said the same."

"Undoubtedly, for you view this matter entirely from the standpoint of the polite world, from the outlook of social respectability, where self rules every action with the question, 'What will others say?' So should I two years ago, but conditions have somewhat changed my views. Professional necessity can never afford to be quite so punctilious, cannot always choose the nature of its environments: the nurse must care for the injured, however disagreeable the task; the newspaper woman must cover her assignment, although it takes her amid filth; and the actress must thoroughly assume her character, in spite of earlier prejudices. The woman who deliberately chooses this life must, sooner or later, adjust herself to its unpleasant requirements; and if her womanhood remain true, the shallow criticism of others cannot greatly harm her. I had three alternatives in this case---I could selfishly accept my handful of money, go to Denver, and leave these other helpless people here to suffer; I could accept assistance from you, a comparative stranger; or I could aid them and earn my own way by assuming an unpleasant task. I chose the last, and my sense of right upholds me."

Winston watched her earnestly as she spoke, his gray eyes brightening with unconscious appreciation, his face gradually losing its harshness of disapproval. A spirit of independence always made quick appeal to his favor, and this girl's outspoken defiance of his good opinion set his heart throbbing. Back of her outward quietness of demeanor there was an untamed spirit flashing into life.

"We may never exactly agree as to this question of proprieties," he acknowledged slowly. "Yet I can partially comprehend your position as viewed professionally. Am I, then, to understand that your future is definitely decided upon? You really purpose dedicating your life to dramatic art?"

She hesitated, her quickly lowered eyes betraying a moment of embarrassment.

"Yes," she answered finally. "I am beginning to find myself, to believe in myself."

"You expect to find complete satisfaction in this way?"

"Complete? Oh, no; one never does that, you know, unless, possibly, the ideals are very low; but more than I can hope to find elsewhere. Even now I am certainly happier in the work than I have been for years." She looked up at him quickly, her eyes pleading. "It is not the glitter, the sham, the applause," she hastened to explain, "but the real work itself, that attracts and rewards me---the hidden labor of fitly interpreting character---the hard, secret study after details. This has become a positive passion, an inspiration. I may never become the perfected artist of which I sometimes dream, yet it must be that I have within me a glimmering of that art. I feel it, and cannot remain false to it."

"Possibly love may enter to change your plans," he ventured to suggest, influenced by the constantly changing expression of her face.

She flushed to the roots of her hair, yet her lips laughed lightly.

"I imagine such an unexpected occurrence would merely serve to strengthen them," she replied quickly. "I cannot conceive of any love so supremely selfish as to retard the development of a worthy ideal. But really, there is small need yet of discussing such a possibility."

She stood aside as he made a movement toward the open door, yet, when he had stepped forth into the hall, she halted him with a sudden question:

"Do you intend returning at once to Denver?"

"No, I shall remain here."

She said nothing, but he clearly read a farther unasked question in her face.

"I remain here, Miss Norvell, while you do. I shall be among your audiences at the Gayety. I do not altogether agree that your choice has been a correct one, but I do sincerely believe in you,---in your motives,---and, whether you desire it or not, I propose to constitute myself your special guardian. There is likely to be trouble at the Gayety, if any drunken fool becomes too gay."

With flushed cheeks she watched him go slowly down the stairway, and there were tears glistening within those dark eyes as she drew back into the room and locked the door. A moment she remained looking at her reflected face in the little mirror, her fingers clinched as if in pain.

"Oh, why does n't he go away without my having to tell him?" she cried, unconsciously aloud. "I---I thought he surely would, this time."

CHAPTER VI

THE "LITTLE YANKEE" MINE

A wide out-jutting wall of rock, uneven and precipitous, completely shut off all view toward the broader valley of the Vila, as well as of the town of San Juan, scarcely three miles distant. Beyond its stern guardianship Echo Canyon stretched grim and desolate, running far back into the very heart of the gold-ribbed mountains. The canyon, a mere shapeless gash in the side of the great hills, was deep, long, undulating, ever twisting about like some immense serpent, its sides darkened by clinging cedars and bunches of chaparral, and rising in irregular terraces of partially exposed rock toward a narrow strip of blue sky. It was a fragment of primitive nature, as wild, gloomy, desolate, and silent as though never yet explored by man.

A small clear stream danced and sang over scattered stones at the bottom of this grim chasm, constantly twisting and curving from wall to wall, generally half concealed from view by the dense growth of overhanging bushes shadowing its banks. High up along the brown rock wall the gleam of the afternoon sun rested warm and golden, but deeper down within those dismal, forbidding depths there lingered merely a purple twilight, while patches of white snow yet clung desperately to the steep surrounding hills, or showered in powdery clouds from off the laden cedars whenever the disturbing wind came souging up the gorge. Early birds were beginning to flit from tree to tree, singing their welcome

to belated Springtime; a fleecy cloud lazily floating far overhead gave deeper background to the slender strip of over-arching blue. It all combined to form a nature picture of primeval peace, rendered peculiarly solemn by those vast ranges of overshadowing mountains, and more deeply impressive by the grim silence and loneliness, the seemingly total absence of human life.

Yet in this the scene was most deceptive. Neither peace nor loneliness lurked amid those sombre rock shadows; over all was the dominance of men--primitive, fighting men, rendered almost wholly animal by the continued hardships of existence, the ceaseless struggle after gold. The vagrant trail, worn deep between rocks by the constant passage of men and mules, lay close beside the singing water, while here and there almost imperceptible branches struck off to left or right, running as directly as possible up the terraced benches until the final dim traces were completely lost amid the low-growing cedars. Each one of these led as straight as nature would permit to some specific spot where men toiled incessantly for the golden dross, guarding their claims with loaded rifles, while delving deeper and deeper beneath the mysterious rocks, ever seeking to make their own the secret hoards of the world's great storehouse. Countless centuries were being rudely unlocked through the ceaseless toil of pick and shovel, the green hillsides torn asunder and disfigured by ever-increasing piles of debris, while eager-eyed men struggled frantically to obtain the hidden riches of the rocks. Here and there a rudely constructed log hut, perched with apparent recklessness upon the brink of the precipice, told the silent story of a claim, while in other places the smouldering remains of a camp-fire alone bespoke primitive living. Yet every where along that upper terrace, where in places the seductive gold streak lay half uncovered to the sun, were those same yawning holes leading far down beneath the surface; about them grouped the puny figures of men performing the labors of Hercules under the galling spur of hope.

On this higher ledge, slightly beyond a shallow intersecting gorge shadowed by low-growing cedars, two men reclined upon a rock-dump, gazing carelessly off six hundred feet sheer down into the gloomy depths of the canyon below. Just beyond them yawned the black opening of their shaft-hole, the rude windlass outlined against the gray background of rock, while somewhat to the left, seemingly overhanging the edge of the cliff, perched a single-roomed cabin of logs representing home. This was the "Little Yankee" claim, owners William Hicks and "Stutter" Brown. The two partners were sitting silent and idle, a single rifle lying between them on the dump. Hicks was tall, lank, seamed of face, with twinkling gray eyes, a goat's beard dangling at his chin to the constant motion of his nervous jaws; and Brown, twenty years his junior, was a young, sandy-haired giant, limited of speech, of movement, of thought, with freckled cheeks and a downy little moustache of decidedly red hue. They had been laboriously deciphering a letter of considerable length and peculiar illegibility, and the slow but irascible Stutter had been swearing in disjointed syllables, his blue eyes glaring angrily across the gully, where numerous moving figures, conspicuous in blue and red shirts, were plainly visible about the shaft-hole of the "Independence," the next claim below them on the ledge. Yet for the moment neither man spoke otherwise. Finally, shifting uneasily, yet with mind evidently made up for definite action, Hicks broke the prolonged silence.

"I was thinkin' it over, Stutter, all the way hoofin' it out yere," he said, chewing continually on his tobacco, "but sorter reckoned ez how yer ought ter see the writin' furst, considerin' ez how you're a full partner in this yere claim. It sorter strikes me thet the lawyer hes give us the straight tip all right, an' thar 's no other way fer gittin' the cinch on them ornary fellers over thar," and the speaker waved his hand toward the distant figures. "Yer see, it's this yere way, Stutter. You an' I could swar, of course, thet the damned cusses hed changed the stakes on us more 'n onct, an' thar 's no doubt in our two minds but what they 're a-followin' out our ore-lead right now, afore we kin git down ter it. Hell! of course they are--they got the fust start, an' the men, an' the money back of 'em. We ain't got a darn thing but our own muscle, an' the rights of it, which latter don't amount ter two bumps on a log. Fer about three weeks we 've been watchin' them measly skunks take out our mineral, an' for one I 'm a-goin' ter quit. I never did knuckle down ter thet sort, an' I 'm too old now ter begin. The lawyer says ez how we ain't got no legal proof, an' I reckon it's so. But I 'm damned if I don't git some. Thar ain't a minin' engineer in San Juan that 'll come up yere fer us. Them fellers hes got 'em all on the hip; but I reckon, if we hunt long 'nough, we kin find some feller in Colorado with nerve 'nough to tackle this yere job, an' I 'm

a-goin' out gunnin' for jist that man."

He got to his feet, his obstinate old eyes wandering across the gully, and the younger man watched him with slow curiosity.

"How f-f-far you g-g-going, Bill?" he burst forth stutteringly.

"Denver, if I need to," was the elder's resolute, response. "I 'll tell ye what I 'm a-goin' ter do, Stutter. I 'm a-goin' ter draw out every blamed cent we 've got in the bank down at San Juan. 'T ain't much of a pile, but I reckon it's got ter do the business. Then I 'll strike out an' hunt till I find a minin' engineer thet 's got a soul of his own, an' grit 'nough behind it ter root out the facts. I 've been a-prospecttn' through these here mountings fer thirty years, an' now thet I 've hit somethin' worth havin', I 'm hanged if I 'm a-goin' ter lie down meek ez Moses an' see it stole out plumb from under me by a parcel o' tin-horn gamblers. Not me, by God! If I can't git a cinch on sich a feller ez I want, then I 'll come back an' blow a hole through that Farnham down at San Juan. I reckon I 'll go in an' tell him so afore I start."

The old man's square jaws set ominously, his gnarled hand dropping heavily on the butt of the Colt dangling at his hip.

"You stay right yere, Stutter, on the dump, and don't yer let one o' them measly sneaks put nary foot on our claim, if yer have ter blow 'em plumb ter hell. You an' Mike kin tend ter thet all right, an' you bet I 'm goin' ter have some news fer yer when I git home, my boy."

He swung around, and strode back along the ledge to the door of the cabin, reappearing scarcely a moment later with a small bundle in his hand.

"Thar 's 'nough grub in thar ter last you an' Mike fer a week yit, an' I 'll be back afore then, er else planted. *Adios.*"

Brown sat up, his gun resting between his knees, and in silence watched his partner scrambling down the steep trail. It was not easy for him to converse, and he therefore never uttered a word unless the situation demanded the sacrifice. He could swear, however, with considerable fluency, but just now even that relief seemed inadequate. Finally, the older man disappeared behind the scrub, and, except for those more distant figures about the dump of the "Independence," the blond giant remained apparently alone. But Stutter had long ago become habituated to loneliness; the one condition likely to worry him was lack of occupation. He scrambled to his feet and climbed the dump, until able to lean far over and look down into the black mouth of the uncovered shaft.

"Got yer b-b-bucket full, M-M-Mike?" he questioned, sending his deep, sputtering voice far down into the depths below.

"Oi have thot," came the disgusted response from out the darkness. "Ye measly spalpeen, ain't Oi bin shakin' of the rope fer twenty minutes? Oi tought maybe ye'd run off an' left me to rot down in the hole. Whut 's up now, ye freckled-face ilephant, yer?"

Brown indulged in a cautious glance about, then stuck his almost boyish face farther down within the safety of the hole before venturing an explanation.

"B-B-Bill's g-g-gone to find s-s-some engi-n-neer w-with nerve 'nough ter r-r-run our lines," he managed to spit out disjointedly. "S-s-says he'll go plumb ter Denver 'fore he 'll g-g-give up, an' if he d-don't f-find any sich he 'll c-c-come back an' p-p-perforate F-F-Farnham."

"Bedad!" a tinge of unrestrained delight apparent in the sudden roar, "an' was he hot?"

"H-he sure was. He m-m-m-meant business all r-right, an' hed f-f-forty rounds b-b-buckled on him. H-here goes, Mike," and Brown grasped the warped handle of the windlass and began to grind slowly, coiling the heavy rope, layer upon layer, around the straining drum. He brought the huge ore-bucket to the surface, dumped its load of rock over the edge of the shaft-hole, and had permitted it to run down swiftly to the waiting Mike, when a slight noise behind sent the man whirling suddenly about, his hand instinctively reaching forth toward the discarded but ready rifle. A moment he stared, incredulous, at the strange vision fronting him, his face quickly reddening from embarrassment, his eyes irresolute and puzzled. Scarcely ten feet away, a woman, rather brightly attired and apparently very much at her ease, sat upon a rather diminutive pony, her red lips curved in lines of laughter, evidently no little amused at thus startling him. Brown realized that she was young and pretty, with jet black, curling hair, and eyes of the same color, her skin peculiarly white and clear, while she rode man fashion, her lower limbs daintily encased within leggings of buckskin. She had carelessly dropped her reins upon the high pommel of the saddle, and as their glances fairly met, she laughed outright.

"You mooch frighten, senior, and you so ver' big. It make me joy." Her broken English was oddly attractive. "Poof! los Americanos not all find me so ver' ter'ble."

Stutter Brown ground his white teeth together savagely, his short red moustache bristling. He was quite young, never greatly accustomed to companionship with the gentler sex, and of a disposition strongly opposed to being laughed at. Besides, he felt seriously his grave deficiencies of speech.

"I-I-I was s-sorter expectin' a-a-another kind of c-c-caller," he stuttered desperately, in explanation, every freckle standing out in prominence, "an' th-th-thought m-m-maybe somebody 'd g-g-got the d-drop on me."

The girl only laughed again, her black eyes sparkling. Yet beneath his steady, questioning gaze her face slightly sobered, a faint flush becoming apparent in either cheek.

"You talk so ver' funny, senior; you so big like de tree, an' say vords dat vay; it make me forget an' laf. You moost not care just for me. Pah! but it vas fight all de time vid you, was n't it, senior? Biff, bang, kill; ver' bad," and she clapped her gauntleted hands together sharply. "But not me; I vas only girl; no gun, no knife---see. I just like know more 'bout mine---Americano's mine; you show me how it vork. *Sabe?*"

Stutter appeared puzzled, doubtful.

"Mexicana?" he questioned, kicking a piece of rock with his heavy boot.

"Si, senior, but I speak de English ver' good. I Mercedes Morales, an' I like ver' much de brav' Americanos. I like de red hair, too, senior---in Mexico it all de same color like dis," and she shook out her own curling ebon locks in sudden shower. "I tink de red hair vas more beautiful."

Mr. Brown was not greatly accustomed to having his rather fiery top-knot thus openly referred to in tones of evident admiration. It was a subject he naturally felt somewhat sensitive about, and in spite of the open honesty of the young girl's face, he could not help doubting for a moment the sincerity of her speech.

"L-l-like f-fun yer do," he growled uneasily. "A-a-anyhow, whut are yer d-d-doin' yere?"

For answer she very promptly swung one neatly booted foot over and dropped lightly to the ground, thus revealing her slender figure. Her most notable beauty was the liquid blackness of her eyes.

"Si, I tell you all dat ver' quick, senor," she explained frankly, nipping the rock-pile with her riding whip, and bending over to peer, with undisguised curiosity, into the yawning shaft-hole. "I ride out from San Juan for vat you call constitutional---mercy, such a vord, senor!---an' I stray up dis trail. See? It vas most steep, my, so steep, like I slide off; but de mustang he climb de hill, all right, an' den I see you, senor, an' know dere vas a mine here. Not de big mine---bah! I care not for dat kind---but just one leetle mine, vere I no be 'fraid to go down. Den I look at you, so big, vid de beautiful red hair, an' de kin' face, an' I sink he vood let me see how dey do such tings---he vas nice fellow, if he vas all mud on de clothes. Si, for I know nice fellow, do I not, *amigo? Si, bueno*. So you vill show to me how de brav' Americanos dig out de yellow gold, senor?"

She flashed her tempting glance up into the man's face, and Brown stamped his feet nervously, endeavoring to appear stern.

"C-c-could n't h-hardly do it, m-m-miss. It 's t-too blame dirty d-d-down below fer y-your sort. B-b-besides, my p-pardner ain't yere, an' he m-m-might not l-like it."

"You haf de pardner? Who vas de pardner?"

"H-h-his name's H-H-Hicks."

She clasped her hands in an ecstasy of unrestrained delight.

"Beell Heeks? Oh, senor, I know Beell Heeks. He vas ver' nice fellow, too---but no so pretty like you; he old man an' swear---Holy Mother, how he swear! He tol' me once come out any time an' see hees mine. I not know vere it vas before. Maybe de angels show me. You vas vat Beell call Stutter Brown, I tink maybe? Ah, now it be all right, senor. *Bueno!*"

She laid her gauntleted hand softly on the rough sleeve of his woollen shirt, her black, appealing eyes flashing suddenly up into his troubled face.

"I moost laugh, senor; such a brav' Americano 'fraid of de girl. Why not you shoot me?"

"A-a-afraid nothin'," and Stutter's freckled face became instantly as rosy as his admired hair, "b-but I t-tell ye, miss, it's a-a-all d-dirt down th-there, an' not f-f-fit fer no lady ter t-t-traipse round in."

The temptress, never once doubting her power, smiled most bewitchingly, her hands eloquent.

"You vas good boy, just like I tink; I wear dis ol' coat---see; an' den I turn up de skirt, so. I no 'fraid de dirt. Now, vat you say, senor? *Bueno?*"

Thus speaking, she seized upon the discarded and somewhat disreputable garment, flung it carelessly about her shapely shoulders, shrugging them coquettishly, her great eyes shyly uplifting to his relenting face, and began swiftly to fasten up her already short dress in disregard of the exposure of trim ankles. The agitated Mr. Brown coughed, his uneasy glances straying down the open shaft. He would gladly, and with extreme promptness, have shoved the cold muzzle of his Colt beneath the nose of any man at such moment of trial; but this young girl, with a glance and a laugh, had totally disarmed him. Disturbed conscience, a feeling akin to disloyalty, pricked him, but the temptation left him powerless to resist---those black eyes held him already captive; and yet in this moment of wavering indecision, that teasing hand once again rested lightly upon his shirt-sleeve.

"Please do dat, senor," the voice low and pleading. "It vas not ver' mooch just to let a girl see your leetle mine. What harm, senor? But maybe it's so because you no like me?"

Startled by so unjust a suspicion, the eyes of the young giant instantly revealed a degree of interest which caused her own to light up suddenly, her red lips parting in a quick, appreciative smile which disclosed the white teeth.

"Ah, I see it vas not dat. Eet make glad de heart---make eet to sing like de birds. Now I know eet will be as I vish. How do I get down, senor?"

Thus easily driven from his last weak entrenchments, his heart fluttering to the seduction of her suggestive glance, the embarrassed Stutter made unconditional surrender, a gruff oath growling in his throat. He leaned out over the dark shaft, his supporting hand on the drum.

"Come u-u-up, M-M-Mike," he called, rattling his letters like castanets. "I w-w-want to g-go d-d-down."

There followed a sound of falling rocks below, a fierce shaking of the suspended rope, and then a muffled voice sang out an order, "H'ist away, and be dommed ter yer." Brown devoted himself assiduously to the creaking windlass, although never able entirely to remove his attention from that bright-robed, slender figure standing so closely at his side. For one brief second he vaguely wondered if she could be a witch, and he looked furtively aside, only to perceive her bright eyes smiling happily at him. Then suddenly a totally bald head shot up through the opening, a seamed face the color of parchment, with squinting gray eyes, peered suspiciously about, while a gnarled hand reached forth, grasped a post in support, and dragged out into the sunlight a short, sturdy body. Mike straightened up, with a peculiar jerk, on the dump, spat viciously over the edge of the canyon, and drew a short, black pipe from out a convenient pocket in his shirt. He made no audible comment, but stood, his back planted to the two watchers; and Stutter cleared his throat noisily.

"Th-th-this l-l-lady wants ter s-s-see how we m-m-mine," he explained in painful embarrassment, "a-an' I th-th-thought I 'd t-take her d-d-down if you 'd w-work the w-w-windlass a b-bit."

Old Mike turned slowly around and fronted the two, his screwed-up eyes on the girl, while with great deliberation he drew a match along the leg of his canvas trousers.

"Anything to oblige ye," he said gruffly. "Always ready to hilp the ladies---be me sowl, Oi've married three of thim already. An' wus this Hicks's orthers, Stutter?"

"N-n-no, not exactly," Brown admitted, with evident reluctance. "B-but ye s-s-see, she's a g-great friend o' B-B-Bill's, an' so I reckon it 'll be all r-right. Don't s-see how n-no harm kin be d-d-done."

The pessimistic Michael slowly blew a cloud of pungent smoke into the air, sucking hard at his pipe-stem, and laid his rough hands on the windlass handle.

"None o' my dommed funeral, beggin' yer pardon, miss," he condescended to mutter in slight apology. "Long as the pay goes on, Oi 'd jst as soon work on top as down below. H'ist the female into the bucket, ye overgrown dood!"

Stutter Brown, still nervous from recurring doubts, awkwardly assisted his vivacious charge to attain safe footing, anxiously bade her hold firmly to the swaying rope, and stood, carefully steadying the line as it slowly disappeared, hypnotized still by those marvellous black eyes, which continued to peer up at him until they vanished within the darkness. Leaning far over to listen, the young miner heard the bucket touch bottom, and then, with a quick word of warning to the man grasping the handle, he swung himself out on the taut rope, and went swiftly down, hand over hand.

Mike, still grumbling huskily to himself, waited until the windlass ceased vibrating, securely anchored the handle with a strip of raw-hide, and composedly sat down, his teeth set firmly on the pipe-stem, his eyes already half closed. It was an obstinate, mulish old face, seamed and creased, the bright sunlight rendering more manifest the leather-like skin, the marvellous network of wrinkles about eyes and mouth. Not being paid for thought, the old fellow now contented himself with dozing, quite confident of not being quickly disturbed.

In this he was right. The two were below for fully an hour, while above them Mike leaned with back comfortably propped against the windlass in perfect contentment, and the hobbled pony peacefully cropped the short grass along the ledge. Then the brooding silence was abruptly broken by a voice rising from out the depths of the shaft, while a vigorous shaking of the dangling rope caused the windlass to vibrate sharply. Old Mike, with great deliberation stowing away his pipe, unslipped the raw-hide, and, calmly indifferent to all else except his necessary labor, slowly hauled the girl to the surface. She was radiant, her eyes glowing from the excitement of unusual adventure, and scrambled forth from the dangling bucket without awaiting assistance. Before Brown attained to the surface, the lady had safely captured the straying pony and swung herself lightly into the saddle. Squaring his broad shoulders with surprise as he came out, his face flushed, his lips set firm, the young giant laid restraining fingers on her gloved hand.

"Y-y-you really m-mean it?" he asked, eagerly, as though fearing the return to daylight might already have altered her decision. "C-can I c-call on you wh-wh-where you s-s-said?"

She smiled sweetly down at him, her eyes picturing undisguised admiration of his generous proportions, and frank, boyish face.

"Si, si, senior. *Sapristi*, why not? 'T is I, rather, who 'fraid you forget to come."

"Y-you n-need n't be," he stammered, coloring. "S-senorita, I sh-shall never f-f-forget this day."

"*Quien sabe?*---poof! no more vill I; but now, *adios*, senior."

She touched her pony's side sharply with the whip, and, standing motionless, Stutter watched them disappear over the abrupt ledge. Once she glanced shyly back, with a little seductive wave of the gauntleted hand, and then suddenly dropped completely out of view down the steep descent of the trail. Old Mike struck another match, and held the tiny flame to his pipe-bowl.

"An' it's hell ye played the day," he remarked reflectively, his eyes glowing gloomily.

The younger man wheeled suddenly about and faced him.

"Wh-what do ye m-m-mean?"

"Jist the same whut I said, Stutter. Ye 're a broight one, ye are. That's the Mexican dancer down at the Gayety at San Juan, no less; and it's dollars to doughnuts, me bye, that that dom Farnham sint her out here to take a peek at us. It wud be loike the slippery cuss, an' I hear the two of thim are moighty chummy."

And Stutter Brown, his huge fists clinched in anger, looked off into the dark valley below, and, forgetting his affliction of speech, swore like a man.

CHAPTER VII

A DISMISSAL

The far from gentle orchestra at the Gayety was playing with a vivacity which set the pulses leaping, while the densely packed audience, scarcely breathing from intensity of awakened interest, were focussing their eager eyes upon a slender, scarlet-robed figure, an enveloping cloud of gossamer floating mistily about her, her black hair and eyes vividly contrasting against the clear whiteness of her skin, as she yielded herself completely to the strange convolutions of her weird dance. The wide stage was a yellow flood of light, and she the very witch of motion. This was her third encore, but, as wildly grotesque as ever, her full skirts shimmering in the glare of the foot-lights, her tripping feet barely touching the sanded floor, her young, supple figure, light as a fairy, weaving in the perfect rhythm of music, the tireless child of Mexico leaped and spun, wheeled and twirled,---at times apparently floated upon the very air, her bare white arms extended, her wonderful eyes blazing from the exhilaration of this moment of supreme triumph.

Beth Norvell, neatly gowned for the street, her own more sedate performance already concluded, had paused for a single curious instant in the shadow of the wings, and remained looking out upon that scarlet figure, flitting here and there like some tropical bird, through the gaudy glare of the stage. Winston, waiting patiently for twenty minutes amid the denser gloom just inside the stage door, watched the young girl's unconsciously interested face, wondering alike at both himself and her. This entire adventure remained an unsolved problem to his mystified mind---how it was she yet continued to retain his interest; why it was he could never wholly succeed in divorcing her from his life. He endeavored now to imagine her a mere ordinary woman of the stage, whom he might idly flirt with to-night, and quite as easily forget to-morrow. Yet from some cause the mind failed to respond to such suggestion. There was something within the calm, womanly face as revealed beneath the reflection of garish light, something in the very poise of the slender figure bending slightly forward in aroused enthusiasm, which compelled his respect, aroused his admiration. She was not a common woman, and he could not succeed in blinding himself to that fact. Even the garish, cheap environments, the glitter and tinsel, the noise and brutality, had utterly failed to tarnish Beth Norvell. She stood forth different, distinct, a perfectly developed flower, rarely beautiful, although blooming in muck that was overgrown with noxious weeds. Winston remained clearly conscious that some peculiar essence of her native character had mysteriously perfumed the whole place---it glorified her slight bit of stage work, and had already indelibly impressed itself upon those rough, boisterous Western spirits out in front. Before her parting lips uttered a line she had thoroughly mastered them, the innate purity of her perfected womanhood, the evident innocence of her purpose, shielding her against all indecency and insult. The ribald scoffing, the insolent shuffling of feet, the half-drunken uneasiness, ceased as if by magic; and as her simple act proceeded, the stillness out in front became positively solemn, the startled faces picturing an awakening to higher things. It was a triumph far exceeding the noisy outburst that greeted the Mexican---a moral victory over unrestrained lawlessness won simply by true womanliness, unaided and alone. That earlier scene had brought to Winston a deeper realization of this girl's genius, a fresher appreciation of the true worth of her esteem. No struggle of heart or head could ever again lower her in his secret thought to the common level.

The swinging strains of the dancer's accompaniment concluded with a blare of noisy triumph, the mad enthusiasts out in front wildly shouting her name above the frantic din of applause, while, flushed and panting, the agile Mexican dancer swept into the darkened wings like a scarlet bird.

"Ah, de Americana!" she exclaimed, her eyes yet blazing from excitement, poising herself directly in front of her silent watcher. "Senorita, it ees not de same as yours---dey like you, si; but dey lofe Mercedes."

Miss Norvell smiled gently, her gaze on the other's flushed, childish face, and extended her hand.

"There seems ample room for both of us," she replied, pleasantly, "yet your dancing is truly wonderful. It is an art, and you must let me thank you."

It is difficult to understand why, but the untamed, passionate girl, stung in some mysterious manner by these quietly spoken words of appreciation, instantly drew her slight form erect.

"You nevar forget you not one of us, do you?" she questioned in sudden bitterness of spirit. "Pah! maybe you tink I care what you like. I dance because I lofe to; because it sets my blood on fire. I no care for all your airs of fine lady."

"I exceedingly regret you should feel so. I certainly spoke in kindness and appreciation. Would you permit me to pass?"

The angry young Mexican swept back her scarlet skirts as though in disdain, her white shoulders uplifted. She did not know why she felt thus vindictive; to save her soul she could not have told the reason, yet deep down within her passionate heart there existed a hatred for this white, silent American, whose slightest word sounded to her like rebuke. She stood there still, watching suspiciously, smouldering dislike burning in her black eyes, when Winston suddenly stepped from the concealing shadows with a word of unexpected greeting. She noticed the sudden flush sweep into Miss Norvell's cheek, the quick uplifting of her eyes, the almost instant drooping again of veiling lashes, and, quickly comprehending it all, stepped promptly forward just far enough to obtain a clear view of the young man's face. The next moment the two had vanished into the night without. Mercedes laughed unpleasantly to herself, her white teeth gleaming.

"Ah, Merciful Mother! so my ver' fine lady has found herself a lofer here already. *Sapristi*, an' he is well worth lookin' at! I will ask of de stage manager his name."

Outside, beneath the faint glimmer of the stars, Winston offered his arm, and Miss Norvell accepted it silently. It was no more than a short stroll to the hotel, and the street at that particular hour was sufficiently deserted, so the young man rather keenly felt the evident constraint of his companion. It impressed him as unnatural, and he felt inclined to attribute her state of mind to the unpleasant scene he had just beheld.

"Senorita Mercedes does not appear very kindly disposed toward you," he ventured. "Have you quarrelled already?"

"You refer to the Mexican dancer?" she questioned, glancing aside at him curiously. "Really, I did not remember having heard the girl's name mentioned before. Do you know her?"

"Only as she is announced on the bills, and having seen her dance from the front of the house. She is certainly a true artist in her line, the most expert I recall ever having seen. What has ever made her your enemy?"

"I am sure I do not know. Her words were a complete surprise; I was too greatly astonished even to resent them. I have never spoken to the girl until to-night, and then merely uttered a sentence of sincere congratulation. She is extremely pretty, and it seems quite too bad she should be compelled to lead such a life. She does not appear older than seventeen."

He glanced about at her in surprise.

"Such a life," he echoed, recklessly. "So then you actually pity others while remaining totally unconcerned regarding yourself?"

"Oh, no; you greatly mistake, or else wilfully misconstrue. I am not unconcerned, yet there is a very wide difference, I am sure. This girl is at the Gayety from deliberate choice; she as much as told me so. She is in love with that sort of life. Probably she has never known anything better, while I am merely fighting out a bit of hard luck, and, within two weeks, at the longest, shall again be free. Surely, you cannot hint that we stand upon the same level."

"God forbid!" fervently. "Yet just as sincerely I wish you did not deem it necessary to remain for even that brief length of time. It is a shock to me to realize your intimate association with such depraved characters. You are surely aware that my purse remains at your disposal, if you will only cut the whole thing."

She lifted her eyes reproachfully to his face.

"Yes, I know; and possibly you are justified according to your code for feeling in that way. But I do not believe I am becoming in the least contaminated by evil associations, nor do I feel any lowering of moral ideals. I am doing what I imagine to be right under the circumstances, and have already given you my final decision, as well as my reason for it. You say 'such depraved characters.' Can you refer to this Mercedes? Strange as it may seem, I confess feeling an interest in this beautiful Mexican girl. What is it you know regarding her?"

The young man impulsively started to speak, but as instantly paused. An instinctive dread of uttering those plain words he would much prefer she should never hear served to soften his language.

"There is not a great deal of reserve about the Gayety," he explained lightly, "and indiscriminate gossip is a part of its advertising equipment. As to Senorita Mercedes, my only informant is common rumor out in front. That connects her name quite familiarly with one of the proprietors of the gambling rooms."

"You have no reason to know this?"

"None whatever. As I say, it has come to me in the form of common rumor. The man referred to is the special faro expert, a fellow named Farnham."

Miss Norvell started violently, her fingers clutching his arm as if to keep her body from falling, her face grown suddenly white.

"Farnham, did you say? What---what Farnham?"

"I believe I have heard him familiarly spoken of as 'Biff.'"

"Here? Here in San Juan? 'Biff' Farnham here?" The startled words appeared to stick in the swelling white throat, and she stood staring at him, her slender figure swaying as though he had struck her a physical blow. "Oh, I never knew that!"

Winston, shocked and surprised by this unexpected outburst, did not speak, his face slowly hardening to the dim suspicion thus suddenly aroused by her agitation and her impetuous exclamation. She must have taken instant warning from the expression of his eyes, for, with an effort, she faced him in regained calmness, a slight tremor in her low voice alone betraying the lack of complete self-control.

"Your information certainly startled me greatly," she exclaimed slowly. "It was so unexpected, and so much has happened of late to affect my nerves."

They walked on in silence, and as he ventured to glance aside at her, uncertain regarding his future course, her eyes were lowered and hidden behind the drooping lashes.

"And is that all?" he asked.

"All? Why, what more is there?"

He compressed his lips, striving not to exhibit openly his impatience.

"Nothing, of course," he acquiesced quietly, "if the lady prefers keeping silent. Only, as matters now stand, the result may prove an unpleasant misunderstanding."

They were now at the bottom of the few steps leading up toward the hotel entrance, and Miss Norvell, removing her hand from the support of his arm, stood before him outwardly calm.

"Beyond doubt, you refer to my apparent surprise at first hearing Mr. Farnham's name mentioned?"

He bowed quietly, again fascinated and disarmed by the revelation in those dark eyes.

"The explanation is quite simple," and the voice exhibited a touch of coolness easily perceptible. "I chanced to be somewhat acquainted with this man in the East before---well, before he became a gambler. Of course, I do not know him now, have not the slightest desire to do so, but the sudden information that he was actually here, and---and all the rest---came to me with a shock. Is that sufficient?"

The young man was unsatisfied, and, without doubt, his face quite clearly exhibited his true feeling. Yet there was that about her constrained manner which held him to respectful silence, so that for a moment the hesitation between them grew almost painful. Miss Norvell, realizing this new danger, struggled weakly against sudden temptation to throw herself unreservedly upon the mercy of this new friend, confide wholly in him, accept his proffered aid, and flee from possible coming trouble. But pride proved even stronger than fear, and her lips closed in firm resolution.

"Mr. Winston," she said, and now her eyes were uplifted unfaltering to his own. "I find myself obliged to speak with a frankness I have hoped to avoid. It was never my desire that you should call for me at the theatre to-night."

"Indeed?" His surprised tone clearly exhibited the sudden hurt of the wound.

"Yes; yet, pray do not misunderstand me. I find it exceedingly difficult to say this, and I confess I have even prayed that you would be led to go away voluntarily, and without its being necessary for me to appear discourteous. I appreciate your kindness, your gentlemanly conduct. I---I greatly value your friendship, prize it more highly, possibly, than you will ever be able to realize; yet, believe me, there are reasons why I cannot permit you to---to be with me any longer in this way. It is for your sake, as well as my own, that I am driven to speak thus frankly, and I am certain you will not add to my pain, my embarrassment, by asking more definite explanation."

His heart beating like a trip-hammer, Winston stood motionless, staring into the girl's appealing face, suddenly aroused to her full meaning, and as thoroughly awakened to a conception of what she really had become to him. The thought of losing her, losing her perhaps to another, seemed to chill his very soul.

"Assuredly, I will respect your secret," he answered, mastering his voice with an effort. "I understand when I am bowled out. What is it you desire me to do?"

He could not perceive in that dim light the sudden mist of tears clouding her eyes, but she lifted her gloved hand and swept them aside.

"It is not easy to say such things, yet I must. I wish you to go away; go back to Denver," she exclaimed; then, all at once, her strained voice broke into a little sob. "I cannot stand your presence here!"

That last impetuous sentence burst through his armor of constraint, and for the instant he forgot everything but that thoughtless confession. She read it in his face, and as quickly flung forth her hand in warning, but he only grasped it tightly within his own.

"You cannot stand it!" he cried in passionate eagerness. "Then you must care for me? You must love me, Beth?"

"No, no!" Her eyes were full of agony, and she sought to free her imprisoned hand. "Oh, hush! I beg of you, hush! You---you hurt me so. I will not permit you to speak such words. Please release my hand."

He loosened his grasp, feeling bewildered, ashamed, dimly conscious that he had been guilty of an ungentlemanly action, yet deep within his own heart assured that he felt no regret.

"Do you mean that?" he questioned vaguely.

"Yes," and all the previous tremor had left her clear voice. "I did not suppose you would ever say such a thing to me. I gave you no right to speak those words."

"My own heart gave me the right."

Possibly the woman in her conquered; perhaps there was a nameless hunger within her soul which made her long to hear the forbidden words just once from his lips.

"The right, you say? What right?"

"To tell you that I love you."

She drew a quick, quivering breath, the rich color surging into her cheeks, her gloved hands clasped across her heaving bosom as though to still the fierce throbbing of her heart. An instant she stood as if palsied, trembling, from head to foot, although he could perceive nothing. Her lips smiled.

"Oh, indeed," she said archly, "and how very prettily you said it! The only son of Colonel Winston, the wealthy banker of Denver, honors Miss Norvell, actress, and she, of course, feels highly grateful!"

"Beth, stop!" His voice was indignantly earnest. "It is not that; you must know it is not that!"

"I only know it is supremely ridiculous," she returned, more coldly; "yet if I did not believe you spoke with some degree of honesty I should deem your words a deliberate insult, and treat them accordingly. As it is, I prefer regarding your speech merely as an evidence of temporary insanity. Ned Winston making love to Beth Norvell! Why, you do not even know my true name, the story of my life, or that I am in any way worthy of your mere friendship. Love! You love me, an actress in a fly-by-night company, a variety artist at the Gayety! What would they say at home?"

"I know you."

"Ah, but you do not in the least," her voice grown steady and serious. "That is the whole trouble. You do not in the least know me. I am not even what you imagine me to be. I am a fraud, a cheat, a masquerader. Know me! Why, if you did,

instead of speaking words of love you would despise; instead of seeking, you would run away. Oh, let us end this farce forever; it is as painful to myself as to you. Promise me, Ned Winston, that you will return to Denver."

She tantalized, tempted him even while she thus openly renounced. He struggled madly with an almost overmastering desire to burst forth in strenuous denial, to lay his whole life unreservedly at her feet. Yet something within the girl's resolute face steadied him, made him feel her decision as unchangeable.

"Beth---you---you will not listen?"

"No---not to another word."

"You do not believe me?"

He marked the quick restraining pressure of her lips, the tumultuous rise and fall of her breast.

"Yes, I believe you," she admitted, almost wearily. "You mean it---now; but---but it is impossible. I wish you to go."

An instant Winston stood looking straight into those dark, glowing eyes, and all his inherited strength of manhood came trooping back to aid him. He comprehended in that moment of intense resolution that this woman had become the whole world to him. That one fact never would change. It came over him as a distinct revelation untinged by either despair or hope. It was merely an unalterable truth, which he must henceforth face as fate willed. He was of fighting blood, and the seeming obstacles in the way of success did not dismay; they merely served to inspire him to greater efforts.

"Unfortunately, I am not at present free to go," he replied, more quietly, "for the reason that I have already accepted some professional work here. However, I agree not to trouble you again with my presence until---"

He paused in uncertainty as to his next word.

"What?"

"You give me welcome."

She extended her hand.

"You certainly speak with sufficient confidence."

"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread," he quoted lightly; "and I herewith announce myself a firm believer in miracles."

"Then your faith is about to be put to a most severe test."

"I welcome that. Yet, if parting is insisted upon, we can, at least, remain friends. You certainly do not hold my words against me?"

The flush, although fainter, again crept into the clear cheeks, and her eyes fell before this questioning.

"No true woman ever remains wholly indifferent," she acknowledged with swift frankness, "or neglects to think kindly in her secret heart of any one who has told her that story; and I am a woman."

For a brief moment her hand rested warm and throbbing within his own, and there passed an electric flash of the eyes between them. Then she withdrew her fingers and opened the door.

"Good-bye," she whispered, the word lingering like perfume, and vanished, even as he took a step toward her.

CHAPTER VIII

"HE MEANS FIGHT"

Winston remained staring blankly at the closed door behind which she had so swiftly vanished, his mind a chaos of doubt. He assuredly never purposed saying what he had said under the spur of deprivation, yet he regretted no single word that he had uttered. That he earnestly worshipped this briefly known woman was a fact borne in upon him suddenly; yet now, the fact once completely realized, he surrendered unconditionally to the inevitable. For a moment his thought of her obscured all lesser things; he saw nothing else in the wide world really worth striving after--every aroused impulse thrilled to the fair face, the soft voice of Beth Norvell. He was no "quitter," no faint-heart either in love or in war, and he was now far too deeply in earnest to accept as final a stingless rejection spoken by lips that were so openly contradicted by the smiling eyes above. Whatever of stern necessity might have inspired the utterance of such words of cold renunciation, it was assuredly neither indifference nor dislike. He forgave the lips, recalling only the eyes.

With his hand still pressed against the porch railing, the young man suddenly recalled Biff Farnham, his cool gray eyes as instantly hardening, his lips pressed together. What possible part in the dusk of the shadowed past did that disreputable gambler play? What connection could he hold, either in honor or dishonor, with the previous life history of Beth Norvell? He did not in the least doubt her, for it was Winston's nature to be entirely loyal, to be unsuspecting of those he once trusted. Yet he could not continue completely blind. That there once existed some connection it was impossible to ignore entirely. Her laughing, yet clearly embarrassed, attempt at explanation had not in the slightest deceived him, for beyond it remained her quick surprise at that earliest unexpected mention of the man's name, the suddenly blanched cheeks, the unconcealed fright revealed by the dark eyes. The full truth was to be read there, and not in her later more deliberate attempt at leading his suspicions astray. There was nothing pleasant about this thought, and Winston's sensitive face flushed, his glance wandering uneasily down the midnight street. For the space of a block, or more, where numerous tents and low wooden buildings stood deserted of tenants, all remained dark and silent; but just beyond glowed brilliantly the many-hued lights of the wide-awake Poodle-Dog, and he could even hear the band playing noisily within the still more distant dance hall. This combined sight and sound served to arouse him to action and a cool resolve. If he really intended to play out this game successfully he must learn something of its conditions. Besides, he had now two most excellent reasons for desiring to form an early acquaintance with this man Farnham--the fellow had come across his line of life twice within the past twelve hours. For the purpose there could be no time better than the present. He struck a match against the rough railing and lighted for himself a fresh cigar, his clear-cut, manly features showing calmly determined in that instant glare of sputtering flame. Almost unconsciously, following the instinct of his long Western training, he slipped a revolver from its customary resting-place at the hip, and dropped the weapon conveniently into the side pocket of his loose sack coat. He had heard some tales of this man he purposed seeking, and it might prove well to be prepared for emergencies.

The bar-room of the blazing Poodle-Dog was thronged with men--men standing before the long, sloppy bar, men seated around rough tables, and men lounging here and there in groups about the heavily sanded floor. Uninterestedly glancing at these, Winston paused for an idle moment, his eyes fastened upon a whirling spectacle of dancers in the hall beyond. It formed a scene of mad revelry; yet in his present state of mind, he cared little for its frontier picturesqueness, and soon turned away, mounting the broad stairway down which, like an invitation, echoed the sharp click of ivory chips, and the excited voices of those absorbed in play. In both size and gorgeousness of decoration the rooms above were a surprise--a glitter of lights, a babel of noises, a continuous jumble of figures, while over all trembled a certain tension of

excitement, terrible in its enchaining power. The very atmosphere seemed electric, filled with a deadly charm. The dull roar of undistinguishable voices sounded incessantly, occasionally punctuated by those sharp, penetrating tones with which the scattered dealers called varied turns of play, or by some deep oath falling unnoted from desperate lips as the unhappy end came. Winston, who had seen many similar scenes, glanced with his usual cool indifference at the various groups of players, careless except in his search, and pressing straight through the vibrating, excited throng, regardless of the many faces fronting him. He understood that Farnham dealt faro, and consequently moved directly down the long main room totally indifferent to all else. He discovered his particular goal at last, almost at the farther end of the great apartment, the crowd gathered about the faro table dense and silent. He succeeded in pressing in slowly through the outer fringe of players until he attained a position within ten feet of the dealer. There he halted, leaning against the wall, the narrow space between them unoccupied.

He saw before him a slenderly built, fashionably dressed figure, surmounted by clear-cut, smooth-shaven features---a man of thirty, possibly, decidedly aristocratic, perfectly self-controlled, his eyes cool, calculating, his hands swift, unhesitating in play. From some mysterious cause this masterful repose of the absorbed dealer began immediately to exercise a serious fascination over the man watching him. He did not appear altogether human, he seemed rather like some perfectly adjusted machine, able to think and plan, yet as unemotional as so much tempered steel. There was no perceptible change passing in that utterly impassive face, no brightening of those cold, observant eyes, no faintest movement of the tightly compressed lips. It was as though he wore a mask completely eclipsing every natural human feeling. Twice Winston, observing closely from his post of vantage slightly to the rear the swift action of those slender white fingers, could have sworn the dealer faced the wrong card, yet the dangerous trick was accomplished so quickly, so coolly, with never a lowering of the eyes, the twitching of a muscle, that a moment later the half-jealous watcher doubted the evidence of his own keen eyesight. As the final fateful card came silently gliding forth and was deliberately turned, face upward, amid bitter curses telling the disappointment of that breathless crowd, a young woman suddenly swept around the lower edge of the long table, brushing Winston with her flapping skirt as she passed, bent down, and whispered a half-dozen rapid sentences into the gambler's ear. The hands, already deftly shuffling the cards for another deal, scarcely paused in their operations, nor did those cool, observant eyes once desert the sea of excited faces before him. He asked a single brief question, nodded carelessly to the hastily spoken reply, and then, as the woman drew noiselessly away, Winston gazed directly into the startled black eyes of Senorita Mercedes. Instantly she smiled merrily, exhibiting her white teeth.

"Ah, senor," and she bent toward him in seductive whisper, "so my lady, de Americana, let you escape early to-night!"

Surprised at her recognition, he failed to answer immediately, and the girl touched him gently with her hand.

"De girls of my race never so cold, senor. Try me some time, an' see."

With a happy laugh and coquettish uplifting of the dark eyes, the dancer was as quickly gone, vanishing into the throng like a flash of red flame. For a breathless moment Winston's admiring gaze followed, conscious merely of her dark beauty, her slender, graceful figure. He was young, impressionable, and there was rare witchery about the girl which momentarily fascinated him. His attention shifted back to Farnham with a swift remembrance of the stern purpose which had brought him there. The gambler was playing out his case silently, emotionless as ever. If he had observed anything unusual, if he considered anything beyond his card-play, no eye could have detected it in that impassive countenance, those cold, expressionless eyes. Apparently he was a mere automaton, the sole symbol of life showing in the white fingers so deftly dealing the fateful pasteboards from the box. The impatient, excited crowd facing him moved restlessly, cursing or laughing with each swift turn of play; but he who wrought the spell neither spoke nor smiled, his face remaining fixed, immutable, as emotionless as carven granite. Suddenly he glanced meaningfully aside, and, nodding silently to a black-moustached fellow lounging beside the croupier, rose quickly from his chair. The other as instantly slipped into it, his hands guarding the few remaining cards, while Farnham stood for a moment behind the chair, idly

looking on. There was no noticeable interruption to the game, and when the final card came gliding forth from the silver box, the imperturbable gamester turned deliberately away from the table, heedless of the desperate struggle about him, the curses and uproar, and faced the younger man still leaning against the wall.

"Mr. Winston?" he questioned quietly.

Surprised by this unexpected notice, the other bowed in silent acknowledgment of his name.

A faint sarcastic smile curved the thin, compressed lips, while Farnham ran one hand carelessly through his slightly curling hair.

"I should like a few words with you in private," he explained politely. "There is a vacant room we can use---this way."

Astonished into yielding without protest, and at the same time feeling sufficiently eager to learn the cause for such a request, Winston unhesitatingly followed the other through the press, marking as he did so the slender erectness of that figure in advance, the square set of the broad shoulders, the easy air of authority with which he cleared the way. Without ceremony Farnham flung aside a heavy brocaded curtain, glancing inquiringly into the smaller room thus revealed. It contained a square table and half a dozen chairs. Three men sat within, their feet elevated, quietly smoking. The gambler coolly ran his eyes over their uplifted faces.

"I desire to use this room, gents," he announced quietly. "You 'll find plenty of vacant space outside."

Whether the lounging trio knew the speaker of old, or were sufficiently satisfied from his stern face of the probable results should they long hesitate to comply, the three pairs of feet came down together, their owners passing out in single file. Farnham waved his hand politely toward the vacated interior, a slight measure of deference apparent in his modulated voice.

"Help yourself to a chair, Mr. Winston, and permit me to offer you a fresh cigar; a fairly good one I imagine, as I chance to be somewhat particular regarding the weed."

A moment they sat thus furtively studying each other's face across the table through the increasing clouds of blue smoke, the younger man puzzled and filled with vague suspicion, the elder still rather uncertain of his present ground, as well as of the exact sort of character opposing him. He was somewhat expert in judging human nature; and the full, square chin, the frank, open look in those steady gray eyes across the table left him doubtful of the final outcome.

"No doubt, my addressing you by name was something of a surprise," he began, leaning slightly forward, his cigar between his fingers; "but as it chanced, you were pointed out to me on the street a few hours since. May I inquire in this connection if, by any freak of fortune, you can be Ned Winston, of Denver?"

"I am."

Farnham permitted his lips to smile genially, although his eyes remained utterly devoid of humor. He was skating upon rather thin ice now, realizing it to be far safer to make the venture in all boldness. What he might need to say later would altogether depend upon how much this man really knew.

"I was not previously assured of that fact," he explained, pleasantly. "It was my pleasure at one time to be quite intimately associated with an old friend of yours, a college chum, I believe---Robert Craig, of Chicago."

The swift light of pleasant remembrance glowed instantly within the other's watchful eyes. For the moment he dropped his guard in the surprise of this avowal.

"Bob Craig! Indeed; why, I do not recall his ever having mentioned your name to me."

Farnham's suspended breath burst through his compressed lips in sudden relief.

"Very probably not," he admitted, quietly, yet having the grace to lower his eyes slightly. "My own intimacy with Craig occurred since his college days. However, he has spoken to me regarding you quite frequently, and I naturally esteem it a pleasure to meet with you personally."

Winston did not immediately reply, puzzling his confused mind in a wholly useless attempt at recalling his ever having heard this man's name before. But Farnham, placed completely at his ease regarding possible recognition, proceeded coolly.

"Yet, that does not sufficiently account for my inviting you here." And he leaned farther across the table, slightly lowering his voice. "My important reason for speaking is entirely a business one. You are, I understand, a mining engineer?"

Winston permitted his eyes to acquiesce, fully determined now to allow this man to exhibit his own hand completely before making any return play. Farnham, watching the face of the other closely, paused to relight his cigar.

"The simple fact is," he resumed, carelessly, "we are having some little difficulty at present regarding certain mining claims we are operating up in Echo Canyon. Nothing at all serious, you understand, but there 's plenty of bad blood, and we naturally prefer keeping the entire controversy out of the courts, if possible. A lawsuit, whatever its final result, would be quite certain to tie up the property for an indefinite period. Besides, lawsuits in this country cost money. The man who has been making the greater part of the existing trouble, a drunken, quarrelsome old mountain shell-back, named Hicks, came in here to see me this afternoon. He was in blamed bad humor, and threatened to blow my brains out unless I came to his terms. No doubt he meant it, and consequently I got rid of him the easiest way I could, and that was by lying. I 've always preferred to lie rather than get shot. Hard to account for tastes, you know. However among other things the fellow chanced to mention while here was that you had been employed to look after their interests. I presume that statement was merely a bluff?"

"Well, not precisely," admitted Winston, when the other paused. "I agreed to go out there, and look over the ground."

Farnham smiled deprecatingly, his cigar gripped tightly between his white teeth.

"Just about as I supposed. No particular harm done as yet, and no contract made; time enough left to draw out of a bad bargain. Well, Winston, I am here to tell you that outfit is not the kind you want to associate yourself with if you desire to stand well in this camp. That 's the straight goods. They 're simply a lot of blackmailers and irresponsible thieves. Why, damn it, man, the actual fact is, they can't get a single reputable mining engineer in all this whole district to take hold of their dirty work. That 's why they 've had to hunt up a new man, and got track of you."

"So Hicks admitted," interposed the younger man gravely, "although he put it in rather different form. He said it was because you had the money, and your crowd bought them all up."

"Oh, he did, did he?" and the gambler laughed outright. "Well, that sort of a job would n't be very costly---to outbid that measly outfit. It would be a sight cheaper than litigation, I reckon. What did he offer you, by the way?"

The young engineer hesitated slightly, his cheeks flushing at the cool impudence of the other's direct question.

"I do not recall that any positive offer was made," he replied finally. "At least, the question of payment was not broached."

"The old cuss proved more honest than I had supposed," and Farnham dropped his clinched hand on the table. "Now, see here, Winston, I propose giving you this thing right out from the shoulder. There is no use beating around the bush. Those fellows have n't got so much as a leg to stand on; their claim is no good, and never will be. They 're simply making a bluff to wring some good money out of us, and I don't want to see you get tangled up in that sort of a skin game. You 're Bob Craig's friend, and therefore mine. Now, listen. There are two fellows concerned in that 'Little Yankee' claim, this whiskey-soaked Hicks and his partner, a big, red-headed, stuttering fool named Brown---'Stutter' Brown, I believe they call him---and what have they got between them? A damned hole in the ground, that's all. Oh, I know; I 've had them looked after from A to Z. I always handle my cards over before I play. They had exactly two hundred dollars between them deposited in a local bank here last week. That 's their total cash capital. Yesterday one of my people managed to get down in their dinky mine. It was a girl who did the job, but she 's a bright one, and that fellow Brown proved dead easy when she once got her black eyes playing on him. He threw up both hands and caved. Well, say, they 're down less than fifty feet, and their vein actually is n't paying them grub-stakes. That's the exact state of the case. Now, Winston, you do n't propose to tie yourself professionally with that sort of a beggarly outfit, do you?"

The younger man had been sitting motionless, his arm resting easily on the back of the chair, his eyes slowly hardening as the other proceeded.

"I never before clearly understood that poverty was necessarily a crime," he remarked thoughtfully, as Farnham came to a pause. "Besides, I am not tied up with that special outfit. I have merely agreed to examine into the matter."

"Of course, I understand that; but what's the use? You 'll only come to exactly the same conclusion all the others have. Besides, I have been especially authorized to offer you a thousand dollars simply to drop the thing. It's worth that much to us just now to be let alone."

Winston's eyes half closed, his fingers gripping nervously into the palm of his hand.

"It occurs to me you place my selling-out price at rather low figures," he said contemptuously.

Farnham straightened up in his chair, instantly realizing he had been guilty of playing the wrong card, and for the moment totally unable to perceive how safely to withdraw it. Even then he utterly failed to comprehend the deeper meaning in the other's words.

"I was thinking rather of what it was directly worth to us," he explained, "and had no conception you would look at it that way. However, we are perfectly willing to be liberal---how much do you want?"

For a moment Winston stared straight at him, his lips firmly set, his gray eyes grown hard as steel. Then he deliberately pushed back his chair, and rose to his feet, one clinched hand resting on the table.

"You may not fully understand my position," he began quietly, "for in all probability such a conception is utterly beyond you, but I do n't want a dollar, nor a cent. Good-night."

He turned deliberately toward the entrance, but the thoroughly astounded gambler leaped to his feet with one hand extended in sudden protest. He was angry, yet believed he perceived a great light shining through the darkness.

"Hold on, Winston," he exclaimed anxiously; "just a moment. I'd totally forgotten that you were the son of a millionaire, and therefore possessed no desire for money like the rest of us more ordinary mortals. Now, let's be sensible. By God, you must want something! What is it?"

"You have received my final answer. I am not in the market."

Farnham crushed a bitter oath between his gleaming teeth, and flung his sodden cigar-butt to the floor.

"Do you actually mean you are crazy enough to go with Hicks, after all I've told you?"

"I propose to discover for myself whether his claim is just. If it is, I'm with him."

The gambler caught his breath sharply, for an instant utterly speechless, his face pallid with rage. Then the fierce, angry words burst forth in unrestrained torrent through the calm of his accustomed self-control.

"Oh, you 'll play hell, you infernal cur. Do it, and I 'll guarantee you 'll get a bullet in the brain, even if you are old Winston's son. We 've got a way of taking care of your kind out here when you get too gay. You 're with him, are you? Well, I 'm damned if you ever get any chance even to sit in the game. We 'll get you, and get you early, see if we don't. There are other things besides money in this world, and you 've got your price, just as well as every other man. Perhaps it's silk, perhaps it's calico; but you bet it's something, for you 're no angel. By God, I believe I could name it, even now."

Winston wheeled, his right hand thrust deeply into his coat pocket, his face sternly set.

"What, for instance?"

"Well,---just to take a chance,---Beth Norvell,"

Farnham never forgot the flame of those gray eyes, or the sharp sting of the indignant voice.

"What do you know regarding her? Speak out, damn you!"

The gambler laughed uneasily; he had seen that look in men's faces before, and knew its full, deadly meaning. He had already gone to the very limit of safety.

"Oh, nothing, I assure you. I never even saw the lady," he explained coldly. "But I have been told that she was *the* attraction for you in this camp; and I rather guess I hit the bull's-eye that time, even if it was a chance shot."

Winston moistened his dry lips, his eyes never wavering from off the sneering face of the other.

"Farnham," the voice sounding low and distinct, "I have got something to say to you, and you are going to listen to the end. You see that?" He thrust sharply forward the skirt of his short coat. "Well, that's a thirty-eight, cocked and loaded, and I've got you covered. I know your style, and if you make a single move toward your hip I'll uncork the whole six shots into your anatomy. Understand? Now, see here---I'm not on the bargain counter for money or anything else. I had not the slightest personal interest in this affair an hour ago, but I have now, and, what is more, I am going directly after the facts. Neither you, nor all of your crowd put together, can stop me with either money, bullets, or women. I don't bully worth a cent, and I don't scare. You took the wrong track, and you've got me ready now to fight this out to a finish. And the first pointer I desire to give you is this---if your lips ever again besmirch the name of Beth Norvell to my

knowledge, I 'll hunt you down as I would a mad dog. I believe you are a dirty liar and thief, and now I 'm going after the facts to prove it. Good-night."

He backed slowly toward the curtained doorway, his gaze never wavering from off the surprised countenance of the other, his hidden hand grasping the masked revolver. Then he stepped through the opening and disappeared. Farnham remained motionless, his face like iron, his teeth gripping savagely. Then he dropped his hand heavily on the table, still staring, as if fascinated, at the quivering curtains.

"By God, the fellow actually means fight," he muttered slowly. "He means fight."

CHAPTER IX

THE FORCE OF CIRCUMSTANCES

She had expected the probability of such a happening, yet her face perceptibly paled while perusing the brief note handed her by the stage manager upon coming forth from her dressing-room. Her first impulse was to refuse compliance, to trust fortune in an endeavor to keep beyond reach, to turn and run from this new, threatening danger like a frightened deer. But she recalled the financial necessity which held her yet a prisoner at the Gayety. This writer was partner in the gambling rooms, possibly in the theatre also; her chance for escaping him would be very slender. Besides, it might be far better to face the man boldly and have it over. Undoubtedly a meeting must occur some time; as well now as later so that the haunting shadow would not remain ever before her. The color stole slowly back into her cheeks as she stood twisting the paper between her fingers, her eyes darkening with returning courage.

"Where is the gentleman, Ben?" she asked, steadying herself slightly against a fly.

"First box, Miss; right through that narrow door, yonder," and the man smiled, supposing he understood. "Very convenient arrangement for the stage ladies."

She paused, her hand resting upon the latch, in a final effort to quiet her rapid breathing and gain firmer control over her nerves. This was to be a struggle for which she must steel herself. She stepped quietly within, and stood, silent and motionless, amid the shadows of the drawn curtains, gazing directly at the sole occupant of the box, her dark eyes filled with contemptuous defiance. Farnham lounged in the second chair, leaning back in affected carelessness with one arm resting negligently upon the railing, but there came into his pale face a sudden glow of appreciation as he swept his cool eyes over the trim figure, the flushed countenance there confronting him. A realization of her fresh womanly fairness came over him with such suddenness as to cause the man to draw his breath quickly, his eyes darkening with passion.

"By thunder, Lizzie, but you are actually developing into quite a beauty!" he exclaimed with almost brutal frankness. "Life on the stage appears to agree with you; or was it joy at getting rid of me?"

She did not move from where she had taken her first stand against the background of curtains, nor did the expression upon her face change.

"I presume you did not send for me merely for the purpose of compliment," she remarked, quietly.

"Well, no; not exactly," and the man laughed with assumed recklessness in an evident effort to appear perfectly at ease. "I was simply carried away by the enthusiasm of the moment. I was always, as you will remember, something of a connoisseur regarding the charms of the sex, and you have certainly improved wonderfully. Why, I actually believe I might fall in love with you again if I were to receive the slightest encouragement."

"I do not think I am offering you any."

"Hardly; even my egotism will not permit me to believe so. An iceberg would seem warm in comparison. Yet, at least, there is no present occasion for our quarrelling. Sit down."

"Thank you, I prefer to remain standing. I presume whatever you may desire to say will not require much time?"

Farnham leaned forward, decidedly jarred from out his assumed mood of cold sarcasm. He had expected something different, and his face hardened with definite purpose.

"That depends," he said soberly, "on your frame of mind. You do not appear extremely delighted to meet me again. Considering that it is now fully three years since our last conversation, you might strive to be, at least outwardly, cordial."

She gathered up her skirts within her left hand, and turned calmly toward the door.

"Is that all?"

The man leaped impulsively to his feet, his cheeks burning with sudden animation, his previous mask of reckless indifference entirely torn away.

"Hell, no!" he exclaimed warmly, as instantly pausing when she wheeled swiftly about and faced him firmly. "No, it is not all. Of course, I had a special purpose in sending for you. Yet I cannot help feeling a natural curiosity. Tell me, what are you doing here?"

"That is quite easily seen; I am endeavoring to earn a living."

"A nice, quiet, respectable sort of a place you have chosen, certainly. It is about the last spot I should ever have expected to discover you in, knowing as I do your former puritanical morals. Your tastes must have greatly changed under the spur," and he laughed lightly, in mockery.

Miss Norvell's lips curled in unconcealed contempt, her eyes darkening with indignation.

"My present associations were not entered into from choice but from necessity. With you, I understand, it is deliberate choice."

The man stood undecided, fingering the edge of the curtain, vaguely realizing that he was merely injuring his own cause by continuing to anger her, yet far too deeply hit to remain entirely silent.

"You seem inclined to strike out as hard as ever," he retorted, yet in tones of manifest regret. "But just now there is not the slightest occasion for any bitterness. I am perfectly prepared to do the square thing, and if we can only pull together pleasantly for a little while, it will prove far better for both of us."

"In plainer words, you chance just now to have some special use for me?"

"Well, I hope you will look at the situation from my viewpoint. But the actual truth is, that when I first came up here to-night, I had not the faintest suspicion that it was you I was seeking."

"No?" doubtfully.

"That is an actual fact, Lizzie. I did n't suppose you were within a thousand miles of this place," and Farnham quietly settled himself again in his chair. "I came up here merely intending to get a glimpse of an actress named Beth Norvell. I was never more thoroughly surprised in my life than when you first came out on the stage. For a moment it knocked me silly. Say, you're an artist all right, my girl. That was a great stunt. Why, those boys down below hardly breathed until you disappeared. You ought to get a chance in Chicago; you 'd be wearing diamonds. Damned if I was n't honestly proud of you myself."

The girl caught her breath sharply, her hand pressed tightly against her side.

"What---what was it you desired of Beth Norvell?" she questioned.

Farnham's white teeth gleamed in a sudden smile of appreciation.

"Hope you are not becoming jealous," he said insinuatingly. "Positively no occasion, I assure you, for it was not to make love to the girl, I wanted to see her. Lord, no! This was purely a business deal. The truth is, I chanced to hear she had a lover already, and he was the fellow I was really after."

"A lover?" she stepped toward him, her eyes blazing, her cheeks aflame. "I? How dare you? What can you mean by so false an insinuation?"

"Oh, don't flare up so, Lizzie," and the complacent gambler looked at her with eyes not entirely devoid of admiration. "It really makes you prettier than ever, but that sort of thing cuts no ice with me. However, what I have just said stands: the story flying around here is that you have captured old Winston's boy, and a damned good catch it is, too."

She went instantly white as a sheet, her body trembling like an aspen, her quivering lips faltering forth words she could not wholly restrain.

"The story, you say---the story! Do---do you believe that of me?"

"Oh, that does n't make any difference," the brute in him frankly enjoying her evident pain. "Lord, what do you care about my belief? That was all passed and over with long ago. All I know is, the fellow is gone on you, all right. Why, he pulled a gun on me last night merely because I chanced to mention your name in his presence."

The telltale color swept back into her cheeks in swift wave. For an instant her eyes wavered, then came back to the man's sneering face.

"Did---did you dare tell him?"

He laughed lightly, softly patting his hand on the railing, his own eyes partially veiled by lowered lids.

"Torn off the mask of unimpeachable virtue, have I?" he chuckled, well pleased. "Rather prefer not to have our late affair blowed to this particular young man, hey? Well, I suspected as much; and really, Lizzie, you ought to know I am not that sort of a cur. I've held my tongue all right so far, and consequently I expect you to do me a good deed in return. That's a fair enough proposition, is n't it?"

She did not immediately answer, gazing upon him as she might at some foul snake which had fascinated her, her breath coming in half-stifled sobs, her hand clutching the heavy curtain for support.

"Oh, good God!" she faltered at last, speaking as though half dazed. "You must possess the spirit of a demon. Why do you continue to torture me so? You have no right--no right; you forfeited all you ever possessed years ago. Under Heaven, I am nothing to you; and in your heart you know I have done nothing wrong, nothing to awaken even the foul suspicions of jealousy. Mr. Winston has been my friend, yet even that friendship---innocent and unsullied---is already past; we have parted for all time."

"Indeed! You are such a consummate actress, Lizzie, I scarcely know what really to believe. Probably, then, you no longer object to my telling the gentleman the story?"

Her lips closed firmly.

"I shall tell him myself."

"Oh! Then, after all your fine words of renunciation, you will see him again! Your reform is soon ended. Well, my girl, there is really no necessity for any such sacrifice on your part. No one here suspects anything regarding our little affair excepting you and me. You do what I desire with this Winston, and I'm mum. What do you say?"

She sank back into a chair, utterly unable to stand longer, hiding her face in her hands.

"What---what is it you wish?" she questioned wearily.

He leaned forward and placed his hand, almost in caress, upon her skirt, but she drew the cloth hastily away, a sudden sob shaking her voice.

"Oh, please, don't touch me! I cannot stand it---only tell me what it is you wish."

"I want you to exercise your influence over that fellow, and prevent his taking professional employment at the 'Little Yankee' mine."

"Why?" she lifted her head again, facing him with questioning eyes.

"Simply because his doing so will interfere seriously with some of my business plans---that's all."

"Then why don't you act the part of a man, and go to him yourself? Why, in this, do you prefer hiding behind the skirts of a woman?"

Farnham laughed grimly, in no way embarrassed by the query.

"Good Lord, Lizzie! I've been to him, all right, but the fellow is like a stubborn mule. He has n't got but one selling-out price, so far as I can learn, and that chances to be Beth Norvell. You see the point? Well, that's exactly why I came here to-night. I wanted to be able to tender him the goods."

For a moment her eyes remained pitifully pleading; then they suddenly appeared to harden into resolute defiance. As though moving in a dream, she arose slowly to her feet, taking a single step away from him toward the closed door.

"As I have already explained," she paused to say coldly, "Mr. Winston is no more to me than any other gentleman whom I may have chanced to meet in friendship. I have not the faintest reason to suppose I could influence his decision in any matter appertaining to his professional work. Moreover, I have not the slightest inclination to try."

"Do you dare refuse, in spite of all I can say to your injury?" he asked, even then doubtful of her meaning.

"I definitely decline to be your catspaw,---yes. Nothing you can relate truthfully will ever harm me in the estimation of a gentleman, and I shall certainly know how to combat falsehood."

"Quite pretty. Injured innocence, I perceive, is to be the line of defence. What! are you already going?"

"I am."

"Where?"

She turned again, standing erect, her face flushing, her hand upon the latch of the door.

"If it is imperative that you know, I will tell you. I intend seeking Mr. Winston, and informing him exactly who and what I am."

"Now? at this hour of the night?"

"Better now, and at this hour of the night, than venture waiting until after you have had an inning. I am not at all ashamed to confess the truth, if I can only be the first to tell my story."

She pressed the latch of the door, her breathing so rapid as to be positively painful. With an ill-repressed oath, Farnham sprang to his feet, his rising anger putting an end to all prudence.

"Wait!" he exclaimed gruffly. "Wait where you are until I am done. You have heard only a part of this thing so far. My God, girl! don't you know me well enough by this time to comprehend that I always have my way, whatever the cost may be to others? Lord! what do I care for this fellow? or, for the matter of that, what do I care for you? I don't permit people to stand in my path; and I supposed you had thoroughly learned that lesson, if no other. Faith, you had cause enough, surely. So you refuse all endeavor to keep Winston out of this affair, do you? Perhaps you had better pause a minute, and remember who it is you are dealing with. I reckon you never saw any signs of the quitter about me. Now, it 's true I 'd rather have you do this business up quietly; but if you refuse, don't forget there are other means fully as effective, and a damn sight quicker." He reached out suddenly, grasping her hand. "Did you ever hear the adage, 'Dead men tell no tales'?" he questioned savagely.

She drew her hand sharply back from its instant of imprisonment, with a smothered cry, her eyes filled with undisguised horror.

"You threaten---you threaten murder?"

"Oh, we never use that word out in this country---it is considered far too coarse, my dear," and Farnham's thin lips curled sardonically. "We merely 'silence' our enemies in Colorado. It is an extremely simple matter; nothing at all disagreeable or boorish about it, I can assure you. A stick of dynamite dropped quietly down a shaft-hole, or pushed beneath a bunk house---that's all. The coroner calls it an accident; the preachers, a dispensation of Providence; while the fellows who really know never come back to tell. If merely one is desired, a well-directed shot from out a cedar thicket affords a most

gentlemanly way of shuffling off this mortal coil."

"You would not! You dare not!"

"I? Why, such a thought is preposterous, of course, for the risk would be entirely unnecessary. Quite evidently you are not well acquainted with one of the flourishing industries of this section, my dear. There are always plenty of men out of a job in this camp; conscience does n't come high, and the present market price for that sort of work is only about twenty-five dollars a head. Not unreasonable, all things considered, is it?"

If she had not thoroughly known this man, had not previously sounded his depths, she might have doubted his meaning, deceived by the lazy drawl in his soft voice, the glimmer of grim humor in his eyes. But she did know him; she comprehended fully the slumbering tiger within, the lurking spirit of vindictiveness of his real nature, and that knowledge overcame her, left her weak and trembling like a frightened child. For an instant she could not articulate, staring at him with white face and horrified eyes.

"You---you mean that?" and for the first time she clasped his loose coat between her clutching fingers.

"It is hardly a subject to be deliberately selected for jest," he replied coolly, "but if you prefer you might wait and see."

She stepped back from him, leaning heavily against the frame of the door, her face again hidden behind uplifted hands. The man did not move, his face emotionless, his lips tightly set. He was watching her with the intentness of a hawk, absolutely certain now of his victim. Suddenly she looked up, her eyes picturing the courage of desperation. One glance into his face and the woman stood transformed, at bay, the fierce spirit of battle flaming into her face.

"Have it so, then," she exclaimed sharply. "I pledge myself to do everything possible to prevent his remaining here." She drew herself up, her eyes darkening from sudden, uncontrollable anger. "Oh, how I despise you, you coward, you cur! I know you, what you are capable of, and I do this to preserve the life of a friend; but my detestation of you is beyond expression in words. My one and greatest shame is that I ever trusted you; that I once believed you to be a man. Good God! how could I ever have been so blind!"

She opened the door with her hand extended behind her, and backed slowly away, facing him where he stood motionless, smiling still as though her sudden outburst of passion merely served to feed his conceit.

"Then I may trust you in this?"

Her eyes shone fairly black with the depth of scorn glowing in them.

"Have---have you ever known me to lie?" she asked, her voice faltering from reaction.

The door closed.

CHAPTER X

A NEW ALLIANCE

Her eyes blinded by a strange mist of tears, Beth Norvell clung to the latch of the closed door, fearful lest the man within might decide to follow, endeavoring to gaze about, while gaining control over her sorely shattered nerves. Strong as she had appeared when nerved by indignation and despair, that stormy interview with Farnham---his scarcely veiled threats,

his heartless scoffing--had left her a wreck, for the moment scarcely mistress of her own mind. One thing alone stood forth as a rallying point for all her benumbed energies---she must save Winston from a real danger, the nature of which she did not in the least doubt. The gambler's boast was no idle one; she, who had before tasted of his depravity, felt fully convinced of his intention now. Yet what could she hope to do? How best might she accomplish that imperative duty of rescue?

There occurred to her only one feasible plan---a complete surrender of her womanly pride, an immediate acceptance of the young man's proffered aid to Denver, with an insistence that he also accompany her. Woman enough to realize her power, she could not but have faith in the results. The color crept back in her cheeks at this daring conception, for, after those hastily uttered words of the previous night, what construction would he be likely to put on this sudden yielding? An instant she hesitated, afraid, shrinking back before the sacrifice as from fire. Then her fine eyes darkened, the clinging tears vanishing while her fingers clinched in passionate resolve. Do it? Why, of course she must do it! What was her pitiful pride in the balance against his life? He might never dream what so great a sacrifice cost her; might even despise her for such an exhibition of weakness; but she would know, and be the stronger in her own soul from the brave performance of duty. Besides, she intended to tell him the whole miserable story of her wrecked life---not now, not even to-night, but some time, on their way back into the world,---as they were nearing Denver, perhaps, and at the moment of final parting. It almost seemed easy as she faced the stern necessity, so easy that her parted lips smiled sarcastically when she heard Farnham rise and leave the darkened box through the opposite entrance. Perhaps, when he comprehended it all, this other, who had spoken love words to her, would understand where the real blame lay, and so prove manly enough to absolve her from any conception of evil. This hope was sweet, strengthening, yet it faded immediately away. Ah, no; such result was not natural, as she understood the world---it was always the woman who bore the burden of condemnation. Far safer to expect nothing, but do the right simply because it was right. She no longer questioned what that would be. It stood there before her like a blazing cross of flame; she must hold those two men apart, even though they both trampled her heart beneath their feet. This was her destiny, the payment she must return the world for having once made a mistake. One out of the multitude, she felt strong enough in the crisis to choose deliberately the straight and narrow path leading through Gethsemane.

And this very choosing gave back her womanhood, cleared her dazed brain for action, and sent the red blood throbbing through her veins. Her immediate surroundings began to take definite form. To the left the great, deserted stage extended, wrapped in total darkness, silent, forsaken, the heavy drop-curtain lowered to the floor. Through its obscuring folds resounded noisily a crash of musical instruments, the incessant shuffling of feet, a mingled hum of voices, evidencing that the dance was already on in full volume. Far back, behind much protruding scenery, a single light flickered like a twinkling star, its dim, uncertain radiance the sole guide through the intricacies of cluttered passageways leading toward the distant stage entrance. Half frightened at this gloomy loneliness, the girl moved gingerly forward, her skirts gathered closely about her slender figure, with anxious eyes scanning the gloomy shadows in vague suspicion. Suddenly a hand gripped her extended wrist, and she gazed for a startled instant into fiercely burning eyes, her own heart throbbing with nervous excitement.

"Vat vas he to you? Answer me! Answer me quick!"

The blood came back into her blanched cheeks with a sudden rush of anger. Instantly indignation swept back the mists of fear. With unnatural strength she wrenched free her captured hand, and sternly fronted the other, a barely recognized shadow in the gloom.

"Permit me to pass," she exclaimed, clearly. "How dare you hide here to halt me?"

The other exhibited her teeth, gleaming white and savage behind parted lips, yet she never stirred.

"Dare? Pah! you waste time to talk so," she cried brokenly, her voice trembling from passion. "You no such fine lady now, *senorita*. You see dis knife; I know how use eet quick. Bah! you go to him like all de rest, but I vill know de truth first, if I have to cut eet out you. So vat ees de *Senor Farnham* to you? Say quick!"

The American remained silent, motionless, her breath quickening under the threat, her eyes striving to see clearly the face of the one confronting her.

"Do you expect to frighten me?" she asked, coldly, her earlier anger strangely changing to indifference. "It is you who wastes time, *senorita*, for I care little for your knife. Only it would be an extremely foolish thing for you to do, as I have not come between you and your lover."

The impulsive Mexican dancer laughed, but with no tone of joy perceptible.

"My lofer! Mother of God! sometime I think I hate, not lofe. He vas like all you *Americanos*, cold as de ice. He play vis Mercedes, and hurt---gracious, how he hurt! But I must be told. Vat vas he to you? Answer me dat."

Beth Norvell's eyes softened in sudden pity. The unconscious appeal within that broken voice, which had lost all semblance of threat, seemed to reveal instantly the whole sad story, and her heart gave immediate response. She reached out, touching gently the hand in which she saw the gleam of the knife-blade. There was no fear in her now, nothing but an infinite womanly sympathy.

"He is nothing to me," she said, earnestly, "absolutely nothing. I despise him---that is all. He is unworthy the thought of any woman."

The slender figure of the Mexican swayed as though stricken by a blow, the fierce, tigerish passion dying out of her face, her free hand seeking her throat as though choking.

"Nothing?" she gasped, incredulously. "*Sapristi*, I think you lie, *senorita*. Nothing? Vy you go to him in secret? Vy you stay and talk so long? I not understand."

"He sent for me; he wished me to aid him in a business matter."

The other stared incredulous, her form growing rigid with gathering suspicion that this fair American was only endeavoring to make her a fool through the use of soft speech. The white teeth gleamed again maliciously.

"You speak false to Mercedes," she cried hotly, her voice trembling. "Vy he send for you, *senorita*? You know him?"

There was a bare instant of seeming hesitation, then the quiet, better controlled voice answered soberly:

"Yes, in the East, three years ago."

Like a flash of powder, the girl of the hot-blooded South burst into fresh flame of passion, her foot stamping the floor, her black eyes glowing with unrestrained anger.

"*Dios de Dios!* Eet ees as I thought. He lofe you, not Mercedes. Vy I not kill you?---hey?"

Miss Norvell met her fiercely threatening look, her single step of advance, without tremor or lowering of the eyes. She even released her grasp upon the uplifted knife, as if in utter contempt. For a moment they confronted each other, and

then, as suddenly as she had broken into flame, the excitable young Mexican burst into tears. As though this unexpected exhibition of feeling had inspired the action, the other as quickly decided upon her course.

"Listen to me, girl," she exclaimed gravely, again grasping the lowered knife hand. "I am going to trust you implicitly. You feel deeply; you will understand when I tell you all. You call me a fine lady because I hold myself aloof from the senseless revelry of this mining camp; and you believe you hate me because you suppose I feel above you. But you are a woman, and, whatever your past life may have been, your heart will respond to the story of a woman's trouble. I'm going to tell you mine, not so much for my sake as for your own. I am not afraid of your knife; why, its sharp point would be almost welcome, were it not that I have serious work to do in the world before I die. And you are going to aid me in accomplishing it. You say you do not really know now whether you truly love or hate this man, this Farnham. But I know for myself beyond all doubt. All that once might have blossomed into love in my heart has been withered into hatred, for I know him to be a moral leper, a traitor to honor, a remorseless wretch, unworthy the tender remembrance, of any woman. You suppose I went to him this night through any deliberate choice of my own? Almighty God, no! I went because I was compelled; because there was no possible escape. Now, I am going to tell you why."

Mercedes, the tears yet clinging to her long, black lashes, stood motionless, gazing at the other with fascination, her slender, scarlet-draped figure quivering to the force of these impetuous words. She longed, yet dreaded, to hear, her own lips refusing utterance. But Beth Norvell gave little opportunity; her determination made, she swept forward unhesitatingly. As though fearful of being overheard, even in the midst of that loneliness, she leaned forward, whispering one quick, breathless sentence of confession. The startled dancer swayed backward at the words, clutching at her breast, the faint glimmer of light revealing her staring eyes and pallid cheeks.

"Mother of God!" she sobbed convulsively. "No, no! not dat! He could not lie to me like dat!"

"Lie?" in bitter scornfulness. "Lie! Why, it is his very life to lie---to women. God pity us! This world seems filled with just such men, and we are their natural victims. Love? Their only conception of it is passion, and, that once satiated, not even ordinary kindness is left with which to mock the memory. In Heaven's name, girl, in your life have you not long since learned this? Now, I will tell you what this monster wanted of me to-night." She paused, scarcely knowing how best to proceed, or just how much of the plot this other might already comprehend.

"Have you ever heard of the 'Little Yankee' mine?" she questioned.

"Si, senorita," the voice faltering slightly, the black eyes drooping. "Eet is up in de deep canyon yonder; I know eet."

"He told me about it," Miss Norvell continued more calmly. "He is having trouble with those people out there. There is something wrong, and he is afraid of exposure. You remember the young man who walked home with me last night: Well, he is a mining engineer. He has agreed to examine into the claims of the 'Little Yankee' people, and this---this Farnham wants him stopped. You understand? He sent for me to use my influence and make him go away. I refused, and then this---this creature threatened to kill Mr. Winston if he remained in camp, and---and I know he will."

The Mexican's great black eyes widened, but not with horror. Suddenly in the silent pause she laughed.

"Si, si; now I know all---you lofe dis man. *Bueno!* I see eet as eet vas."

The telltale red blood swept to the roots of Miss Norvell's hair, but her indignant reply came swift and vehement.

"No, stop! Never dare to speak such words. I am not like that! Can you think of nothing except the cheap masquerade of love? Have you never known any true, pure friendship existing between man and woman? This mining engineer has

been good to me; he has proved himself a gentleman. It is not love which makes me so anxious now to serve him, to warn him of imminent danger---it is gratitude, friendship, common humanity. Is it impossible for you to comprehend such motives?"

The other touched her for the first time with extended hand, her face losing much of its previous savagery.

"I know so ver' leettle 'bout such kinds of peoples, senorita," she explained regretfully, her voice low, "de kind vat are good and gentle and vidout vantin' somting for eet. Eet ees not de kinds I meet vis ver' much. Dey be all alike vis me---lofe, lofe, lofe, till I get seek of de vord---only de one, an' I not know him ver' vell yet. Maybe he teach me vat you mean some day. He talk better, not like a fool, an' he not try to make me bad. Is dat eet, senorita?"

"Yes; who is it you mean?"

"He? Oh! it vas most odd, yet I do not laugh, senorita, I know not vy, but he make me to feel---vat you calls eet?---si, de respect; I tink him to be de good man, de gentle. He was at de 'Little Yankee' too. I vonder vas all good out at de 'Little Yankee'? *Sapristi!* he vas such a funny man to talk---he sputter like de champagne ven it uncorked. I laugh at him, but I like him just de same, for he act to me like I vas de lady, de ver' fine lady. I never forget dat. You know him, senorita? So big like a great bear, vis de beautiful red hair like de color of dis dress. No? He so nice I just hate to have to fool him, but maybe I get chance to make eet all up some day---you tink so? Merciful saints! Ve are queer, ve vomens! Eet vas always de voman vat does like de vay you do, hey? Ve vas mooch fools all de time."

"Yes, we are 'much fools'; that seems ordained. Yet there are true, noble men in this world, Mercedes, and blessed is she who can boast of such a friendship. This Mr. Winston is one, and, perhaps, your stuttering giant may prove another." She caught at a straw of hope in thus interesting the girl. "So he is at the 'Little Yankee'? and you wish to serve him? Then listen; he is in danger also if this scheme of revenge carries---in danger of his life. Dynamite does not pick out one victim, and permit all others to escape."

"Dynamite?"

"That was Farnham's threat, and God knows he is perfectly capable of it. Now, will you aid me?"

The young Mexican girl stood staring with parted lips.

"Help you how? Vat you mean?"

"Warn the men of the 'Little Yankee.'"

The other laughed behind her white teeth, yet with no mirth in the sound.

"Ah, maybe I see, senorita; you try make a fool out me. No, I not play your game. You try turn me against Senor Farnham. I tink you not catch Mercedes so."

"You do not believe me?"

"*Sapristi!* I know not for sure. Maybe I help, maybe I not. First I talk vis Senor Farnham, an' den I know vether you lie, or tell true. Vatever ees right I do."

"Then permit me to pass."

Miss Norvell took a resolute step forward, clasping her skirts closely to keep them from contact with the dusty scenery crowding the narrow passage. The jealous flame within the black eyes of the Mexican dimmed.

"You can no pass dat vay," she explained swiftly, touching the other's sleeve.

"Not through the stage door?"

The other shook her head doggedly.

"Eet is alway locked, senorita."

Beth Norvell turned about in dismay, her eyes pleading, her breath quickening.

"You mean we are shut in here for the night? Is n't there any way leading out?"

"Oh, si, si," and Mercedes smiled, waving her hands. "Zar is vay yonder vare de orchestra goes. Eet leads to de hall; I show you."

"Did he know?"

"Vat? Senor Farnham? No doubt, senorita. Come, eet ees but de step."

The bewildered American hung back, her eyes filled with dread resting upon the black shadow of the curtain, from behind which clearly arose the strains of a laboring orchestra, mingling with the discordant noise of a ribald crowd. Farnham understood she was locked in; knew she might hope to escape only through that scene of pollution; beyond doubt, he waited in its midst to gloat over her degradation, possibly even to accost her. She shrank from such an ordeal as though she fronted pestilence.

"Oh, not that way; not through the dance hall!" she exclaimed.

Mercedes clapped her hands with delight. To her it appeared amusing.

"Holy Mother! Vy not? Eet make me laugh to see you so ver' nice. Vat you 'fraid 'bout? Vas eet de men? Pah! I snap my fingers at all of dem dis vay. Dey not say boo! But come, now, Mercedes show you vay out vere you no meet vis de men, no meet vis anybody. Poof, eet ees easy."

She danced lightly away, her hand beckoning, her black eyes aglow with aroused interest. Reluctantly the puzzled American slowly followed, dipping down into the black labyrinth leading beneath the stage. Amid silence and darkness Mercedes grasped her arm firmly, leading unhesitatingly forward. Standing within the glare of light streaming through the partially open door. Miss Norvell drew a sudden breath of relief. The chairs and benches, piled high along the side of the great room, left a secluded passageway running close against the wall. Along this the two young women moved silently, catching merely occasional glimpses of the wild revelry upon the other side of that rude barrier, unseen themselves until within twenty feet of the street door. There Miss Norvell hesitated her anxious eyes searching the mixed crowd of dancers now for the first time fully revealed. Even as she gazed upon the riot, shocked into silence at the inexpressible profligacy displayed, and ashamed of her presence in the midst of it, a merry peal of laughter burst through the parted lips of the Mexican dancer.

"*Dios de Dios*, but I had all forgot dis vas your night for de dance, senor. But you no so easy forget Mercedes, hey?"

He stood directly before them, plainly embarrassed, gripping his disreputable hat in both hands like a great bashful boy, his face reddening under her smiling eyes, his voice appearing to catch within his throat. Mercedes laughed again, patting his broad shoulder with her white hand as though she petted a great, good-natured dog. Then her sparkling black eyes caught sight of something unexpected beyond, and, in an instant, grew hard with purpose.

"Holy Mother! but eet 's true he ees here, *senorita*---see yonder by de second vindow," she whispered fiercely. "Maybe it vas so he tink to get you once more, but he not looked dis vay yet. *Bueno!* I make him dance vis me. Dis man Stutter Brown, an' he go vis you to de hotel; ees eet not so, *amigo?*"

"I-I have no t-t-time," he stuttered, totally confused. "Y-you see, I 'm in a h-hell of a h-h-hurry."

"Pah; eet vill not take five minute, an' I be here ven you come back. Si, *senor*, I vait for you for de dance, sure." She turned eagerly to Miss Norvell. "You go vis him, *senorita*; he ver' good man, I, Mercedes, know."

The American looked at them both, her eyes slightly smiling in understanding.

"Yes," she assented quietly, "I believe he is."

CHAPTER XI

HALF-CONFIDENCES

Whatever Stutter Brown may secretly have thought concerning this new arrangement of his affairs, he indulged in no outward manifestations. Not greatly gifted in speech, he was nevertheless sufficiently prompt in action. The swift, nervous orders of the impulsive Mexican dancer had sufficiently impressed him with one controlling idea, that something decidedly serious was in the air; and, as she flitted across the room, looking not unlike a red bird, he watched her make directly toward a man who was leaning negligently back in a chair against the farther wall. For a moment he continued to gaze through the obscuring haze of tobacco smoke, uncertain as to the other's identity, his eyes growing angry, his square jaw set firm.

"W-who is the f-f-feller?" he questioned gruffly. "Wh-what 's she m-mean l-leavin' me to go over th-thar ter h-him?"

Beth Norvell glanced up frankly into his puzzled face.

"She has gone to keep him away from me," she explained quietly. "His name is Farnham."

Brown's right hand swung back to his belt, his teeth gripped like those of a fighting dog.

"Hell!" he ejaculated, forgetting to stutter. "Is that him? Biff Farnham? An' he 's after you is he, the damned Mormon?"

She nodded, her cheeks growing rosy from embarrassment. Brown cast a quick, comprehensive glance from the face of the woman to where the man was now leaning lazily against the wall.

"All r-right, little g-girl," he said slowly, and with grave deliberation. "I-I reckon I n-never went b-back on any p-pard yet. B-blamed if y-y-you hate thet c-cuss any worse th-than I do. Y-you bet, I 'll take you out o' h-h-here safe 'nough."

He drew her more closely against his side, completely shielding her slender figure from observation by the intervention of his giant body, and thus they passed out together into the gloomy but still riotous street. A block or more down, under

the glaring light of a noisy saloon, the girl looked up questioningly into his boyish face.

"Are you Stutter Brown, of the 'Little Yankee'?" she asked doubtfully.

"I-I reckon you've c-c-called the t-turn, Miss."

She hesitated a moment, but there was something about this big, awkward fellow, with his sober eyes and good-natured face, which gave her confidence.

"Do---do you know a Mr. Ned Winston?"

He shook his head, the locks of red hair showing conspicuously under the wide hat-brim.

"I r-reckon not. Leastwise, don't s-s-sorter seem to r-recall no such n-name, Miss. Was the g-gent a f-friend o' your 'n?"

"Y-yes. He is a mining engineer, and, I have been told, is under engagement at the 'Little Yankee.'"

Brown's eyes hardened, looking down into the upturned face, and his hands clinched in sudden awakening suspicion.

"You d-did, hey?" he questioned sullenly. "Wh-who told you that r-rot?"

"Farnham."

The man uttered an unrestrained oath, fully believing now that he was being led into a cunningly devised trap. His mental operations were slow, but he was swift and tenacious enough in prejudice. He stopped still, and the two stood silently facing each other, the same vague spectre of suspicion alive in the minds of both.

"Farnham," the man muttered, for one instant thrown off his guard from surprise. "How th-the hell d-d-did he g-git hold o' that?"

"I don't know; but is n't it true?"

He turned her face around toward the light, not roughly, yet with an unconscious strength which she felt irresistible, and looked at her searchingly, his own eyes perceptibly softening.

"Y-you sure l-l-look all right, little g-girl," he admitted, slowly, "but I 've h-heard th-th-that feller was hell with w-women. I-I reckon you b-better go b-back to Farnham an' find out."

He paused, wiping his perspiring face with the back of his hand, his cheeks reddening painfully under her unfaltering gaze. Finally he blurted out:

"Say, w-who are you, anyhow?"

"Beth Norvell, an actress."

"You kn-kn-know Farnham?"

She bent her head in regretful acknowledgment.

"An' you kn-kn-know the senorita?"

"Yes, a very little."

Stutter Brown wet his lips, shifting awkwardly.

"Well, y-you 'll excuse me, M-Miss," he stuttered in an excess of embarrassment, yet plunging straight ahead with manly determination to have it out. "I-I ain't much used t-t-to this sorter th-thing, an' maybe I-I ain't got no r-r-right ter be a-botherin' you with m-my affairs, nohow. But you s-see it's th-this way. I 've sorter t-took a big l-l-likin' to that dancin' girl. Sh-she 's a darn sight n-n-nearer my s-style than anything I 've been up a-against fer s-some time. I-I don't just kn-know how it h-h-happened, it was so blame s-sudden, b-but she 's got her l-l-lasso 'bout me all r-right. But Lord! sh-she 's all fun an' laugh; sh-sh-she don't seem to take n-nothin' serious like, an' you c-can't make much ou-ou-out o' that kind; you n-never know just how to t-take 'em; leastwise, I don't. N-now, I 'm a plain s-s-sorter man, an' I m-make bold ter ask ye a m-mighty plain sorter qu-question--is that there M-M-Mercedes on the squar?"

He stood there motionless before her, a vast, uncertain bulk in the dim light, but he was breathing hard, and the deep earnestness of his voice had impressed her strongly.

"Why do you ask me that?" she questioned, for the moment uncertain how to answer him. "I scarcely know her; I know almost nothing regarding her life."

"Y-you, you are a w-woman, Miss," he insisted, doggedly, "an', I t-take it, a woman who will u-understand such th-th-things. T-tell me, is she on the squar?"

"Yes," she responded, warmly. "She has not had much chance, I think, and may have made a mistake, perhaps many of them, but I believe she 's on the square."

"Did---did sh-she come out t-to our m-m-mine spying for Farnham?"

"Really, I don't know."

His grave face darkened anxiously; she could perceive the change even in that shadow, and distinguish the sharp grind of his teeth.

"Damn him," he muttered, his voice bitter with hate. "It w-would be l-l-like one of his l-low-lived tricks. Wh-what is that g-girl to him, anyhow?"

It was no pleasant task to hurt this man deliberately, yet, perhaps, it would be best. Anyway, it was not in Beth Norvell's nature either to lie or to be afraid.

"He has been her friend; there are some who say her lover."

He stared fixedly at her, as though she had struck him a stinging, unexpected blow.

"Him? A-an' you s-s-say she 's on the squar?"

"Yes; I say she is on the square, because I think so. It's a hard life she 's had to live, and no one has any right to judge her by strict rules of propriety. I may not approve, neither do I condemn. Good women have been deceived before

now--have innocently done wrong in the eyes of the world--and this Mercedes is a woman. I know him also, know him to be a cold-blooded, heartless brute. She is merely a girl, pulsating with the fiery blood of the South, an artist to her fingers' tips, wayward and reckless. It would not be very difficult for one of that nature to be led astray by such a consummate deceiver as he is. I pity her, but I do not reproach. Yet God have mercy on him when she awakes from her dream, for that time is surely coming, perhaps is here already; and the girl is on the square. I believe it, she is on the square."

For a silent, breathless moment Brown did not stir, did not once take his eyes from off her face. She saw his hand slip down and close hard over the butt of his dangling revolver. Then he drew a deep breath, his head thrown back, his great shoulders squared.

"D-damn, but that helps me," he said soberly. "It--it sure does. G-good-night, little g-girl."

"Are you going to leave me now?"

"Why, sure. Th-this yere is the h-h-hotel, ain 't it? W-well, I 've got t-to be back to th-the 'Little Yankee' afore d-d-daylight, or thar 'll be h-hell to pay, an' I sure m-mean to see her first, an'---an'---maybe h-him."

She stood there in thoughtful perplexity, oblivious to all else in her strange surroundings, watching the dark shadow of his burly figure disappear through the dim light. There was a strength of purpose, a grim, unchangeable earnestness about the man which impressed her greatly, which won her admiration. He was like some great faithful dog, ready to die at his master's bidding. Down in her heart she wondered what would be the tragic end of this night's confidence.

"There goes a good friend," she said slowly, under her breath, "and a bad enemy." Then she turned away, aroused to her own insistent mission of warning, and entered the silent hotel.

The night clerk, a mere boy with pallid cheeks and heavy eyes bespeaking dissipation, reclined on a couch behind the rough counter, reading a Denver paper. He was alone in the room, excepting a drunken man noisily slumbering in an arm-chair behind the stove. Miss Norvell, clasping her skirts tightly, picked her way forward across the littered floor, the necessity for immediate action rendering her supremely callous to all ordinary questions of propriety.

"Can you inform me if Mr. Winston is in his room?" she questioned, leaning across the counter until she could see the clerk's surprised face.

The young fellow smiled knowingly, rising instantly to his feet.

"Not here at all," he returned pleasantly. "He left just before noon on horseback. Heard him say something 'bout an engineering job he had up Echo Canyon. Reckon that 's where he 's gone. Anything important, Miss Norvell?"

CHAPTER XII

THE COVER OF DARKNESS

Beth Norvell did not remember ever having fainted in her life, yet for a moment after these words reached her, all around grew dark, and she was compelled to grasp the counter to keep from falling. The strain of the long night, coupled with such unexpected news proving she had arrived too late with her warning, served to daze her brain, to leave her utterly unable either to think or plan. The clerk, alarmed by the sudden pallor of her face, was at her side instantly, holding eagerly forth that panacea for all fleshly ills in the West, a bottle of whiskey.

"Good Lord, Miss, don't faint away!" he cried excitedly. "Here, just take a swig of this; there 's plenty of water in it, and it's the stuff to pull you through. There, that's better. Great Scott, but I sure thought you was goin' to flop over that time." He assisted her to a convenient chair, then stepped back, gazing curiously into her face, the black bottle still in his hand. "What's the trouble, anyhow?" he questioned, his mind filled with sudden suspicion. "That---that fellow did n't throw you, did he?"

Miss Norvell, her fingers clasping the chair arm for support, rose hurriedly to her feet, a red flush sweeping into her pallid cheeks. For an instant her intense indignation held her speechless.

"'Throw' me? What is it you mean?" she exclaimed, her voice faltering. "Do you rank me with those shameless creatures out yonder? It is for Mr. Winston's sake I sought word with him; it has nothing whatever to do with myself. I chanced to learn news of the utmost importance, news which he must possess before morning; yet it is not a message I can trust to any one else. My God! what can I do?" She paused irresolute, her hands pressing her temples. The boy, his interest aroused, took a step forward.

"Can I be of service?"

"Oh, I hardly know; I scarcely seem able to think. Could---could you leave here for just ten minutes---long enough to go to the dance hall at the Gayety?"

"Sure thing; there 's nothin' doin'."

"Then please go; find a big, red-headed miner there named Brown---'Stutter' Brown they call him---and bring him back here to me. If---if he is n't there any longer, then get Mercedes, the Mexican dancer. You know her, don't you?"

The clerk nodded, reaching for his hat.

"Get one of those two; oh, you must get one of them. Tell them I say it is most important."

There was a terrible earnestness about the girl's words and manner, which instantly impressed the lad with the necessity for immediate haste. He was off at a run, slamming the door heavily behind him, and plunging headlong into the black street. As he disappeared, Miss Norvell sank back into the vacated chair, and sat there breathing heavily, her eyes fastened upon the drunken man opposite, her natural coolness and resource slowly emerging from out the haze of disappointment. Brown could surely be trusted in this emergency, for his interest was only second to her own. But why had she not told him the entire story before? Why, when she had opportunity, did she fail to reveal to him Farnham's threats, and warn him against impending danger? She realized fully now the possible injury wrought by her secrecy. She felt far too nervous, too intensely anxious, to remain long quiet; her eyes caught the ticking timepiece hanging above the clerk's desk, and noted the hour with a start of surprise. It was already after two. Once, twice, thrice she paced across the floor of the office and stood for a moment striving to peer through the dirty window-glass into the blackness without, faintly splotched with gleams of yellow light. Finally, she flung back the door and ventured forth upon the shadowed porch, standing behind the low railing, where those passing below were little likely to notice her presence. Her head throbbed and ached, and she loosened her heavy hair, pressing her palms to the temples. The boy returned at last hurriedly, bare-headed, but unaccompanied, and she met him at the top of the steps, realizing, even before he spoke, that those she sought had not been found.

"Not there? Neither there?"

"No, Miss." The clerk was breathing hard from his run, but his tone was sympathetic. "Darned if I did n't hustle that outfit from pit to boxes, but nobody there seemed to sabe this yere Brown. Mercedes, she was there all right, 'bout ten minutes ago, but just naturally faded away before I hit the shebang. Doorkeeper piped it she had a guy with her when she broke loose, an' he reckoned she must have lit out fer home."

"For home?" a faint ray of light breaking from the word. "Where does the girl live? Do you know?"

"Sure; I 'm wise; she has a couple of dandy rooms over at the old fort, just across the creek; you know where that is, don't you?"

She nodded silently, her eyes brightening with resolution.

"It 's a blame tough bit of hiking to take alone on a dark night like this," he commented gravely. "You was n't plannin' to try any such trip as that, was you, Miss?"

"Oh, no; certainly not. I'm going upstairs to wait for daylight. But I thank you so much," and she cordially extended her hand. "You see, I--I could hardly go to the Gayety myself at such an hour."

The boy colored, still clasping the extended hand. Something in her low tone had served to recall to his mind those hasty words uttered in the office.

"Sure not, Miss Norvell; it's a bit tough, all right, for anybody like you down there at this time o' night."

She opened the door, the bright light from within shining about her slender figure, yet leaving her face still in shadow.

"Did---did you chance to notice if Mr. Farnham remained in the dance hall?"

"Biff Farnham?" in sudden, choking surprise. "Great guns, do you know him, too? No, he was n't there, but I can tell you where he is, all the same. He 's at the Palace Livery, saddling up, along with half a dozen other fellows. I saw 'em as I come trottin' along back, and wondered what the dickens was on tap at this time o' night."

The girl made no attempt to answer. She stood clutching the edge of the door for support, her lips tightly compressed, feeling as if her heart would rise up and choke her. She realized instantly that the crisis had arrived, that Winston's life probably hung upon her next decision. Twice she endeavored bravely to speak, and when she finally succeeded, the strange calmness other voice made her doubt her own sanity.

"Thank you," she said gravely, "you have been most kind,---good-night," and vanished up the stairs.

Within the privacy of her own securely locked room Beth Norvell flung herself upon the narrow bed, not to sleep, not even to rest, but in an earnest effort to clarify her brain, to gain fresh conception of this grim reality which fronted her. She realized now precisely what Ned Winston stood for in her life---must ever stand for until the bitter end. There was no upbraiding, no reviling. Not in the slightest degree did she even attempt to deceive herself; with set, tearless eyes, and without a sigh of regret, she simply faced the naked truth. She had made the mistake herself; now she must bear the burden of discovery. It was not the dull inertia of fatalism, but rather the sober decision of a woman who had been tried in the fire, who understood her own heart, and comprehended the strength of her own will. Personal suffering and sacrifice were no new chapters written in her life; these had been met before, and now, in yet another guise, they could be courageously met again. She sat up quickly upon the edge of the bed, her hands pressing back the heavy hair from off her hot forehead. What right had she to lie there shuddering at destiny when lives---his life---might be trembling in the

balance? She could at least serve, and, whatever else of weakness may have lurked in Beth Norvell, there was no germ of cowardice. Clearer and more clear she perceived duty, until it overshadowed love and brought her upon her feet in active preparation, in burning desire for action.

Standing before the little mirror, she wondered dimly at those dark circles beneath her eyes, the unusually sharp lines visible at the corners of her mouth. She felt hot, feverish, and in hope of thus relieving the painful throbbing of her temples she buried her face in the bowl of cool water. Rapidly, almost carelessly, she gathered up her dishevelled locks, fastening them in some simple, yet secure fashion back out of the way. From the open trunk standing against the wall, she caught up a plain, soft hat, one she had used in character upon the stage, and drew it down firmly over the mass of soft hair, never noting how coquettishly the wide brim swept up in front, or what witchery of archness it gave to her dark eyes. She took a quick step toward the door, and then, her hand already on the latch, she paused in uncertainty; finally, she drew a small, pearl-handled revolver from the bottom tray, and placed it carefully in a pocket of her jacket.

"I--I hardly believe I could ever use it," she thought, "but maybe I might."

Outside, in the narrow, deserted hall, she stood at the head of the steep flight of stairs and listened. The snoring of the drunken man in the office below was the only disturbing sound. Out through the open office door a dull bar of yellow light streamed across the lower steps. Like a ghost she stole silently down, treading so softly not a stair creaked beneath her cautious footfalls. The next moment she had opened the door, and was alone in the dark street.

Dark it was, but neither deserted nor silent. The unleashed evil of San Juan was now in full control, more madly riotous than ever beneath the cloak of so late an hour. Nothing short of complete return of daylight would bring semblance of peace to that carnival of saloons, gambling dens, and dance halls. Through the shadows stalked unrebuked, uncontrolled, the votaries of dissipation and recklessness, of "easy money" and brutal lust. Yellow rays of light streamed from out dirty, uncurtained windows, leaving the narrow street weirdly illuminated, with here and there patches of dense shadows. Shifting figures, often unsteady of step, appeared and disappeared like disembodied spirits, distorted from all human semblance by that uncertain radiance; on every side the discordant sounds of violins and pianos commingled in one hideous din, punctuated by drunken shouts and every species of noise of which civilized savagery is capable.

Yet this was not what she feared, this saturnalia of unbridled passion, for the way was comparatively well lighted, and in traversing it she was reasonably certain to be within call of some one sober enough to protect her from insult or injury. Even in drink these men remained courteous to women of the right sort. No, she had travelled that path alone at night before, again and again, returning from her work. She shrank, womanlike, from the sights and sounds, but was conscious of no personal fear. What she dreaded beyond expression was that long, black stretch of narrow, desolate alley-way leading down toward the creek bridge and the old fort beyond. She had been over that path once in broad daylight, and it made her shudder to think she must now feel her way there alone through the dark. The growing fear of it got upon her nerves as she stood hesitating; then, almost angry with herself, she advanced swiftly down toward the distant glowing lights of the Gayety. It was just beyond there that the alley turned off toward the foothills, a mere thread of a path wandering amid a maze of unlighted tents and disreputable shacks; she remembered this, and the single rotten strip of plank which answered for a sidewalk.

There was an unusually boisterous, quarrelsome crowd congregated in front of the Poodle-Dog, and she turned aside into the middle of the street in order to get past undisturbed. Some one called noisily for her to wait and have a drink, but she never glanced about, or gave slightest heed. At the curb a drunken woman reeled against her, peering sneeringly into her face with ribald laugh, but Beth Norvell pushed silently past, and vanished into the protecting shadows beyond.

The wide doors of the brilliantly illuminated Gayety were flung open, the bright light from within streaming far across the road. Many of its patrons, heated with liquor and the dance, had swarmed forth upon the broad platform outside in

search of fresher air. To avoid pushing her way through this noisy crowd the girl swiftly crossed the street into the darkness opposite. As she paused there for an instant, scarcely conscious that the glow of the lamps reflected full upon her face, there sounded a sudden clatter of horses' hoofs to her right, and a half-dozen riders swept around the sharp corner, dashing forward into the glare. She had barely time in which to leap backward out of their direct path, when one of the horsemen jerked his mount upon its haunches, and, uttering an oath of astonishment, leaned forward across his pommel, staring down into her startled face. Then he laughed.

"Go on, boys," he cried, sitting erect, with a wave of his hand to the others. "I'll catch up within half a mile. I've got a word to say first to this precious dove fluttering here." He struck the flank of his horse, causing the sensitive beast to quiver, his own lips curling maliciously. The girl, panting between parted lips, never lowered her eyes from his face, and the steady look angered him.

"Still hunting for Winston?" he questioned, sneeringly. "Well, I can inform you where he may very easily be found."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, out at the 'Little Yankee.' It seems you were a trifle late in getting him word, or else your fascinations failed to move him. You must be losing your grip."

She neither moved nor spoke, her eyes--dark, unwinking beneath the wide hat-brim--telling him nothing. Yet her hand closed upon the pearl handle hidden away in the jacket pocket, and her lips formed a straight line.

"I'm damned sorry you did n't land the fellow, Lizzie," he went on brutally. "He's about the best catch you're liable to get, and besides, it leaves me a rather unpleasant job. Still, I thought I'd better tell you, so you would n't feel it necessary to hang around the streets here any longer. Fact is, I'm anxious to shield your reputation, you know." He looked about carelessly, his glance settling on the open doors of the Gayety. "Don't strike me this is exactly the sort of place for one of your moral respectability to be discovered in. Lord! but what would the old man or that infernal prig of a brother of yours say, if they could only see you now? A monologue artist at the Gayety was bad enough, but this, this is the limit."

There was a flash of something white and glittering within six inches of his face, a sharp click, and an eye looked directly into his own across a short steel barrel.

"Go!" The word was like the spat of a bullet.

"But, Lizzie--"

"Go, you cur! or, as God is my witness, if you stay I'll kill you!"

With a sharp dig of the spur his horse sprang half-way across the road, a black, prancing shadow against the glare of light. She saw the rider fling up one arm, and bring down the stinging quirt on the animal's flank; the next instant, with a bound, they were swallowed up in the darkness. A moment she leaned against the shack, nerveless, half fainting from reaction, her face deathly white. Then she inhaled a long, deep breath, gathered her skirts closely within one hand, and plunged boldly into the black alley.

CHAPTER XIII

TWO WOMEN

Mercedes stood in the shade of the towering hillside, the single beam of light shining from an uncurtained window alone faintly revealing her slenderness of figure in its red drapery. No other gleam anywhere cleft the prevailing darkness of the night, and the only perceptible sound was that of horses' hoofs dying away in the distance. The girl was not crying, although one of her hands was held across her eyes, and her bosom rose and fell tumultuously to labored breathing. She stood silent, motionless, the strange radiance causing her to appear unreal, some divinely moulded statue, an artist's dream carven in colored stone. Suddenly she sprang backward from out that revealing tongue of light and crouched low at the angle of the house, not unlike some affrighted wild animal, her head bent forward intently listening. There was a plainly perceptible movement in the gloom, the sound of an approaching footstep and of rapid breathing, and finally a shadow became visible. The watcher leaped to her feet half angrily.

"Ah! so eet vas you, senorita!" she exclaimed, her voice betraying her emotion,---"you, who come so dis night. *Sapristi!* vy you follow me dis vay? By all de saints, I make you tell me dat! You vant him, too? You vant rob me of all thing?"

The visitor, startled by this sudden challenge, stood before her trembling from head to foot with the nervous excitement of her journey, yet her eyes remained darkly resolute.

"You recognize me," she responded quickly, reaching out and touching the other with one hand, as if to make certain of her actual presence. "Then for God's sake do not waste time now in quarrelling. I did not make this trip without a purpose. 'He,' you say? Who is he? Who was it that rode away from here just now? Not Farnham?"

Mercedes laughed a trifle uneasily, her eyes suddenly lowered before the other's anxious scrutiny.

"Ah, no, senorita," she answered softly. "Eet surprises me mooch you not know; eet vas *Senor Brown*."

Miss Norvell grasped her firmly by the shoulder.

"Brown?" she exclaimed eagerly. "Stutter Brown? Oh, call him back; cannot you call him back?"

The young Mexican shook her head, her white teeth gleaming, as she drew her shoulder free from the fingers clasping it.

"You vas too late, senorita," she replied, sweetly confident. "He vas already gone to de 'Little Yankee.' But he speak mooch to me first."

"Much about what?"

"Vel, he say he lofe me---he say eet straight, like eet vas vat he meant."

"Oh!"

"Si, senorita; he not even talk funny, maybe he so excited he forgot how, hey? An' vat you tink dat he say den to Mercedes---vat?"

The other shook her head, undecided, hesitating as to her own purpose.

"He ask me vould I marry him. Si, si, vat you tink of dat---me, Mercedes Morales, de dancer at de Gayety---he ask me vould I marry him. Oh, Mother of God!"

The young American stared at her upturned animated face, suddenly aroused to womanly interest.

"And what did you say?"

Mercedes stamped her foot savagely on the hard ground, her eyes glowing like coals of fire.

"You ask vat I say? Saints of God! vat could I say? He vas a good man, dat Senor Brown, but I---I vas not a good voman. I no tell him dat---no! no! I vas shamed; I get red, vite; I hardly speak at all; my heart thump so I tink maybe eet choke me up here, but I say no. I say no once, twice, tree time. I tell him he big fool to tink like dat of me. I tell him go vay an' find voman of his own race---good voman. I tell him eet could nevah be me, no, nevah."

"Then you do not love him?"

The puzzled dancer hesitated, her long lashes lowered, and outlined against her cheeks.

"Lofe? Dat vas not nice vord as eet come to me. I know not ver' vell just vat. Maybe if I not lofe him I marry him---si; I no care den. I make him to suffer, but not care; ees eet not so? Anyhow, I---vat you call dat?---respect dis Senor Brown mooch, ver' mooch. Maybe dat last longer as lofe---*quien sabe?*"

Scarcely comprehending this peculiar explanation, Beth Norvell's first conception was that the girl had chosen wrong, that she had allied herself upon the side of evil.

"You mean you---you will go back to Biff Farnham?" she asked, her tone full of horror.

Mercedes straightened up quickly, her young, expressive face filled with a new passion, which struggled almost vainly for utterance through her lips.

"Go back to dat man!" she panted. "Me? *Sapristi!* and you tink I do dat after Senor Brown ask me be hees vife! Blessed Mary! vat you tink I am? You tink I not feel, not care? I go back to dat Farnham? Eet vould not be, no! no! I tol' him dat mooch, an' he got mad. I no care, I like dat. I no lofe him, nevah; I vas sold to him for money, like sheep, but I learn to hate him to kill." The deep glow of the black eyes softened, and her head slowly dropped until it touched the other's extended arm. "But dis Senor Brown he vas not dat kind---he ask me to marry him; he say he not care vat I been, only he lofe me, an' he be good to me always. I vas hungry for dat, senorita, but I say no, no, no! Eet vas not for me, nevah. I send him away so sorry, an' den I cry ven I hear his horse go out yonder. Eet vas like he tread on me, eet hurt dat vay. Maybe I no lofe him, but I know he vas good man an' he lofe me. Eet vas de honor ven he ask me dat, an' now I be good voman because a good man lofes me. Holy Mother! eet vill be easy now dat he wanted to marry me."

Impulsively Beth Norvell, her own eyes moist, held the other, sobbing like a child within the clasp of sympathetic arms. There was instantly formed between them a new bond, a new feeling of awakened womanhood. Yet, even as her fingers continued to stroke the dishevelled hair softly, there flashed across her mind a recurring memory of her purpose, the necessity for immediate action. Not for an instant longer did she doubt the complete honesty of the other's frank avowal, or question the propriety of requesting her aid in thwarting Farnham. She held the slight, quivering figure back, so that she might gaze into the uplifted, questioning face.

"Mercedes, yes, yes, I understand it all," she cried eagerly. "But we cannot talk about it any longer now. It is a wonderful thing, this love of a good man; but we are wasting time that may mean life or death to others, perhaps even to him. Listen to what I say---Farnham has already gone to the 'Little Yankee,' and taken a gang of roughs with him. They left San Juan on horseback more than half an hour ago. He threatened me first, and boasted that Mr. Winston was out there, and that I was too late to warn him of danger. Oh, girl, you understand what that means; you know him well, you must realize what he is capable of doing. I came here as fast as I could in the dark," she shuddered, glancing backward

across her shoulder. "Every step was a way of horrors, but I did n't know any one who could help me. But you---you know the way to the 'Little Yankee,' and we---we must get there before daylight, if we have to crawl."

All that was savagely animal in the other's untamed nature flamed into her face.

"He say vat? Senor Farnham he say vat he do?"

"He said dynamite told no tales, but sometimes killed more than the one intended."

Mercedes' hand went to her head as though a pain had smitten her, and she stepped back, half crouching in the glow like a tiger cat.

"He say dat? De man say dat? Holy Angels! he vas de bad devil, but he find me de bad devil too. Ah, now I play him de game, an' ve see who vin! De 'Leetle Yankee,' eet tree mile, senorita, an' de road rough, mooch rough, but I know eet---si, I know eet, an' ve get dare before de day come; sure ve do eet, *bueno*." She grasped the arm of the other, now fully aroused, her slight form quivering from intense excitement. "Come, I show you. See! he vas my pony---ah! eet makes me to laugh to know de Senor Farnham give him me; now I make him to upset de Senor Farnham. *Sapristi!* eet vas vat you call de vay of de world, de verligig; vas eet not so? You ride de pony, senorita; I valk an' lead him---si, si, you more tired as Mercedes; I danseuse, no tire ever in de legs. Den I find de vay more easy on foot in de dark, see? You ride good, hey? He jump little, maybe, but he de ver' nice pony, an' I no let him run. No, no, de odder vay, senorita, like de man ride. Poof! it no harm in de dark. *Bueno*, now ve go to surprise de Senor Farnham."

She led promptly forth as she spoke, moving with perfect confidence down the irregular trail skirting the bank of the creek, her left hand grasping the pony's bit firmly, the other shading her eyes as though to aid in the selection of a path through the gloom. It was a rough, uneven, winding road they followed, apparently but little used, littered with loose stones and projecting roots; yet, after a moment of fierce but useless rebellion, the lively mustang sobered down into a cautious picking of his passage amid the debris, obedient as a dog to the soft voice of his mistress. The problems of advance were far too complicated to permit of much conversation, and little effort at speech was made by either, the principal thought in each mind being the necessity for haste.

Swaying on the saddleless back of the pony, her anxious gaze on the dimly revealed, slender figure trudging sturdily in front, Beth Norvell began to dread the necessity of again having to meet Winston under such conditions. What would he naturally think? He could scarcely fail to construe such action on his behalf as one inspired by deep personal interest, and she instinctively shrank from such revelation, fearing his glance, his word of welcome, his expressions of surprised gratitude. The awkwardness, the probable embarrassment involved, became more and more apparent as she looked forward to that meeting. If possible, she would gladly drop out, and so permit the other to bear on the message of warning alone. But, even with Mercedes' undoubted interest in Brown, and her increasing dislike of Farnham, Beth could not as yet entirely trust her unaccompanied. Besides, there was no excuse to offer for such sudden withdrawal, no reason she durst even whisper into the ear of another. No, there was nothing left her but to go on; let him think what he might of her action, she would not fail to do her best to serve him, and beneath the safe cover of darkness she blushed scarlet, her long lashes moist with tears that could not be restrained. They were at the bottom of the black canyon now, the high, uplifting rock walls on either side blotting out the stars and rendering the surrounding gloom intense. The young Mexican girl seemed to have the eyes of a cat, or else was guided by some instinct of the wild, feeling her passage slowly yet surely forward, every nerve alert, and occasionally pausing to listen to some strange night sound. It was a weird, uncanny journey, in which the nerves tingled to uncouth shapes and the wild echoing of mountain voices. Once, at such a moment of continued suspense, Beth Norvell bent forward and whispered a sentence into her ear. The girl started, impulsively pressing her lips against the white hand grasping the pony's mane.

"No, no, senorita," she said softly. "Not dat; not because he lofe me; because he ask me dat. Si, I make him not so sorry."

She remembered that vast overhanging rock about which the dim trail circled as it swept upward toward where the "Little Yankee" perched against the sky-line. Undaunted by the narrowness of the ledge, the willing, sure-footed mustang began climbing the steep grade. Step by step they crept up, cautiously advancing from out the bottom of the cleft, the path followed winding in and out among bewildering cedars, and skirting unknown depths of ravines. Mercedes was breathing heavily, her unoccupied hand grasping the trailing skirt which interfered with her climbing. Miss Norvell, from her higher perch on the pony's back, glanced behind apprehensively. Far away to the east a faint, uncertain tinge of gray was shading into the sky. Suddenly a detached stone rattled in their front; there echoed the sharp click of a rifle hammer, mingled with the sound of a gruff, unfamiliar voice:

"You come another step, an' I 'll blow hell out o' yer. *Sabe?*"

It all occurred so quickly that neither spoke; they caught their breath and waited in suspense. A shadow, dim, ill-defined, seemed to take partial form in their front.

"Well, can't yer speak?" questioned the same voice, growlingly. "What yer doin' on this yere trail?"

Mercedes released the pony's bit, and leaned eagerly forward.

"Vas dat you, Beell Heeks?" she questioned, doubtfully.

The man swore, the butt of his quickly lowered rifle striking sharply against the rock at his feet.

"I 'm damned if it ain't that Mexican agin," he exclaimed, angrily. "Now, you get out o' yere; you hear me? I 'm blamed if I kin shoot at no female, but you got in one measly spyin' job on this outfit, an' I 'll not put up with another if I have ter pitch ye out inter the canyon. So you git plum out o' yere, an' tell yer friend Farnham he better take more care o' his females, or some of 'em are liable ter get hurt."

There was the harsh crunch of a footstep in the darkness, another figure suddenly slid down the smooth surface of rock, dropping almost at the pony's head. The animal shied with a quick leap, but a heavy hand held him captive.

"Y-you sh-sh-shut up, B-Bill," and the huge form of Stutter Brown loomed up directly between them, and that menacing rifle. "I-I reckon as how I'll t-t-take a h-hand in this yere g-g-game. Sh-she ain't no s-spy fer Farnham, er I 'm a l-l-liar." He touched her softly with his great hand, bending down to look into her face, half hidden beneath the ruffled black hair. "C-come, little g-g-girl, what's up?"

She made no response, her lips faltering as though suddenly stricken dumb. Beth Norvell dropped down from the pony's back, and stood with one hand resting on Mercedes' shoulder.

"She only came to show me the way," she explained bravely. "I-I have a most important message for Mr. Winston. Where is he?"

"Important, d-did you s-s-say?"

"Yes, its delivery means life or death---for Heaven's sake, take me to him!"

For a single breathless moment Brown hesitated, his eyes on the girl's upturned face, evidently questioning her real purpose.

"I c-can't right n-now, Miss," he finally acknowledged, gravely; "that's s-straight; fer ye s-s-see, he 's down the 'I-I-Independence' shaft."

CHAPTER XIV

UNDERGROUND

It was a daring ruse that had taken Ned Winston down the shaft of the "Independence" mine with the midnight shift. Not even the professional enthusiasm of a young engineer could serve to justify so vast a risk, but somehow this battle of right and wrong had become a personal struggle between himself and Farnham; he felt, without understanding clearly why, that the real stake involved was well worth the venture, and would prove in the end of infinitely more value to him than any settlement of the mere mining claims at issue. For several hours he had been below in the tunnel of the "Little Yankee," measuring distances, and sampling the grade of ore. All the afternoon and much of the early night had been utilized in a careful exploration of the surface ledges; creeping in, under protection of the low-growing cedars, as closely as a vigilant rifle-guard would permit, to the great ore dump of the busy "Independence"; diligently studying their system of labor, and slowly crystallizing into shape his later plan of action. He was already morally convinced that the Farnham people were actively engaged in stealing the "Little Yankee" ore; that they were running their tunnel along the lead of the latter; that they were doing this systematically, and fully conscious of the danger of discovery. His lines of survey, the nature of the ore bodies, the muffled sound of picks, plainly discernible in the silent breast of the "Little Yankee" while he lay listening with ear to the rock, as well as the close secrecy, all combined to convince him fully of the fact. Yet such vague suspicions were perfectly useless. He must have absolute, convincing proof, and such proof could be obtained nowhere excepting at the bottom of the "Independence" shaft.

He talked over the situation frankly with the two partners in the little single-roomed cabin perched on the cliff edge, while the obedient though grumbling Mike, rifle in hand, sat solemnly on the dump pile without. Little by little the three conspirators worked out a fairly feasible plan. There were numerous chances for failure in it, yet the very recklessness of the conception was an advantage. Winston, his face darkened as a slight disguise, and dressed in the rough garments of a typical miner, was to hide beside the footpath leading between the "Independence" bunk-house and the shaft. Should one of the men chance to loiter behind the others when the working shift changed at midnight, Brown was to attend to him silently, relying entirely upon his giant strength to prevent alarm, while Winston was promptly to take the vacated place among the descending workmen. By some grim fate this crudely devised scheme worked like a well-oiled piece of machinery. A sleepy-headed lout, endeavoring to draw on his coat as he ran blindly after the others, stumbled in the rocky path and fell heavily. Almost at the instant Stutter Brown had the fellow by the throat, dragging him back into the security of the cedars, and Winston, lamp and dinner-pail in hand, was edging his way into the crowded cage, his face turned to the black wall.

That was five hours before. At the very edge of the black, concealing chaparral, within easy rifle range of the "Independence" shaft-house, Hicks and Brown lay flat on their faces, waiting and watching for some occasion to take a hand. Back behind the little cabin old Mike sat calmly smoking his black dudheen, apparently utterly oblivious to all the world save the bound and cursing Swede he was vigilantly guarding, and whose spirits he occasionally refreshed with some choice bit of Hibernian philosophy. Beneath the flaring gleam of numerous gasoline torches, half a dozen men constantly passed and repassed between shaft-house and dump heap, casting weird shadows along the rough planking, and occasionally calling to each other, their gruff voices clear in the still night. Every now and then those two silent watchers could hear the dismal clank of the windlass chain, and a rattle of ore on the dump, when the huge buckets were hoisted to the surface and emptied of their spoil. Once---it must have been after three o'clock---other men seemed

suddenly to mingle among those perspiring surface workers and the unmistakable neigh of a horse came faintly from out the blackness of a distant thicket. The two lying in the chaparral rose to their knees, bending anxiously forward. Brown drew back the hammer of his rifle, while Hicks swore savagely under his breath. But those new figures vanished in some mysterious way before either could decide who they might be---into the shaft-house, or else beyond, where denser shadows intervened. The two watchers sank back again into their cover, silently waiting, ever wondering what was happening beyond their ken, down below in the heart of the hill.

Some of this even Winston never knew, although he was a portion of it. He had gone down with the descending cage, standing silent among the grimy workmen crowding it, and quickly discerning from their speech that they were largely Swedes and Poles, of a class inclined to ask few questions, provided their wages were promptly paid. There was a deserted gallery opening from the shaft-hole some forty feet below the surface; he saw the glimmer of light reflected along its wall as they passed, but the cage dropped to a considerably lower level before it stopped, and the men stepped forth into the black entry. Winston went with them, keeping carefully away from the fellow he supposed to be foreman of the gang, and hanging back, under pretence of having difficulty in lighting his lamp, until the others had preceded him some distance along the echoing gallery. The yellow flaring of their lights through the intense darkness proved both guidance and warning, so he moved cautiously forward, counting his steps, his hand feeling the trend of the side wall, his lamp unlit. The floor was rough and uneven, but dry, the tunnel apparently having been blasted through solid rock, for no props supporting the roof were discernible. For quite an extended distance this entry ran straight away from the foot of the shaft---directly south he made it---into the heart of the mountain; then those twinkling lights far in advance suddenly winked out, and Winston groped blindly forward until he discovered a sharp turn in the tunnel.

He lingered for a moment behind the protection of that angle of rock wall, struck a safety match, and held the tiny flame down close against the face of his pocket compass. Exactly; this new advance extended southeast by east. He snuffed out the glowing splinter between his fingers, crossed over to the opposite side, and watchfully rounded the corner to where he could again perceive the twinkling lights ahead. His foot met some obstacle along the floor, and he bent down, feeling for it with his fingers in the dark; it proved to be a rude scrap-iron rail, evidence that they carried out their ore by means of mules and a tram-car. A few yards farther this new tunnel began to ascend slightly, and he again mysteriously lost his view of the miners' lamps, and was compelled to grope his way more slowly, yet ever carefully counting his steps. The roof sank with the advance until it became so low he was compelled to stoop. The sound of picks smiting the rock was borne to him, made faint by distance, but constantly growing clearer. There he came to another curve in the tunnel.

He crouched upon one knee, peering cautiously around the edge in an effort to discover what was taking place in front. The scattered lights on the hats of the miners rendered the whole weird scene fairly visible. There were two narrow entries branching off from the main gallery not more than thirty feet from where he lay. One ran, as nearly as he could judge, considerably to the east of south, but the second had its trend directly to the eastward. Along the first of these tunnels there was no attempt at concealment, a revealing twinkle of light showing where numerous miners were already at work. But the second was dark, and would have remained unnoticed entirely had not several men been grouped before the entrance, their flaring lamps reflected over the rock wall. Winston's eyes sparkled, his pulse leaped, as he marked the nature of their task---they were laboriously removing a heavy mask, built of wood and canvas, which had been snugly fitted over the hole, making it resemble a portion of the solid rock wall.

There were four workmen employed at this task, while the foreman, a broad-jawed, profane-spoken Irishman, his moustache a bristling red stubble, stood a little back, noisily directing operations, the yellow light flickering over him. The remainder of the fellows composing the party had largely disappeared farther down, although the sound of their busy picks was clearly audible.

"Where the hell is Swanson?" blurted out the foreman suddenly. "He belongs in this gang. Here you, Ole, what 's become o' Nelse Swanson?"

The fellow thus directly addressed drew his hand across his mouth, straightening up slightly to answer.

"Eet iss not sumtings dot I know, Meester Burke. He seems not here."

"Not here; no, I should say not, ye cross-oied Swade. But Oi 'm dommed if he did n't come down in the cage wid' us, for Oi counted the lot o' yez. Don't any o' you lads know what 's become o' the drunken lout?"

There was a universal shaking of heads, causing the lights to dance dizzily, forming weird shadows in the gloom, and the irritated foreman swore aloud, his eyes wandering back down the tunnel.

"No doubt he's dhrunk yet, an' laid down to slape back beyant in the passage," he growled savagely. "Be all the powers, but Oi 'll tache that humpin' fool a lesson this day he 'll not be apt to fergit fer a while. I will that, or me name 's not Jack Burke. Here you, Peterson, hand me over that pick-helve." He struck the tough hickory handle sharply against the wall to test its strength, his ugly red moustache bristling. "Lave the falsework sthandin' where it is till I git back," he ordered, with an authoritative wave of the hand; "an' you fellers go in beyant, an' help out on Number Wan till Oi call ye. Dom me sowl, but Oi'll make that Swanson think the whole dom mounting has slid down on top o' him---the lazy, dhrunken Swade."

The heavy pick-handle swinging in his hand his grim, red face glowing angrily beneath the sputtering flame of the lamp stuck in his hat, the irate Burke strode swiftly back into the gloomy passage, muttering gruffly.

CHAPTER XV

THE PROOF OF CRIME

Winston sprang to his feet and ran back along the deserted tunnel, bending low to avoid collision with the sloping roof, striving to move rapidly, yet in silence. The intense darkness blinded him, but one hand touching the wall acted as safeguard. For a moment the bewildering surprise of this new situation left his brain in a whirl of uncertainty. He could remember no spot in which he might hope to secrete himself safely; the rock wall of that narrow passageway afforded no possible concealment against the reflection of the foreman's glaring lamp. But he must get beyond sight and sound of those others before the inevitable meeting and the probable struggle occurred. This became the one insistent thought which sent him scurrying back into the gloom, recklessly accepting every chance of encountering obstacles in his haste. At the second curve he paused, panting heavily from the excitement of his hard run, and leaned against the face of the rock, peering anxiously back toward that fast approaching flicker of light. The angry foreman came crunching savagely along, his heavy boots resounding upon the hard floor, the hickory club in his hand occasionally striking against the wall as though he imagined himself already belaboring the recreant Swanson. About him, causing his figure to appear gigantic, his shadow grotesque, the yellow gleam of the light shone in spectral coloring. Winston set his teeth determinedly, and noiselessly cocked his revolver. The man was already almost upon him, a black, shapeless bulk, like some unreal shadow. Then the younger stepped suddenly forth into the open, the two meeting face to face. The startled foreman stared incredulous, bending forward as though a ghost confronted him, his teeth showing between parted lips.

"Drop that club!" commanded Winston coldly, the gleam of an uplifted steel barrel in the other's eyes. "Lively, my man; this is a hair-trigger."

"What the hell---"

"Drop that club! We 'll discuss this case later. There---no, up with your hands; both of them. Turn around slowly; ah, I see you don 't tote a gun down here. So much the better, for now we can get along to business with fewer preliminaries."

He kicked the released pick-helve to one side out of sight in the darkness, his watchful eyes never straying from the Irishman's face. Burke stood sputtering curses, his hands held high, his fighting face red from impotent passion. The trembling light gave to the scene a fantastic effect, grimly humorous.

"Who---who the divil be ye?" The surprised man thrust his head yet farther forward in an effort to make the flame more clearly reveal the other's features. Winston drew the peak of his miner's cap lower.

"That will make very little difference to you, Jack Burke," he said quietly, "if I have any occasion to turn loose this arsenal. However, stand quiet, and it will afford me pleasure to give you all necessary information. Let us suppose, for instance, that I am a person to whom Biff Farnham desires to sell some stock in this mine; becoming interested, I seek to discover its real value for myself, and come down with the night shift. Quite a natural proceeding on my part, is n't it? Now, under such circumstances, I presume you, as foreman, would be perfectly willing to show me exactly what is being accomplished down here?"

He paused, his lips smiling pleasantly, and Burke stared at him, with mouth wide open, his eyes mere black slits in the gloom. It was a full minute before he regained control of his voice.

"Ye think Oi 'm a dommed fool?" he ejaculated, hoarsely.

"No; that is exactly what I do not think, Burke," and Winston smiled again beneath his stern gray eyes. "That is precisely why I know you will show me all I desire to see. A damn fool might possibly be tempted to take chances with this gun, and get hurt, but you are smart enough to understand that I 've got the drop all right, and that I mean business---I mean business." These words were uttered slowly, deliberately, and the foreman involuntarily dropped his lids as though feeling them physically, the fingers of his uplifted hands clinching.

"What---what is it ye want to see?"

"That tunnel you 've got concealed by falsework."

Burke spat against the rock wall, the perspiration standing forth on his forehead. But Irish pugnacity made him stubborn.

"Who tould ye that loie? Shure, an' it's not here ye 'll be apt to foind the loikes o' that, me man."

Winston eyed him scornfully.

"You lie, Burke; I saw it with my own eyes just beyond that second turn yonder. You cannot play with me, and the sooner you master that fact the better. Now, you can take your choice---lead on as I order, and keep your men away, or eat lead. It's one or the other within the next sixty seconds. Turn around!"

No man in his senses would ever doubt the determined purpose lying behind those few low-spoken, earnest words. Whoever this man might be, whatever his purpose, he was assuredly not there in sport, and Burke wheeled about as though some concealed spring controlled his action.

"Good," commented Winston, briefly. "You can lower your hands. Now, walk straight forward, speaking only when I tell you, and never forget there is a gun-barrel within two feet of your back. The slightest movement of treachery, and,

God helping me, Burke, I 'll turn loose every cartridge into your body. I don 't want to do it, but I will."

They moved slowly forward along the deserted tunnel, not unlike two convicts in lock-step. Burke sullenly growling, a burly, shapeless figure under the light in his hat; Winston alert, silent, watchful for treachery, the glimmer of the lamp full on his stern face. Their shadows glided, ever changing in conformation, along the walls, their footfalls resounding hollow from the echoing passage. There were no words wasted in either command or explanation. Without doubt, the foreman understood fairly well the purpose of this unknown invader; but he realized, also, that the man had never lightly assumed such risk of discovery, and he had lived long enough among desperate men to comprehend all that a loaded gun meant when the eye behind was hard and cool. The persuasive eloquence of "the drop" was amply sufficient to enforce obedience. Farnham be hanged! He felt slight inclination at that moment to die for the sake of Farnham. Winston, accustomed to gauging men, easily comprehended this mental attitude of his prisoner, his eyes smiling in appreciation of the other's promptness, although his glance never once wavered, his guarding hand never fell. Burke was safe enough now, yet he was not to be trifled with, not to be trusted for an instant, in the playing out of so desperate a game. At the angle the two halted, while the engineer cautiously reconnoitred the dimly revealed regions in front. He could perceive but little evidence of life, excepting the faint radiance of constantly moving lights down Number One tunnel. Burke stood sullenly silent, venturing upon no movement except under command.

"Anybody down that other entry?"

The foreman shook his head, without glancing around, his jaws moving steadily on the tobacco that swelled his cheek.

"Then lead on down it."

Winston stretched forth his unused left hand as they proceeded, his fingers gliding along the wall, his observant eyes wandering slightly from off the broad back of his prisoner toward the sides and roof of the tunnel. To his experience it was at once plainly evident this preliminary cutting had been made through solid rock, not in the following of any seam, but crossways. Here alone was disclosed evidence in plenty of deliberate purpose, of skilfully planned depredation. He halted Burke, with one hand gripping his shoulder.

"Are you people following an ore-lead back yonder?" he asked sharply.

The Irishman squirmed, glancing back at his questioner. He saw nothing in that face to yield any encouragement to deceit.

"Sure," he returned gruffly, "we're follyin' it all down that Number Wan."

"What 's the nature of the ore body?"

"A bit low grade, wid a thrifle of copper, an' the vein is n't overly tick."

"How far have you had to cut across here before striking color?"

"'Bout thirty fate o' rock work."

"Hike on, you thief," commanded the engineer, his jaw setting threateningly.

It proved a decidedly crooked passage, the top uneven in height, clearly indicating numerous faults in the vein, although none of these were sufficiently serious to necessitate the solution of any difficult mining problem. In spite of the turns

the general direction could be ascertained easily. The walls were apparently of some soft stone, somewhat disintegrated by the introduction of air, and the engineer quickly comprehended that pick and lever alone had been required to dislodge the interlying vein of ore. At the extreme end of this tunnel the pile of broken rock lying scattered about clearly proclaimed recent labor, although no discarded mining tools were visible. Winston examined the exposed ore-vein, now clearly revealed by Burke's flickering lamp, and dropped a few detached specimens into his pocket. Then he sat down on an outcropping stone, the revolver still gleaming within his fingers, and ordered the sullen foreman to a similar seat opposite. The yellow rays of the light sparkled brilliantly from off the outcropping mass, and flung its radiance across the faces of the two men. For a moment the silence was so intense they could hear water drip somewhere afar off.

"Burke," asked the engineer suddenly, "how long have you fellows been in here?"

The uneasy Irishman shifted his quid, apparently considering whether to speak the truth or take the chances of a lie. Something within Winston's face must have decided him against the suggested falsehood.

"Well, sorr, Oi 've only been boss over this gang for a matter o' three months," he said slowly, "an' they was well into this vein be then."

"How deep are we down?"

"Between sixty an' sivity fate, countin' it at the shaft."

"And this tunnel---how long do you make it?"

"Wan hundred an' forty-six fate, from the rock yonder."

Winston's gray eyes, grave with thought, were upon the man's face, but the other kept his own concealed, lowered to the rock floor.

"Who laid out this work, do you know? Who did the engineering?"

"Oi think ut was the ould man hisself. Annyhow, that 's how thim Swades tell ut."

Winston drew a deep breath.

"Well, he knew his business, all right; it's a neat job," he admitted, a sudden note of admiration in his voice. His glance wandered toward the dull sparkle of the exposed ore. "I suppose you know who all this rightly belongs to, don't you, Burke?"

The foreman spat reflectively into the dark, a grim smile bristling his red moustache.

"Well, sorr, Oi 'm not mooch given up to thinkin'," he replied calmly. "If it's them ide's yer after, maybe it wud be Farnham ye'd better interview, sure, an he 's the lad whut 'tinds to that end o' it for this outfit. Oi 'm jist bossin' me gang durin' workin' hours, an' slapin' the rist o' the toime in the bunk-house. Oi 'm dommed if Oi care who owns the rock."

The two men sat in silence. Burke indifferently chewing on his quid. Winston shifted the revolver into his left hand, and began slowly tracing lines, and marking distances, on the back of an old envelope. The motionless foreman steadily watched him through cautiously lowered lashes, holding the lamp in his hat perfectly steady. Slowly, with no other muscle moving, both his hands stole upward along his body; inch by inch attaining to a higher position without

awakening suspicion. His half-concealed eyes, as watchful as those of a cat, gleamed feverishly beneath his hat-brim, never deserting Winston's partially lowered face. Then suddenly his two palms came together, the sputtering flame of the lamp between them.

CHAPTER XVI

A RETURN TO THE DAY

Burke knew better than to attempt running; three steps in the midst of such blinding darkness would have dashed him against unyielding rock. Instantly, his teeth gripped like those of a bulldog, he clutched at Winston's throat, trusting to his great strength for victory. Instinctively, as one without knowing why closes the eyes to avoid injury, the engineer dodged sideways, Burke's gripping fingers missed their chosen mark, and the two men went crashing down together in desperate struggle.

His revolver knocked from his grasp in the first impetus of assault, his cheek bleeding from forcible contact with a rock edge, Winston fought in silent ferocity, one hand holding back the Irishman's searching fingers, the other firmly twisting itself into the soft collar of his antagonist's shirt. Twice Burke struck out heavily, driving his clinched fist into the other's body, unable to reach the protected face; then Winston succeeded in getting one groping foot braced firmly against a surface of rock, and whirled the surprised miner over upon his back with a degree of violence that caused his breath to burst forth in a great sob. A desperate struggle ensued, mad and merciless--arms gripping, bodies straining, feet rasping along the loose stones, muttered curses, the dull impact of blows. Neither could see the other, neither could feel assured his antagonist possessed no weapon; yet both fought furiously,--Burke enraged and merciless, Winston intoxicated with the lust of fight. Twice they reversed positions, the quickness of the one fairly offsetting the burly strength of the other, their sinews straining, the hot breath hissing between set teeth. Pain was unfelt, mercy unknown.

In the midst of the blind *melee*, following some savage instinct, Winston clinched his fingers desperately in the Irishman's hair, and began jamming him back against the irregularities of the rock floor. Suddenly Burke went limp, and the engineer, panting painfully, lay outstretched upon him, his whole body quivering, barely conscious that he had gained the victory. The miner did not move, apparently he had ceased breathing, and Winston, shrinking away from contact with the motionless body, grasped a rock support and hauled himself to his feet.

The intense blackness all about dazed him; he retained no sense of direction, scarcely any memory of where he was. His body, bruised and strained, pained him severely; his head throbbed as from fever. Little by little the exhausted breath came back, and with it a slow realization of his situation. Had he killed Burke? He stared down toward the spot where he knew the body lay, but could perceive nothing. The mystery of the dark suddenly unnerved him; he could feel his hands tremble violently as he groped cautiously along the smooth surface of the rock. He experienced a shrinking, nervous dread of coming into contact with that man lying there beneath the black mantle, that hideous, silent form, perhaps done to death by his hands. It was a revolt of the soul. A moment he actually thought he was losing his mind, feverish fancies playing grim tricks before his strained, agonized vision, imagination peopling the black void with a riot of grotesque figures.

He gripped himself slowly and sternly, his jaws set, his tingling nerves mastered by the resolute dominance of an aroused will. Compelling himself to the act, he bent down, feeling along the ground for the foreman's hat having the extinguished lamp fixed on it. He was a long time discovering his object, yet the continued effort brought back a large measure of self-control, and gave birth to a certain clearness of perception. He held the recovered lamp in his hands, leaning against the side of the tunnel, listening. The very intensity of silence seemed to press against him from every direction as though it had weight. He was still breathing heavily, but his strained ears could not distinguish the slightest sound where he knew Burke lay shrouded in the darkness. Nothing reached him to break the dread, horrible silence,

excepting that far-off, lonely trickle of dripping water. He hesitated, match in hand, shrinking childishly from the coming revelation of his victim. Yet why should he? Fierce as the struggle had proved, on his part the fight had been entirely one of defence. He had been attacked, and had fought back only in self-preservation. Winston harbored no animosity; the fierceness of actual combat past, he dreaded now beyond expression the thought that through his savagery a human life might have been sacrificed. The tiny flame of the ignited match played across his white face, caught the wick of the lamp, and flared up in faint radiance through the gloom. Burke, huddled into the rock shadow, never stirred, and the anxious engineer bent over his motionless form in a horrid agony of fear. The man rested partially upon one side, his hands still gripped as in struggle, an ugly wound, made by a jagged edge of rock, showing plainly in the side of his head. Blood had flowed freely, crimsoning the stone beneath, but was already congealing amid the thick mass of hair, serving somewhat to conceal the nature of the injury.

Winston, his head lowered upon the other's breast, felt confident he detected breath, even a slight, spasmodic twitching of muscles, and hastily arose to his feet, his mind already aflame with expedients. The foreman yet lived; perhaps would not prove even seriously injured, if assistance only reached him promptly. Yet what could he do? What ought he to attempt doing? In his present physical condition Winston realized the utter impossibility of transporting that burly body; water, indeed, might serve to revive him, yet that faint trickle of falling drops probably came from some distant fault in the rock which would require much patient search to locate. The engineer had assumed grave chances in this venture underground; in this moment of victory he felt little inclination to surrender his information, or to sacrifice himself in any quixotic devotion to his assailant. Yet he must give the fellow a fair chance. There seemed only one course practicable, the despatching to the helpless man's assistance of some among that gang of workmen down in Number One. But could this be accomplished without danger of his own discovery? Without any immediate revelation of his part in the tragedy? First of all, he must make sure regarding his own safety; he must reach the surface before the truth became known.

Almost mechanically he picked up his revolver where it lay glittering upon the floor, and stood staring at that recumbent form, slowly maturing a plan of action. Little by little it assumed shape within his mind. Swanson was the name of the missing miner, the one Burke had gone back to seek,--a Swede beyond doubt, and, from what slight glimpse he had of the fellow before Brown grappled with him in the path above, a sturdily built fellow, awkwardly galled. In all probability such a person would have a deep voice, gruff from the dampness of long working hours below. Well, he might not succeed in duplicating that exactly, but he could imitate Swedish dialect, and, amid the excitement and darkness, trust to luck. Let us see; Burke had surely called one of those miners yonder Ole, another Peterson; it would probably help in throwing the fellows off their guard to hear their own names spoken, and they most naturally would expect Swanson to be with the foreman. It appeared feasible enough, and assuredly was the only plan possible; it must be risked, the earlier the better. The thought never once occurred to him of thus doing injury to a perfectly innocent man.

He looked once more anxiously at the limp figure of the prostrate Burke, and then, holding the lamp out before him, moved cautiously down the passage toward the main tunnel. Partially concealing himself amid the denser shadows behind the displaced falsework, he was enabled to look safely down the opening of Number One, and could perceive numerous dark figures moving about under flickering rays of light, while his ears distinguished a sound of voices between the strokes of the picks. He crept still closer, shadowing his lamp between his hands, and crouching uneasily in the shadows. The group of men nearest him were undoubtedly Swedes, as they were conversing in that language, working with much deliberation in the absence of the boss. Winston rose up, his shadow becoming plainly visible on the rock wall, one hand held before his mouth to better muffle the sound of his voice. The hollow echoing along those underground caverns tended to make all noise unrecognizable.

"Yust two of you fellars bettar come by me, an' gif a leeft," he ventured, doubtfully.

Those nearer faces down the tunnel were turned toward the voice in sudden, bewildered surprise, the lights flickering as the heads uplifted.

"Vas it you, Nels Swanson?"

"Yas, I tank so; I jüst want Peterson an' Ole. Meester Burke vas got hurt in the new level, an' I couldn't leeft him alone."

He saw the two start promptly, dropping their picks, their heavy boots crunching along the floor, the flapping hat-brims hiding their eyes and shadowing their faces. For a moment he lingered beside the falsework, permitting the light from his lamp to flicker before them as a beacon; then he hid the tiny flame within his cap, and ran swiftly down the main tunnel. Confident now of Burke's early rescue, he must grasp this opportunity for an immediate escape from the mine. A hundred feet from the foot of the shaft he suddenly came upon the advancing tram-car, a diminutive mule pulling lazily in the rope traces, the humping figure of a boy hanging on behind. The two gazed at each other through the smoke of a sputtering wick.

"Hurry up," spoke Winston, sharply. "Burke's hurt, and they'll need your car to carry him out in. What's the signal for the cage?"

The boy stood silent, his mouth wide open, staring at him stupidly.

"Do you hear, you lunk-head? I 'm after a doctor; how do you signal the cage?"

"Twa yanks on the cord, meester," was the grudging reply. "Wha was ye, onyhow?" But Winston, unheeding the question, was already off, his only thought the necessity of immediately attaining the surface in safety, ahead of the spreading of an alarm.

The cage shot speedily upward through the intense darkness, past the deserted forty-foot gallery, and emerged into the gray light of dawn flooding the shafthouse. Blinking from those long hours passed in the darkness below, Winston distinguished dimly a number of strange figures grouped before him. An instant he paused in uncertainty, his hand shading his eyes; then, as he stepped almost blindly forward he came suddenly face to face with Biff Farnham. A second their glances met, both alike startled, bewildered, doubtful---then the jaw of the gambler set firm, his hand dropped like lightning toward his hip, and Winston, every ounce of strength thrown into the swift blow, struck him squarely between the eyes. The man went over as though shot, yet before he even hit the floor, the other had leaped across the reeling body, and dashed, stumbling and falling, down the steep slope of the dump-pile, crashing head first into the thick underbrush below.

CHAPTER XVII

A COUNCIL OF WAR

In the magic of a moment a dozen angry men were pouring from the shaft-house, their guns barking viciously between their curses. Beyond, at the edge of their dark cover, Hicks and Brown rose eagerly to their knees, while their ready rifles spat swift return fire, not all of it wasted. But Winston had vanished in the green underbrush as completely as though he had dropped into the sea. When he finally emerged it was behind the protecting chaparral, his clothing rags, his breathing the sobs of utter exhaustion. Brown, the spell of battle upon him, never glanced aside, his eyes along the brown rifle-barrel; but Hicks sprang enthusiastically to his feet, uttering a growl of hearty welcome.

"Damn it," he exclaimed, his old eyes twinkling with admiration, "but you 're a man!"

The engineer smiled, his hand pressed hard against his side. "Maybe I am," he gasped, "but I'm mighty near all in just now. Say, that was a lively spin, and it's got to be an eat and a rest for me next."

Hicks shaded his forehead, leaning on his rifle.

"Sometimes I reckon maybe I don't see quite as good as I used to," he explained regretfully. "Put five shots inter that measly bunch over thar just now, an' never saw even one o' 'em hop 'round like they got stung. They look sorter misty-like ter me from here; say, Stutter, what is a-happenin' over thar now, anyway?"

Brown wiped his face deliberately, sputtering fiercely as he strove to get firm grip on his slow thought.

"A-a-ain't much o' n-nuthing, so f-f-fur's I kin s-see," he replied gravely. "C-couple o' fellars w-with g-guns h-h-hidin' back o' ther d-dump. C-c-carried two b-bucks 'hind ther sh-shaft-house; h-h-hurt some, I 'speak. R-reckon I must a' g-got both on 'em. Y-y-you shore ought t-ter wear t-t-telescopes, Bill."

Hicks stared at his partner, his gray goat-beard sticking straight out, his teeth showing.

"So yer got 'em, hey?" he retorted, savagely. "Oh, ye 're chain-lightnin', yer are, Stutter. Ye 're the 'riginal Doctor Carver, yer long-legged, sputtering lunk-head. Yer crow like a rooster thet 's just found its voice. Now, look yere; I reckon it's brain-work what's got ter git us out o' this yere hole, an' I 'll shore have ter furnish most o' that, fer yer ain 't got none ter spare, as ever I noticed. Shoot! hell, yes, yer kin shoot all right, an' make love ter Greasers; but when thet's over with, yer all in. That's when it's up ter old Bill Hicks ter do the thinkin' act, and make good. Lord! yer leave me plumb tired." The old man peered out across the vacant space toward the apparently deserted dump, the anger slowly fading away from his eyes. "I sorter imagine, gents, it will take them fellars a while ter git over ther sudden shock we 've given 'em," he continued. "Maybe we better take this yere rest spell ter git somethin' ter eat in, and talk over how we 're fixed fer when the curtain goes up again. Them fellars never won't be happy till after they git another dose into their systems, an' thar 's liable ter be some considerable lead eat afore night. When they does git braced up, an' they reckon up all this yere means, they 'll shore be an ugly bunch."

Behind the safe protection of the low-growing cedars the three men walked slowly toward the cabin of the "Little Yankee," seemingly utterly oblivious to any danger lurking behind. As they thus advanced Winston related briefly his discoveries in the lower levels of the "Independence," referring to his personal adventures merely as the needs of the simple narrative required. Brown, his rifle at trail, his boyish face sober with thought, indulged in no outward comment, but Hicks burst forth with words of fervent commendation.

"By cracky, are yer shore that was Farnham yer hit?" he exclaimed, his old eyes gleaming in appreciation. "Blame me, Stutter, what do yer think o' that? Punched him afore he cud even pull his gun; never heerd o' no sich miracle afore in this yere camp. Why, Lord, that fellar 's quicker 'n chain-lightnin'; I 've seen him onlimber more 'n once."

"I-I reckon h-h-he won't be v-very likely ter l-let up on yer now, M-m-mister W-Winston," put in the young giant cautiously. "H-he ain't ther kind t-ter fergit no sich d-d-deal."

"Him let up!--hell!" and Hicks stopped suddenly, and stared behind. "He 'll never let up on nothin', that fellar. He 'll be down after us all right, as soon as he gits his second wind, an' Winston here is a-goin' ter git plugged for this night's shindy, if Farnham ever fair gits the drop on him. He ain't got no more mercy 'n a tiger. Yer kin gamble on that, boys. He 'll git ther whole parcel o' us if he kin, 'cause he knows now his little game is up if he does n't; but he 'll aim ter git Winston, anyhow. Did ye make any tracin's while yer was down thar?"

"Yes, I've got the plans in detail; my distances may not be exactly correct, but they are approximately, and I would be willing to go on the stand with them."

"Good boy! That means we 've shore got 'em on the hip. They're a-keepin' quiet over there yet, ain't they, Stutter? Well, let 's have our chuck out yere in the open, whar' we kin keep our eyes peeled, an' while we 're eatin' we 'll talk over what we better do next."

The kitchen of the "Little Yankee" was situated out of doors, a small rift in the face of the bluff forming a natural fireplace, while a narrow crevice between rocks acted as chimney, and carried away the smoke. The preparation of an ordinary meal under such primitive conditions was speedily accomplished, the menu not being elaborate nor the service luxurious. Winston barely found time in which to wash the grime from his hands and face, and hastily shift out of his ragged working clothes to the suit originally worn, when Hicks announced the spread ready, and advised a lively falling to. The dining-room was a large, flat stone on the very edge of the bluff, sufficiently elevated to command a practically unobstructed view of the distant shaft-house of the "Independence." Hicks brought from the cabin an extra rifle, with belt filled with ammunition, which he gravely held out to the engineer.

"These yere fixings will come in handy pretty soon, I reckon," he remarked significantly, and stood quietly on the edge of the rock, holding a powerful field-glass to his eyes.

"They 've brought ther night-shift up ter the top," he commented finally, "an they 're 'rousin' them others outer ther bunk-house. Hell 'll be piping hot presently. 'Bout half them fellers are a-totin' guns, too. Ah, I thought so---thar goes a lad horseback, hell-bent-fer-'lection down the trail, huntin' after more roughs, I reckon. Well, ther more ther merrier, as ther ol' cat said when she counted her kittens. Darned ef they ain't got a reg'lar skirmish line thrown out 'long ther gulch yonder. Yer bet they mean business for shore, Stutter, ol' boy."

Brown, deliberately engaged in pouring the coffee, contented himself with a slight grunt, and a quick glance in the direction indicated. Hicks slowly closed his glasses, and seated himself comfortably on the edge of the rock. Winston, already eating, but decidedly anxious, glanced at the two emotionless faces with curiosity.

"The situation does n't seem to worry either of you very much," he said at last. "If you really expect an attack from those fellows over there, is n't it about time we were arranging for some defence?"

Hicks looked over at him across the rim of his tin cup.

"Defence? Hell! here 's our defence---four o' us, countin' Mike."

"Where is Mike?"

"Oh, out yonder in ther back yard amusin' that Swede Stutter yere brought in ter him fer a playthin'. Them foreigners seem ter all be gittin' mighty chummy o' late. Stutter yere is a-takin' up with Greasers, an' Mike with Swedes. I reckon I 'll have ter be lookin' round fer an Injun, er else play a lone hand purty soon."

Brown, his freckled face hotly flushed, his eyes grown hard, struck the rock with clinched hand.

"D-d-damn you, B-Bill," he stuttered desperately, his great chest heaving. "I-I 've had jist 'nough o' th-th-thet sorter talk. Yer s-s-spit out 'nuther word 'bout her, an' th-th-thar 'll be somethin' e-else a-doin'."

Old Hicks laughed, his gray goat-beard wagging, yet it was clearly evident he appreciated the temper of his partner, and realized the limit of patience.

"Oh, I 'll pass," he confessed genially. "Lord! I hed a touch o' that same disease oncet myself. But thar ain't no sense in yer fightin' me, Stutter; I bet yer git practice 'nough arter awhile, 'less them thar black eyes o' hern be mighty deceivin'. But that thar may keep. Jist now we 've got a few other p'inters ter consider. You was askin' about our defence, Mr. Winston, when this yere love-sick kid butted in?"

"Yes."

"Well, it 's ther lay o' ther ground, an' four good rifles. Thet 's ther whole o' it; them fellers over yonder can't get in, an' I 'm damned if we kin git out. Whichever party gits tired first is the one what's goin' ter git licked."

"I scarcely understand, Hicks; do you mean you propose standing a siege?"

"Don't clearly perceive nothin' else ter do," and the man's half-closed eyes glanced about questioningly. "We ain't strong enough to assault; Farnham 's got more 'n five men ter our one over thar right now. He 's sent a rider inter San Juan arter another bunch o' beauties. We've corralled the evidence, an' we've got ther law back o' us, ter send him ter the penitentiary. Shore, thar's no doubt o' it. He knows it; an' he knows, moreover, thar ain't no way out fer him except ter plant us afore we kin ever git inter ther courts. Thet's his game jist now. Do yer think Mr. Biff Farnham under them circumstances is liable ter do the baby act? Not ter no great extent, let me tell yer. He ain't built thet way. Besides, he hates me like pizen; I reckon by this time he don't harbor no great love for you; an' yer bet he means ter git us afore we kin squeal, if he has ter h'ist the whole damned mounting. Anyhow, that's how it looks ter me an' Stutter yere. What was it you was goin' ter advise, Mr. Winston?"

The engineer set down his tin coffee cup.

"The immediate despatching of a messenger to San Juan, the swearing out of a warrant for Farnham on a criminal charge, and getting the sheriff up here with a posse."

Hicks smiled grimly, his glance wandering over toward Stutter, who sat staring open-eyed at the engineer.

"Ye're a young man, sir, an' I rather reckon yer don't precisely onderstan' ther exact status o' things out yere in Echo Canyon," he admitted, gravely. "I'm law-abidin', an' all that; law's all right in its place, an' whar it kin be enforced, but Echo Canyon ain't Denver, an' out yere ther rifle, an' occasionally a chunk o' dynamite, hes got ter be considered afore ther courts git any chance ter look over ther evidence. It's ginerally lead first, an' lawyers later. Thet 's what makes the game interestin', an' gives sich chaps as Farnham a run fer their money. Well, just now we 've got the law an' ther evidence with us all right, but, damn ther luck, them other fellers hes got the rifles. It 's his play first, an' it sorter looks ter me as if the man knew how ter handle his cards. He ain't no bluffer, either. Just take a squint through them glasses down the trail, an' tell me what yer see."

Winston did so, rising to his feet, standing at the edge of the rock fairly overhanging the valley.

"Wal, do yer make out anythin' in partic'lar?"

"There is a small party of men clustered near the big boulder."

"Exactly; wal, them thar fellars ain't thar altergether fer ther health. Thar 's three more o' ther same kind a'squattin' in the bushes whar the path branches toward ther 'Independence,' an' another bunch lower down 'side ther crick. It's easy 'nough ter talk about law, an' ther sendin' o' a messenger down ter San Juan after the sheriff, but I 'd hate some ter be that messenger. He 'd have some considerable excitement afore he got thar. Farnham 's a dirty villain, all right, but he ain't no fool. He's got us bottled up yere, and ther cork druv in."

"You mean we are helpless?"

"Wal, not precisely; not while our grub and ammunition holds out. I merely intimate thet this yere difficulty hes naturally got ter be thrashed out with guns---good, honest fightin'---afore any courts will git a chance even ter sit inter ther game. We ain't got no time jist now ter fool with lawyers. Clubs is trumps this deal in Echo Canyon, an' we 're goin' ter play a lone hand. Ther one thing what's botherin' me is, how soon ther damned fracas is goin' ter begin. I reckon as how them fellers is only waitin' fer reinforcements."

Winston sat motionless, looking at the two men, his mind rapidly grasping the salient points of the situation. He was thoroughly puzzled at their apparent indifference to its seriousness. He was unused to this arbitrament of the rifle, and the odds against them seemed heavy. Old Hicks easily comprehended the expression upon his face, and solemnly stroked his goat-beard.

"Ain't used ter that sort o' thing, hey?" he asked at last, his obstinate old eyes contracting into mere slits. "Reckon we're in a sort o' pickle, don't ye? Wal, I don't know 'bout that. Yer see, me an' Stutter have bin sort o' lookin' fer somethin' like this ter occur fer a long time, an' we 've consequently got it figgered out ter a purty fine p'int. When Farnham an' his crowd come moseying up yere, they ain't goin' ter have it all their own way, let me tell yer, pardner. Do yer see that straight face o' rock over yonder?" he rose to his feet, pointing across his shoulder. "Wal, that 's got a front o' thirty feet, an' slopes back 'bout as fur, with a shelf hangin' over it like a roof. Best nat'ral fort ever I see, an' only one way o' gittin' inter it, an' that the devil o' a crooked climb. Wal, we 've stocked that place fer a siege with chuck an' ammunition, an' I reckon four men kin 'bout hold it agin the whole county till hell freezes over. It's in easy rifle shot o' both ther cabin an' ther shaft, an' that Biff Farnham is mighty liable ter git another shock when he comes traipsin' up yere fer ter wipe out ther 'Little Yankee.' Ol' Bill Hicks ain't bin prospectin' fer thirty years, an' holdin' down claims with a gun, without learnin' somethin' about ther business. I 'm ready to buck this yere Farnham at any game he wants ter play; damned if he can't take his chice, law er rifles, an' I 'll give him a bellyful either way."

No one spoke for a long while, the three men apparently occupied with their own thoughts. To Winston it was a tragedy, picturesque, heroic, the wild mountain setting furnishing a strange dignity. Brown finally cleared his throat, preparing to speak, his great hand slowly rubbing his chin.

"I-I sorter w-w-wish them w-wimmen wan't y-yere," he stuttered, doubtfully.

The engineer glanced up in sudden astonishment.

"Women!" he exclaimed. "Do you mean to say you have women with you?"

Hicks chuckled behind his beard.

"Shore we have thet---all ther comforts o' home. Nice place fer a picnic, ain't it? But I reckon as how them gals will have ter take pot-luck with the rest o' us. Leastways, I don't see no chance now ter get shuck o' 'em. I 'll tell ye how it happened, Mr. Winston; it 'd take Stutter, yere, too blame long ter relate ther story, only I hope he won't fly off an' git mad if I chance ter make mention o' his gal 'long with the other. He 's gittin' most damn touchy, is Stutter, an' I 'm all

a-tremble fer fear he 'll blow a hole cl'ar through me. It's hell, love is, whin it gits a good hol' on a damn fool. Wal, these yere two bloomin' females came cavortin' up the trail this mornin', just afore daylight. Nobody sent 'em no invite, but they sorter conceived they had a mission in ther wilderness. I wa'nt nowise favorable ter organizin' a reception committee, an' voted fer shovin' 'em back downhill, bein' a bit skeery o' that sex, but it seems that, all unbeknownst ter me, Stutter, yere, hed bin gittin' broke ter harness. An' what did he do but come prancin' inter the argument with a gun, cussin' an' swearin', and insistin' they be received yere as honored guests. Oh, he 's got it bad. He 'll likely 'nough go down ter San Juan soon as ever ther road is cl'ar, an' buy one o' them motters 'God Bless Our Home' ter hang on ther cabin wall, an' a door-mat with 'Welcome' on it. That's Stutter--gone cl'ar bug-house jist 'cause a little black-haired, slim sort o' female made eyes at him. Blame a fool, anyhow. Wal, one o' them two was Stutter's catch, a high-kickin' Mexican dancin' gal down ter San Juan. I ain't goin' ter tell yer what I think o' her fer fear o' gittin' perforated. She hed 'long with her another performer, a darn good-looker, too, as near as I could make out in the dark. Wal, them two gals was purtendin' ter be huntin' arter you; wanted ter warn yer agin Farnham, er some sich rot. You was down ther mine, jist then, so that's the whole o' it up ter date."

"Where are they now?"

"In the cabin yonder, sleepin' I reckon."

Winston turned hastily toward Brown, his lips quivering, his eyes grown stern.

"Who was it with Mercedes?" he questioned sharply. "Did you learn her name?"

"Sh-she told me d-d-down at San Juan," replied Stutter, striving hard to recollect. "It w-w-was N-N-Nor-vell."

With the utterance of the word the young engineer was striding rapidly toward the cabin.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CONFESSION

Through the single unglazed window Beth Norvell saw him coming, and clutched at the casing, trembling violently, half inclined to turn and fly. This was the moment she had so greatly dreaded, yet the moment she could not avoid unless she failed to do her duty to this man. In another instant the battle had been fought and won, the die cast. She turned hastily toward her unconscious companion, grasping her arm.

"Mr. Winston is coming, Mercedes; I--I must see him this time alone."

The Mexican's great black eyes flashed up wonderingly into the flushed face bending over her, marking the heightened color, the visible embarrassment. She sprang erect, her quick glance through the window revealing the figure of the engineer striding swiftly toward them.

"Oh, si, senorita; dat iss all right. I go see Mike; he more fun as dose vat make lofe."

There was a flutter of skirts and sudden vanishment, even as Miss Norvell's ears caught the sound of a low rap on the outer door. She stood breathing heavily, her hands clasped upon her breast, until the knock had been repeated twice. Her voice utterly failing her, she pressed the latch, stepping backward to permit his entrance. The first swift, inquiring glance into his face frightened her into an impulsive explanation.

"I was afraid I arrived here too late to be of any service. It seems, however, you did not even need me."

He grasped the hand which, half unconsciously, she had extended toward him; he was startled by its unresponsive coldness, striving vainly to perceive the truth hidden away beneath her lowered lids.

"I fear I do not altogether understand," he returned gravely. "They merely said that you were here with a message of warning for me. I knew that much only a moment ago. I cannot even guess the purport of your message, yet I thank you for a very real sacrifice for my sake."

"Oh, no; truly it was nothing," the excitement bewildering her. "It was no more than I would have done for any friend; no one could have done less."

"You, at least, confess friendship?"

"Have I ever denied it?" almost indignantly, and looking directly at him for the first time. "Whatever else I may seem, I can certainly claim loyalty to those who trust me. I wear no mask off the stage."

Even as she spoke the hasty words she seemed to realize their full import, to read his doubt of their truth revealed within his eyes.

"Then," he said slowly, weighing each word as though life depended on the proper choice, "there is nothing being concealed from me? Nothing between you and this Farnham beyond what I already know?"

She stood clinging to the door, with colorless cheeks, and parted lips, her form quivering. This was when she had intended to speak in all bravery, to pour forth the whole miserable story, trusting to this man for mercy. But, O God, she could not; the words choked in her throat, the very breath seemed to strangle her.

"That---that is something different," she managed to gasp desperately. "It---it belongs to the past; it cannot be helped now."

"Yet you came here to warn me against him?"

"Yes."

"How did you chance to learn that my life was threatened?"

She uplifted her eyes to his for just one instant, her face like marble.

"He told me."

"What? Farnham himself? You have been with him?"

She bowed, a half-stifled sob shaking her body, which at any other time would have caused him to pause in sympathy. Now it was merely a new spur to his awakened suspicion. He had no thought of sparing her.

"Where? Did he call upon you at the hotel?"

She threw back her shoulders in indignation at his tone of censure.

"I met him, after the performance, in a private box at the Gayety, last evening," she replied more calmly. "He sent for me, and I was alone with him for half an hour."

Winston stood motionless, almost breathless, looking directly into the girl's face. He durst not speak the words of rebuke trembling upon his lips. He felt that the slightest mistake now would never be forgiven. There was a mystery here unsolved; in some way he failed to understand her, to appreciate her motives. In the brief pause Beth Norvell came back to partial self-control, to a realization of what this man must think of her. With a gesture almost pleading she softly touched his sleeve.

"Mr. Winston, I truly wish you to believe me, to believe in me," she began, her low voice vibrating with emotion. "God alone knows how deeply I appreciate your friendship, how greatly I desire to retain it unsullied. Perhaps I have not done right; it is not always easy, perhaps not always possible. I may have been mistaken in my conception of duty, yet have tried to do what seemed best. There is that in the pages of my past life which I intended to tell you fully and frankly before our final parting. I thought when I came here I had sufficient courage to relate it to you to-day, but I cannot--I cannot."

"At least answer me one question without equivocation---do you love that man?" He must ask that, know that; all else could wait.

An instant she stood before him motionless, a slight color creeping back into her cheeks under his intense scrutiny. Then she uplifted her eyes frankly to his own, and he looked down into their revealed depth.

"I do not," the low voice hard with decision. "I despise him."

"Have you ever loved him?"

"As God is my witness---no."

There was no possible disbelieving her; the absolute truthfulness of that utterance was evidenced by trembling lips, by the upturned face. Winston drew a deep breath of relief, his contracted brows straightening. For one hesitating moment he remained speechless, struggling for self-control. Merciful Heavens! would he ever understand this woman? Would he ever fathom her full nature? ever rend the false from the true? The deepening, baffling mystery served merely to stimulate ambition, to strengthen his unwavering purpose. He possessed the instinct that assured him she cared; it was for his sake that she had braved the night and Farnham's displeasure. What, then, was it that was holding them apart? What was the nature of this barrier beyond all surmounting? The man in him rebelled at having so spectral an adversary; he longed to fight it out in the open, to grapple with flesh and blood. In spite of promise, his heart found words of protest.

"Beth, please tell me what all this means," he pleaded simply, his hands outstretched toward her. "Tell me, because I love you; tell me, because I desire to help you. It is true we have not known each other long; yet, surely, the time and opportunity have been sufficient for each to learn much regarding the character of the other. You trust me, you believe in my word; down in the secret depths of your heart you are beginning to love me. I believe that, little girl; I believe that, even while your lips deny its truth. It is the instinct of love which teaches me, for I love you. I may not know your name, the story of your life, who or what you are, but I love you, Beth Norvell, with the life-love of a man. What is it, then, between us? What is it? God help me! I could battle against realities, but not against ghosts. Do you suppose I cannot forgive, cannot excuse, cannot blot out a past mistake? Do you imagine my love so poor a thing as that? Do not wrong me so. I am a man of the world, and comprehend fully those temptations which come to all of us. I can let the dead past bury its dead, satisfied with the present and the future. Only tell me the truth, the naked truth, and let me

combat in the open against whatever it is that stands between us. Beth, Beth, this is life or death to me!"

She stood staring at him, her face gone haggard, her eyes full of misery. Suddenly she sank upon her knees beside a chair, and, with a moan, buried her countenance within her hands.

"Beth," he asked, daring to touch her trembling hair, "have I hurt you? Have I done wrong to speak thus?"

A single sob shook the slender, bowed figure, the face still hidden.

"Yes," she whispered faintly, "you have hurt me; you have done wrong."

"But why?" he insisted. "Is not my love worthy?"

She lifted her head then, resting one hand against the dishevelled hair, her eyes misty from tears.

"Worthy? O God, yes! but so useless; so utterly without power."

Winston strode to the window and back again, his hands clenched, the veins showing across his forehead. Suddenly he dropped upon his knees beside her, clasping her one disengaged hand within both his own.

"Beth, I refuse to believe," he exclaimed firmly. "Love is never useless, never without power, either in this world or the next. Tell me, then, once for all, here before God, do you love me?"

She swept the clinging tears from her lashes, the soft clasp of her fingers upon his hand unconsciously tightening.

"You may read an answer within my face," she replied, slowly. "It must be that my eyes tell the truth, although I cannot speak it with my lips."

"Cannot? In God's name, why?"

She choked, yet the voice did not wholly fail her.

"Because I have no right. I--I am the wife of another."

The head drooped lower, the hair shadowing the face, and Winston, his lips set and white, stared at her, scarcely comprehending. A moment later he sprang to his feet, one hand pressed across his eyes, slowly grasping the full measure of her confession.

"The wife of another!" he burst forth, his voice shaking. "Great God! You? What other? Farnham?"

The bowed head sank yet lower, as though in mute answer, and his ears caught the echo of a single muffled sob. Suddenly she glanced up at him, and then rose unsteadily to her feet clinging to the back of the chair for support.

"Mr. Winston," her voice strengthening with each word spoken, "it hurts me to realize that you feel so deeply. I--I wish I might bear the burden of this mistake all alone. But I cannot stand your contempt, or have you believe me wholly heartless, altogether unworthy. We---we must part, now and forever; there is no other honorable way. I tried so hard to compel you to leave me before; I accepted that engagement at the Gayety, trusting such an act would disgust you with me. I am not to blame for this; truly, I am not---no woman could have fought against Fate more faithfully; only---only I

couldn't find sufficient courage to confess to you the whole truth. Perhaps I might have done so at first; but it was too late before I learned the necessity, and then my heart failed me. There was another reason I need not mention now, why I hesitated, why such a course became doubly hard. But I am going to tell you it all now, for---for I wish you to go away at least respecting my womanhood."

He made no reply, no comment, and the girl dropped her questioning eyes to the floor.

"You asked me if I had ever loved him," she continued, speaking more slowly, "and I told you no. That was the truth as I realize it now, although there was a time when the man fascinated, bewildered me, as I imagine the snake fascinates a bird. I have learned since something of what love truly is, and can comprehend that my earlier feeling toward him was counterfeit, a mere bit of dross. Be patient, please, while I tell you how it all happened. It---it is a hard task, yet, perhaps, you may think better of me from a knowledge of the whole truth. I am a Chicago girl. There are reasons why I shall not mention my family name, and it is unnecessary; but my parents are wealthy and of good position. All my earlier education was acquired through private tutors; so that beyond my little, narrow circle of a world---fashionable and restricted---all of real life remained unknown, unexplored, until the necessity for a wider development caused my being sent to a well-known boarding-school for girls in the East. I think now the choice made was unfortunate. The school being situated close to a large city, and the discipline extremely lax, temptation which I was not in any way fitted to resist surrounded me from the day of entrance. In a fashionable drawing-room, in the home of my mother's friends, I first became acquainted with Mr. Farnham."

She paused with the mention of his name, as though its utterance pained her, yet almost immediately resumed her story, not even glancing up at her listener.

"I was at an age to be easily flattered by the admiration of a man of mature years. He was considerably older than I, always well dressed, versed in social forms, liberal with money, exhibiting a certain dashing recklessness which proved most attractive to all the girls I knew. Indeed, I think it was largely because of their envy that I was first led to accept his attentions. However, I was very young, utterly inexperienced, while he was thoroughly versed in every trick by which to interest one of my nature. He claimed to be a successful dramatist and author, thus adding materially to my conception of his character and capability. Little by little the man succeeded in weaving about me the web of his fascination, until I was ready for any sacrifice he might propose. Naturally ardent, easily impressed by outward appearances, assured as to my own and his social position, ignorant of the wiles of the world, I was an easy victim. Somewhere he had formed the acquaintance of my brother, which fact merely increased my confidence in him. I need not dwell in detail upon what followed---the advice of romantic girls, the false counsel of a favorite teacher, the specious lies and explanations accounting for the necessity for secrecy, the fervent pleadings, the protestations, the continual urging, that finally conquered my earlier resolves. I yielded before the strain, the awakened imagination of a girl of sixteen seeing nothing in the rose-tinted future except happiness. We were married in Christ Church, Boston, two of my classmates witnessing the ceremony. Three months later I awoke fully from dreaming, and faced the darkness."

She leaned against the wall, her face, half hidden, pressed against her arm. Speaking no word of interruption, Winston clasped her hand and waited, his gray eyes moist.

"He was a professional gambler, a brute, a cruel, cold-blooded coward," the words dropping from her lips as though they burned in utterance. "Only at the very first did he make any effort to disguise his nature, or conceal the object of his marriage. He endeavored to wring money from my people, and---and struck me when I refused him aid. He failed because I blocked him; tried blackmail and failed again, although I saved him from exposure. If he had ever cared for me, by this time his love had changed to dislike or indifference. He left me for weeks at a time, often alone and in poverty. My father sought in vain to get me away from him, but---but I was too proud to confess the truth. I should have been welcome at home, without him; but I refused to go. I had made my own choice, had committed the mistake,

had done the wrong; I could not bring myself to flee from the result. I burrowed in the slums where he took me, hiding from all who sought me out. Yet I lived in an earthly hell, my dream of love dispelled, the despair of life constantly deepening. I no longer cared for the man--I despised him, shrank from his presence; yet something more potent than pride kept me loyal. I believed then, I believe now, in the sacredness of marriage; it was the teaching of my church, of my home; it had become part of my very soul. To me that formal church wedding typified the solemnity of religion; I durst not prove untrue to vows thus taken; divorce was a thought impossible."

"And now?" he interrupted gently.

She lifted her head, with one swift glance upward.

"You will think me wrong, quixotic, unnatural," she acknowledged soberly. "Yet I am not absolved, not free---this man remains my husband, wedded to me by the authority of the church. I---I must bear the burden of my vows; not even love would long compensate for unfaithfulness in the sight of God."

In the intense silence they could hear each other's strained breathing and the soft notes of a bird singing gleefully without. Winston, his lips compressed, his eyes stern with repressed feeling, neither moved nor spoke. Beth Norvell's head sank slowly back upon her arm.

"He took me with him from city to city," she went on wearily, as though unconsciously speaking to herself, "staying, I think, in each as long as the police would permit. He was seldom with me, seldom gave me money. We did not quarrel, for I refused to be drawn into any exchange of words. He never struck me excepting twice, but there are other ways of hurting a woman, and he knew them all. I was hungry at times and ill clad. I was driven to provide for myself, and worked in factories and stores. Whenever he knew I had money he took it. Money was always the cause of controversy between us. It was his god, not to hoard up, but to spend upon himself. My steady refusal to permit his bleeding my father enraged him; it was at such times he lost all control, and---and struck me. God! I could have killed him! There were times when I could, when I wonder I did not. Yet in calm deliberation I durst not break my vows. Three years ago he left me in Denver without a word, without a suggestion that the desertion was final. We had just reached there, and I had nothing. Friends of my family lived there, but I could not seek them for help. I actually suffered, until finally I found employment in a large department store. I expected he would return, and kept my rooms where he left me. I wrote home twice, cheerful letters, saying nothing to lower him in the estimation of my people, yet concealing my address for fear they might seek me out. Then there unexpectedly came to me an opportunity to go out with Albrecht, and I accepted it most thankfully. It gave me a chance to think of other things, to work hard, to forget myself in a growing ambition. I had already thrown off the old, and was laying ever firmer hands upon the new, when you came into my life, and then he came back also. It is such a small world, such a little world, all shadowed and full of heartaches!"

In the silence she glanced aside at him, her eyes clear, her hair held back by one hand.

"Please do not look at me like that," she pleaded. "Surely, you cannot blame me; you must forgive."

"There is nothing to blame, or forgive, Beth; apparently there is nothing for me to say, nothing for me to do."

She swayed slowly toward him, resting one hand upon his shoulder.

"But am I right? Won't you tell me if I am right?"

He stood hesitating for a moment, looking down upon that upturned, questioning face, his gray eyes filled with a loyalty that caused her heart to throb wildly.

"I do not know, Beth," he said at last, "I do not know; I cannot be your conscience. I must go out where I can be alone and think; but never will I come between you and your God."

CHAPTER XIX

THE POINT OF VIEW

She sank back upon the chair, her face completely hidden within her arms. Winston, his hand already grasping the latch of the door, paused and glanced around at her, a sudden revulsion of feeling leaving him unnerved and purposeless. He had been possessed by but one thought, a savage determination to seek out Farnham and kill him. The brute was no more than a mad dog who had bitten one he loved; he was unworthy of mercy. But now, in a revealing burst of light, he realized the utter futility of such an act. Coward, brutal as the man unquestionably was, he yet remained her husband, bound to her by ties she held indissoluble. Any vengeful blow which should make her a widow would as certainly separate the slayer from her forever. Unavoidably though it might occur, the act was one never to be forgiven by Beth Norvell, never to be blotted from her remembrance. Winston appreciated this as though a sudden flash-light had been turned upon his soul. He had looked down into her secret heart, he had had opened before him the religious depth of her nature---this bright-faced, brown-eyed woman would do what was right although she walked a pathway of self-denying agony. Never once did he doubt this truth, and the knowledge gripped him with fingers of steel. Even as he stood there, looking back upon her quivering figure, it was no longer hate of Farnham which controlled; it was love for her. He took a step toward her, hesitant, uncertain, his heart a-throb with sympathy; yet what could he say? What could he do? Utterly helpless to comfort, unable to even suggest a way out, he drew back silently, closed the door behind him, and shut her in. He felt one clear, unalterable conviction---under God, it should not be for long.

He stood there in the brilliant sunlight, bareheaded still; looking dreamily off across the wide reach of the canyon. How peaceful, how sublimely beautiful, it all appeared; how delicately the tints of those distant trees blended and harmonized with the brown rocks beyond! The broad, spreading picture slowly impressed itself upon his brain, effacing and taking the place of personal animosity. In so fair a world Hope is ever a returning angel with healing in his wings; and Winston's face brightened, the black frown deserting his forehead, all sternness gone from his eyes. There surely must be a way somewhere, and he would discover it; only the weakling and the coward can sit down in despair. Out of the prevailing silence he suddenly distinguished voices at hand, and the sound awoke him to partial interest. Just before the door where he stood a thick growth of bushes obstructed the view. The voices he heard indistinctly came from beyond, and he stepped cautiously forward, peering in curiosity between the parted branches.

It was a narrow section of the ledge, hemmed in by walls of rock and thinly carpeted with grass, a small fire burning near its centre. There was an appetizing smell of cookery in the air, and three figures were plainly discernible. The old miner, Mike, sat next the embers, a sizzling frying-pan not far away, his black pipe in one oratorically uplifted hand, a tin plate in his lap, his grouchy, seamed old face screwed up into argumentative ugliness, his angry eyes glaring at the Swede opposite, who was loungingly propped against a convenient stone. The latter looked a huge, ungainly, raw-boned fellow, possessing a red and white complexion, with a perfect shock of blond hair wholly unaccustomed to the ministrations of a comb. He had a long, peculiarly solemn face, rendered yet more lugubrious by unwinking blue eyes and a drooping moustache of straw color. Altogether, he composed a picture of unutterable woe, his wide mouth drawn mournfully down at the corners, his forehead wrinkled in perplexity. Somewhat to the right of these two more central figures, the young Mexican girl contributed a touch of brightness, lolling against the bank in graceful relaxation, her black eyes aglow with scarcely repressed merriment. However the existing controversy may have originated, it had already attained a stage for the display of considerable temper.

"Now, ye see here, Swanska," growled the thoroughly aroused Irishman vehemently. "It's 'bout enough Oi 've heard from ye on that now. Thar 's r'ason in all things, Oi 'm tould, but Oi don't clarely moind iver havin' met any in a Swade,

bedad. Oi say ye 're nothin' betther than a dommed foreigner, wid no business in this counthry at all, at all, takin' the bread out o' the mouths of honest min. Look at the Oirish, now; they was here from the very beginnin'; they 've fought, bled, an' died for the counthry, an' the loikes o' ye comes in an' takes their jobs. Be hivins, it 's enough to rile the blood. What's the name of ye, anny how?"

"Ay ban Nels Swanson."

"Huh! Well, it's little the loikes o' ye iver raily knows about names, Oi 'm thinkin'. They tell me ye don't have no proper, dacent names of yer own over in Sweden,---wherever the divil that is, I dunno,---but jist picks up annything handy for to dhraw pay on."

"It ban't true."

"It's a loiar ye are! Bad cess to ye, ain't Oi had to be bunk-mate wid some o' ye dhirty foreigners afore now? Ye 're *sons*, the whole kit and caboodle o' ye---Nelsons, an' Olesons, an' Swansons, an' Andersons. Blissed Mary! an' ye call them things names? If ye have anny other cognomen, it's somethin' ye stole from some Christian all unbeknownst to him. Holy Mother! but ye ought to be 'shamed to be a Swade, ye miserable, slab-sided haythen."

"My name ban Swanson; it ban all right, hey?"

"Swanson! Swanson! Oh, ye poor benighted, ignorant foreigner!" and Mike straightened up, slapping his chest proudly. "Jist ye look at me, now! Oi'm an O'Brien, do ye moind that? An O'Brien! Mother o' God! we was O'Briens whin the Ark first landed; we was O'Briens whin yer ancestors---if iver ye had anny---was wigglin' pollywogs pokin' in the mud. We was kings in ould Oireland, begorry, whin ye was a mollusk, or maybe a poi-faced baboon swingin' by the tail. The gall of the loikes of ye to call yerselves min, and dhraw pay wid that sort of thing ferninst ye for a name! Oi 'll bet ye niver had no grandfather; ye 're nothin' but a it, a son of a say-cook, be the powers! An' ye come over here to work for a thafe---a dhirty, low-down thafe. Do ye moind that, yer lantern-jawed spalpeen? What was it yer did over beyant?"

"Ay ban shovel-man fer Meester Burke---hard vork."

"Ye don't look that intilligent from here. Work!" with a snort, and waving his pipe in the air. "Work, is it? Sure, an' it's all the loikes of ye are iver good for. It 's not brains ye have at all, or ye 'd take it a bit aisier. Oi had a haythen Swade foreman oncet over at the 'Last Chance.' God forgive me for workin' undher the loikes of him. Sure he near worked me to death, he did that, the ignorant furriner. Work! why, Oi 'm dommed if a green Swade did n't fall the full length of the shaft one day, an' whin we wint over to pick him up, what was it ye think the poor haythen said? He opened his oies an' asked, 'Is the boss mad?' afeared he 'd lose his job! An' so ye was workin' for a thafe, was ye? An' what for?"

"Two tollar saxty cint."

Mike leaped to his feet as though a spring had suddenly uncoiled beneath him, waving his arms in wild excitement, and dancing about on his short legs.

"Two dollars an' sixty cints! Did ye hear that, now? For the love of Hivin! an' the union wages three sixty! Ye 're a dommed scab, an' it's meself that 'll wallup ye just for luck. It's crazy Oi am to do the job. What wud the loikes of ye work for Mистер Hicks for?"

Swanson's impassive face remained imperturbable; he stroked the moustaches dangling over the corners of his dejected mouth.

"Two tollar saxty cint."

Mike glared at him, and then at the girl, his own lips puckering.

"Bedad, Oi belave the poor cr'ater do n't know anny betther. Shure, 't is not for an O'Brien to be wastin' his toime thryin' to tache the loikes of him the great sacrets of thrade. It wud be castin' pearls afore swine, as Father Kinny says. Did iver ye hear tell of the Boible, now?"

"Ay ban Lutheran."

"An' what's that? It's a Dimocrat Oi am, an' dom the O'Brien that's annything else. But Oi niver knew thar was anny of thim other things hereabout. It's no prohibitioner ye are, annyhow, fer that stuff in yer bottle wud cook a snake. Sufferin' ages! but it had an edge to it that wud sharpen a saw. What do ye think of ther blatherin' baste annyhow, seenorita?"

The little Mexican gave sudden vent to her pent-up laughter, clapping her hands in such an ecstasy of delight as to cause the unemotional Swanson to open his mild blue eyes in solemn wonder.

"He all right, I rink," she exclaimed eagerly. "He no so mooch fool as you tink him---no, no. See, senior, he busy eat all de time dat you talk; he has de meal, you has de fin' air. Vich ees de bettair, de air or de meat, senior? *Bueno*, I tink de laugh vas vid him."

Mr. O'Brien, his attention thus suddenly recalled to practical affairs, gazed into the emptied frying-pan, a decided expression of bewildered despair upon his wizened face. For the moment even speech failed him as he confronted that scene of total devastation. Then he dashed forward to face the victim of his righteous wrath.

"Ye dom Swade, ye!" He shook a dirty fist beneath the other's nose. "Shmell o' that! It's now Oi know ye 're a thafe, a low-down haythen thafe. What are ye sittin' thar for, grinnin' at yer betthers?"

"Two tollar saxty cint."

The startled Irishman stared at him with mouth wide open.

"An' begorry, did ye hear that, seenorita? For the love of Hivin, it's only a poll-parrot sittin' there ferninst us, barrin' the appetite of him. Saints aloive! but Oi 'd love to paste the crature av it was n't a mortal sin to bate a dumb baste. An' he 's a Lutheran! God be marcifal an' keep me from iver ketchin' that same dis'ase, av it wud lave me loike this wan. What's that? What was it the haythen said then, seenorita?"

"Not von vord, senior; he only vink von eye like maybe he flirt vid me."

"The Swade did that! Holy Mother! an' wid an O'Brien here to take the part of any dacent gurl. Wait till I strip the coat off me. It's an O'Brien that'll tache him how to trate a lady. Say, Swanson, ye son of a gun, ye son of a say-cook, ye son---Sure, Oi 'd loike to tell ye what ye are av it was n't for the prisince of the seenorita. It's Michael O'Brien who 's about to paste ye in the oye fer forgittin' yer manners, an' growin' too gay in good company. Whoop! begorry, it's the grane above the red!"

There was a dull noise of a heavily struck blow. A pair of short legs, waving frantically, traversed a complete semicircle, coming down with a crash at the edge of the bushes. Through a rapidly swelling and badly damaged optic the pessimistic O'Brien gazed up in dazed bewilderment at the man already astride of his prostrate body. It was a

regenerated Norseman, the fierce battle-lust of the Vikings glowing in his blue eyes. With fingers like steel claws he gripped the Irishman's shirt collar, driving his head back against the earth with every mad utterance.

"Ay ban Nels Swanson!" he exploded defiantly. "Ay ban Nels Swanson! Ay ban Nels Swanson! Ay ban shovel-man by Meester Burke! Ay ban Lutheran! Ay ban work two tollar saxty cint! You hear dose tings? Tamn the Irish---Ay show you!"

With the swift, noiseless motion of a bird Mercedes flitted across the narrow space, forcing her slender figure in between the two contestants, her white teeth gleaming merrily, the bright sunshine shimmering across her black hair. Like two stars her great eyes flashed up imploringly into the Swede's angry face.

"No, no, senors! You no fight like de dogs vid me here. I not like dat, I not let you. See! you strike him, you strike me. *Dios de Dios!* I not have eet so---nevah."

A strong, compelling hand fell suddenly on Winston's shoulder, and he glanced about into the grave, boyish countenance of Stutter Brown.

"Th-thar 's quite c-c-consid'able of a c-crowd comin' up the t-t-trail t-ter the 'Independence,' an' B-Bill wants yer," he announced, his calm eyes on the controversy being waged beyond in the open. "Th-thar 'll be somethin' d-doin' presently, but I r-reckon I better s-s-straighten out t-this yere i-i-international fracas first."

CHAPTER XX

THE GAME OF FOILS

The grave-faced, yet good-natured giant pressed his way through the tangled mass of obstructing bushes, and unceremoniously proceeded to proclaim peace. His methods were characteristic of one slow of speech, yet swift of action. With one great hand gripping the Swede, he suddenly swung that startled individual at full length backward into the still smouldering embers of the fire, holding the gasping Mike down to earth with foot planted heavily upon his chest. It was over in an instant, Swanson sputtering unintelligible oaths while beating sparks from his overalls, the Irishman profanely conscious of the damage wrought to his eye, and the overwhelming odds against him. Senorita Mercedes clapped her little hands in delight at the spectacle, her steps light as those of the dance, the girlish joy in her eyes frank and unreserved.

"Ah, de Senor Brown---*bueno!* Dey vas just children to you even ven dey fight, hey? It vas good to see such tings doin', just like de play."

She circled swiftly up toward him, a happy bird of gay, fluttering plumage, pressing her fingers almost caressingly along the swelling muscle of his arm, and gazing with earnest admiration up into his face. Beneath the witching spell of her eyes the man's cheeks reddened. He took the way of savagery out of unexpected embarrassment.

"Th-that 's enough, now, Swanson," he commanded, the stutter largely vanishing before the requirement of deeds. "Th-this is no c-continuous vaudeville, an' ther curtain's rung d-down on yer act. Mike, yer ol' varmint, if yer do any more swearin' while ther lady's yere I 'll knock ther words back down yer throat. Yer know me, so shut up. Th-thar'll be fightin' in p-plenty fer both o' yer presently, the way things look. Now, vamoose, the two o' yer, an' be quiet about it. Mike, y-er better do something fer yer eyes if yer wanter see well 'nough ter take a pot-shot at Farnham's gang."

The two discomfited combatants slouched off unwillingly enough, but the slender white fingers of the Mexican remained clasping the speaker's arm, her upturned face filled with undisguised enthusiasm. Brown, after pretending to watch the fighters disappear, glanced uneasily down into her wondrous dark eyes, shuffling his feet awkwardly, his appearance that of a bashful boy. Mercedes laughed out of the depths of a heart apparently untroubled.

"My, but eet vas so ver' big, senior. See! I cannot make de fingers to go round---no, no. I nevah see such arm---nevah. But you no care? You vas dat great big all over, hey? *Sapristi!* who de woman help like such a big Americano?"

"B-but that ain't it, M-M-M-Mercedes," blurted out the perturbed giant, in desperation. "I-I want yer t-t-ter love me."

"*No comprende, senior.*"

"O-oh, yes yer do. L-Lord! didn't I t-tell it all ter yer s-s-straight 'nough last n-night? Maybe I ain't m-much on ther t-talk, but I r-reckon I sh-sh-shot that all right. C-can't yer make over th-that like inter l-love somehow?"

She released her clasp upon his arm, her eyes drooping behind their long lashes, the merry laughter fading from her lips.

"Dat vas not von bit nice of you, senior. Vy you ever keep bodder me so, ven I good to you? No, I tol' you not ask me dat so quick soon again. Did I not do dis? I tol' you den I know not; I meet you only de twice---how I lofe ven I meet you only de twice?"

"You 've m-m-met me as often a-as I h-h-have you," he interrupted, "an' I kn-know I l-love you all right."

"Oh, dat vas diff'rent, ver' different," and she tripped back from him, with a coquettish toss of the black head. "Vy not? of course. I vas Mercedes---*si*; vas dat not enough? All de *caballeros* say dat to me; dey say me ver' pretty girl. You tink dat too, senior?"

The perplexed Brown, fully conscious that his great strength was useless here, looked an answer, although his lips merely sputtered in vain attempt at speech.

"So; I read dat in de eyes. Den of course you lofe me. It vas de nature. But vis me it vas not so easy; no, not near so easy. I tink maybe you ver' nice man," she tipped it off upon her finger ends half playfully, constantly flashing her eyes up into his puzzled face. "I tink you ver' good man; I tink you ver' strong man; I tink maybe you be ver' nice to Mercedes. 'T is for all dose tings dat I like you, senior, like you ver' mooch; but lofe, dat means more as like, an' I know not for sure. Maybe so, maybe not so; how I tell yet for true? I tink de best ting be I not say eet, but just tink 'bout eet; just keep eet in mine own heart till some odder time ven I sure know. Vas eet not so?"

Brown set his teeth half savagely, the little witch tantalizing him with the swiftness of her speech, the coy archness of her manner. To his slower mentality she was like a humming-bird darting about from flower to flower, yet ever evading him.

"M-maybe yer think I ain't in e-e-earnest?" he persisted, doggedly. "M-maybe yer imagine I d-did n't m-m-mean what I s-said when I asked yer ter m-marry me?"

She glanced up quickly into his serious eyes, half shrinking away as if she suddenly comprehended the dumb, patient strength of the man, his rugged, changeless resolution. There was a bit of falter in the quick response, yet this was lost to him.

"No, senior, I no make fun. I no dat kind. I do de right, dat all; I do de right for both of us. I no vant to do de wrong. You *comprende*, senior? Maybe you soon grow ver' tire Mercedes, she marry you?"

The infatuated miner shook his head emphatically, and flung out one hand toward her.

"No! Oh, you tink so now; you tink so ver' mooch now, but eet better ve wait an' see. I know de men an' de vay dey forget after vile. Maybe I not such good voman like you tink me; maybe I cross, scold, get qvick mad; maybe I no like live widout de stage, de lights, de dance, an' de fun, hey? Vat you do den? You be ver' sorry you marry. I no like dat, no, no. I want de man to lofe me always---nevah to vish he not marry me. You not know me yet; I not know you. Maybe ve wait, ve know."

He caught her gesticulating hands, prisoning them strongly within both his own, but she shook forward her loosened hair until it fell partially across her face, hiding it thus from his eager eyes bent in passion upon her.

"B-but tell me y-you love me! T-tell me th-th-that, an' I 'll let the o-other go!"

"You would make me to say de untrue, senior?"

"Of course not. I w-want ter kn-kn-know. Only if you d-do n't, I 'm a-goin' t-ter git out o' yere."

She remained silent, motionless, her telltale face shadowed, only the quick rise and fall of the bosom evidencing emotion. The man looked at her helplessly, his mouth setting firm, his eyes becoming filled with sudden doubt.

"W-well, Mercedes," he stuttered, unable to restrain himself, "wh-what is it?"

She lifted her lowered head ever so slightly, so that he saw her profile, the flush on the cheek turned toward him.

"Maybe eet better you stay, senior. Anyhow, I no vant you go just now."

For once he proved the more swift of the two, clasping her instantly within his arms, drawing her slender form close against him with a strength he failed to realize in that sudden excess of passion. Holding her thus in helpless subjection he flung aside the obstructing veil of hair, and covered the flushed cheeks with kisses. The next moment, breathless, but not with indignation, the girl had pushed his burning face aside, although she still lay quivering within the remorseless clasp of his arms.

"I no said all dat, senior; I no said all dat. You so ver' strong, you hurt Mercedes. Please, senior---eet vas not dat I meant eet should be dis vay---no, no. I no said I lofe you; I just say stay till maybe I know vich---please, senior."

"N-not till yer k-kiss me yourself," and Brown, intensely conscious of triumph, held back the mass of black hair, his eager eyes devouring the fair face pressing his shoulder. "O-one kiss w-with ther l-l-lips, an' I 'll let yer g-go."

"No, no, senior."

"Th-then I h-hold yer here till some one comes."

"Eet vas not lofe; eet vas just to get away."

"I-I-I take ch-chances on that, l-little girl."

Their lips met and clung; all unconsciously the free arm of the girl stole upward, clasping the man's broad shoulder. For that one instant she forgot all excepting the new joy of that embrace, the crowning faith that this man loved her as no other ever had---truly, nobly, and forever. Her face was aglow as she drew reluctantly back from him, her eyes upon his, her cheeks flushed, her lips trembling. Yet with the parting came as swiftly back the resolution which made her strong.

"Eh, senior; eet shame me, but you promise---please, senior!"

Like a flash, in some mysterious manner, she had slipped free, evaded his effort to grasp her dress, and, with quick, whirling motion, was already half-way across the open space, daring to mock him even while flinging back her long hair, the sunlight full upon her. Never could she appear more delicately attractive, more coquettishly charming.

"Ah, see---you tink me de prisoner. Eet vas not all de strength, senior, not all. You no can catch me again till I lofe you; not de once till I lofe you, senior."

He started toward her blindly, taunted by these unexpected words of renunciation. But she danced away, ever managing to keep well beyond reach, until she disappeared within the narrow path leading to the cabin. He could see her through the vista of branches, pausing to look back and watch if he followed.

"B-but you do," he called out, "I-I know you d-do. Won't yer just s-s-say it for me onct?"

"Say dat I marry you?"

"Y-yes, for it means ther same. Anyhow, s-say yer love me."

She laughed, shaking her head so hard the black hair became a whirling cloud about her.

"No, no! eet not de same, senior. Maybe I lofe you, maybe not yet. Dat ees vat you must fin' out. But marry? Dat no show I lofe you. Oh, de men! to tink eet vas de only vay to prove lofe to marry. No, no! maybe I show you some day eef I lofe you; si, some day I show you ven I know true. But dat not mean I marry you. Dat mean more as dat---you see. *Adios*, senior."

And he stood alone, staring at the blank door, strangely happy, although not content.

CHAPTER XXI

UNDER ARREST

When Brown emerged from behind the protection of the cabin, his freckled face yet burning red in memory of his strenuous love-making, he discovered both Hicks and Winston standing upon the rock which shortly before had formed their breakfast table, gazing watchfully off into the purple depths of the canyon, occasionally lifting their eyes to search carefully the nearer surroundings about the hostile "Independence." Something serious was in the air, and all three men felt its mysterious presence. Hicks held the field-glasses in his hands, outwardly calm, yet his old face already beginning to exhibit the excitement of rapidly culminating events. That they were not to be long left undisturbed was promised by an increasing number of figures distinctly visible around the distant shaft-house and dump, as well as the continuous shouting, indistinguishable as to words but pronounced in volume, borne through the clear air to their ears.

"I 'm a liar if ther was n't twenty in that last bunch," Hicks muttered, just a trifle uneasily. "Good Lord boys! it 's an army they 're organizin' over yonder. Blame me if I onderstan' that sorter scheme at all. It don't look nat'ral. I never thought

Farnham was no coward when ther time come fer fightin', but this kind o' fixin' shore looks as if we had him skeered stiff. Wal, it 'll take more 'n a bunch o' San Juan toughs to skeer me. I reckon ther present plan must be ter try rushin' ther 'Little Yankee.'"

He wheeled about, driving the extended tubes of his glass together, his gray beard forking out in front of his lean, brown face like so many bristles.

"Oh, is thet you come back, Stutter? Thought I heerd somebody walkin' behind me. I reckon, judgin' from ther outlook over thar, thet the dance is 'bout ter begin; leastwise, the fiddlers is takin' their places," and he waved his gnarled hand toward the distant crowd. "Got somethin' like a reg'ment thar now, hoss and fut, an' it's safe ter bet thar 's more a-comin'. This yere fracas must be gittin' some celebrated, an' bids fair ter draw bigger 'n a three-ringed circus. All ther scum o' San Juan must 'a got a private tip thet we was easy marks. They 're out yere like crows hopin' ter pick our bones clean afore the law kin git any show at all. Wal, it 'll be a tough meal all right, an' some of 'em are mighty liable ter have trouble with their digestion, fer thar 's goin' ter be considerable lead eat first. Now see yere, Stutter, the safest thing we kin do is git ready. You chase that whole bunch yonder back behind them rocks, where they 'll be out o' the way---the Swede an' the women. Do it lively, an' you an' Mike stay up thar with 'em, with your guns handy. Keep under cover as much as ye kin, for some o' them lads out thar will have glasses with 'em, and be watchin' of us almighty close. Hurry 'long now; me an' Winston will stop yere until we find out just what their little game is likely ter be."

He turned away from his partner, facing once again toward the "Independence." Then he readjusted the tubes, and passed them over to his silent companion.

"Just see what you make out o' it, Mr. Winston; ye 're some younger, an' yer eyes ought ter be a heap better 'n mine."

The young engineer, his heart already beginning to throb with the excitement of an unaccustomed position of danger, ran the lenses carefully back and forth from the half-concealed bunk-house to the nearer ore-dump, searching for every sign of life. Whatever emotion swayed him, there was not the slightest tremor to the steady hands supporting the levelled tubes.

"They have certainly got together a considerable number of men," he reported, the glass still at his eyes. "Roughs the most of them look to be, from their clothes. The largest number are grouped in between the shaft-house and the dump, but there must be a dozen or fifteen down below at the edge of those cedars. Farnham is at the shaft-house---no, he and another fellow have just started down the dump, walking this way. Now they have gone into the cedars, and are coming straight through. What's up, do you suppose---negotiations?"

"I 'm damned if I know," returned the old miner, staring blankly. "This whole thing kinder jiggers me. Maybe he thinks he kin skeer us out by a good brand o' talk. He 's a bit o' a bluffer, that Farnham."

The two watchers waited in breathless expectancy, leaning on their loaded Winchesters, their eyes eagerly fastened on the concealing cedars. Behind where they remained in the open, yet within easy rifle-shot, the heads of Brown and Old Mike rose cautiously above the rock rampart of their natural fort. Suddenly two men, walking abreast, emerged from out the shadow of the wood, and came straight toward them across the open ridge of rocks. They advanced carelessly, making no effort to pick their path, and in apparently utter indifference to any possible peril. The one was Farnham, his slender form erect, his shoulders squared, his hat pushed jauntily back so as to reveal fully the smoothly shaven face. The other bent slightly forward as he walked, his wide brim drawn low over his eyes, leaving little visible except the point of a closely trimmed beard. He was heavily built, and a "45" dangled conspicuously at his hip. If Farnham bore arms they were concealed beneath the skirt of his coat. Watching them approach, Winston's eyes became threatening, his hands involuntarily clinching, but Hicks remained motionless, his lean jaws continuously munching on the tobacco in his

cheek.

"Who the hell is that with him?" he questioned, wonderingly. "Do you know the feller?"

Winston shook his head, his own steady gaze riveted upon Farnham. Deliberately the two climbed the low ore-dump side by side, and came forth on top into the full glare of the sun. Hicks's Winchester sank to a level, his wicked old eye peering along the polished barrel.

"I 'll have to ask ye ter stop right thar, gents," he said, genially, drawing back the hammer with a sharp click. "Ye 're trespassin' on my property."

The two men came to an instant halt, Farnham smiling unpleasantly, his hands buried in his pockets. His companion hastily shoved back his hat, as though in surprise at the summons, revealing a broad, ruddy face, shadowed by iron-gray whiskers. Hicks half lowered his gun, giving vent to a smothered oath.

"By God, it's the sheriff!" he muttered, in complete bewilderment. "What the hell are we up against?"

There was an interval of intense silence, both parties gazing at each other, the one side startled, unnerved, the other cool, contemptuous. It was the sheriff who first spoke, standing firmly on his short legs, and quietly stroking his beard.

"You probably recognize me, Bill Hicks," he said, calmly, "and it might be just as healthy for you to lower that gun. I ain't here hunting any trouble, but if it begins I 've got a posse over yonder big enough to make it mighty interesting. You sabe?"

Old Hicks hesitated, his finger yet hovering about the trigger, his eyes filled with doubt. There was some mystery in this affair he could not in the least fathom, but he was obstinate and hard-headed.

"Yes, I know you all right, Mr. Sheriff," he returned, yet speaking half angrily. "But I don't know what ye 're dippin' inter this yere affair fer. I haven't any quarrel with you, ner any cause fer one. But I have with that grinnin' cuss alongside o' yer. I 'll talk with you all right, but Farnham will either mosey back ter his own den o' thieves, 'er I 'll blow a hole plumb through him--that's flat. I don't talk ter his kind."

The sheriff held up one hand, taking a single step forward, his face grown sternly resolute.

"Mr. Farnham chances to be present as my deputy," he announced gravely. "I don't know anything about a quarrel between you two men, and I care less. I 'm here to enforce the law and arrest law-breakers. If you decide to interfere between me and my duty I 'll know how to act. I 've smelt of the business end of a gun before to-day, and I guess nobody ever saw Sam Hayes play baby when there was a fight on tap. If there 's trouble between you and Farnham, have it out, and git done with it in proper fashion, but just now he 's a sworn officer of the law, and when you threaten him you threaten all Gulpin County. Do you manage to digest that fact, Hicks?"

The sturdy old prospector, his face white with rage under the tan, uncocked his rifle and dropped the butt heavily upon the earth, his eyes wandering from the face of the sheriff to that of Winston.

"What the hell is it yer want, then?" he asked sullenly. Hayes smiled, shifting easily so as to rest his weight on one leg.

"Got anybody in your bunch named Winston?" he questioned, "Ned Winston, mining engineer?"

The younger man started in surprise.

"That is my name," he replied, before Hicks could speak. The sheriff looked toward him curiously, noting the square jaw, the steady gray eyes; then he glanced aside at Farnham. The latter nodded carelessly.

"So far, so good. By the same luck, have you a Swede here called Nels Swanson?"

Hicks shook his head in uncertainty.

"There 's a Swede here, all right, who belongs ter the 'Independence' gang. I don 't know his name."

"It's Swanson," put in Farnham, cheerfully. "Those are the two birds you 're after, sheriff."

The latter official, as though fascinated by what he read there, never ventured to remove his watchfulness from the face of the engineer, yet he smiled grimly.

"Then I 'll have to trouble you to trot out the Swede, Hicks," he said, a distinct command in his voice. "After he 's here we 'll get down to business."

It was fully five minutes before the fellow arrived, his movements slow and reluctant. From his language, expressing his feelings freely to Mike and Brown, who were engaged in urging him forward, it was evident he experienced no ambition to appear in the limelight. The four men waiting his coming remained motionless, intently watchful of one another. As the slowly moving Swede finally approached, Hayes ventured to remove his eyes from Winston just long enough to scan swiftly the mournful countenance, that single glance revealing to him the character of the man. The latter gazed uneasily from one face to another, his mild blue eyes picturing distress, his fingers pulling aimlessly at his moustache.

"Ay ban yere by you fellers," he confessed sorrowfully, unable to determine which person it was that wanted him.

"So I see," admitted the sheriff laconically. "Are you Nels Swanson?"

The fellow swallowed something in his throat that seemed to choke him. This question sounded familiar; it brought back in a rush a recollection of his late controversy with Mr. O'Brien. His face flushed, his eyes hardening.

"Ay ban Nels Swanson!" he exploded, beating the air with clenched fist. "Ay ban Lutheran! Ay ban shovel-man by Meester Burke. Ay get two tollar saxty cint! Ay not give won tamn for you! Ay lick de fellar vot ask me dot again!"

The sheriff stared at him, much as he might have examined a new and peculiar specimen of bug.

"I don't recall having asked you anything about your family history," he said quietly, dropping one hand in apparent carelessness on the butt of his "45." "Your name was all I wanted." He tapped the breast of his coat suggestively, his gaze returning to Winston.

"Well, gents, we might as well bring this affair to a focus, although no doubt you two understand the meaning of it pretty well already. I 've got warrants here for the arrest of Winston and Swanson. I hope neither of you intend to kick up any row."

The white teeth of the young mining engineer set like a trap, his gray eyes gleaming dangerously beneath frowning brows. Instinctively he took a quick step forward.

"Warrants?" he exclaimed, breathlessly. "In God's name, for what?"

Hayes tightened his grip on the gun butt, drawing it half from the sheath, his eyes narrowing.

"For the murder of Jack Burke," he said tersely. "Don't you move, young man!"

There was a long moment of intense, strained silence, in which the five men could hear nothing but their own quick breathing. Before Winston everything grew indistinct, unreal, the faces fronting him a phantasy of imagination. He felt the fierce throb of his own pulses, a sudden dull pain shooting through his temples. *Murder!* The terrible word struck like a blow, appearing to paralyze all his faculties. In front of him, as if painted, he saw that fierce struggle in the dark, the limp figure lying huddled among the rocks. *Murder!* Aye, and how could he prove it otherwise? How could he hope to clear himself from the foul charge? Even as he yet swayed unsteadily upon his feet, a hand pressed across his eyes as if shielding them from that horrible vision, a voice, deep and strident, rang out:

"Mike an' me have got the two cusses covered Mr. Winston. If they move, or you give us the highball, we 'll plug 'em dead centre!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE INTERVENTION OF SWANSON

Hayes never changed his position, nor removed his eyes from Winston, his right hand still resting upon the butt of his "45," his lips set in rigid line. The engineer, the mist partially clearing from his brain, retained no thought except for Farnham, who remained motionless, staring over his head into the black, threatening muzzle of Stutter Brown's levelled gun. These were Western men; they recognized instantly the potency of "the drop," the absolute certainty of death if they stirred a muscle. They could only wait, breathless, uncertain, the next move in this desperate game. To Winston it seemed an hour he hesitated, his mind a chaos, temptation buffeting him remorselessly. He saw the sheriff's face set hard, and resolute behind its iron-gray beard; he marked the reckless sneer curling Farnham's lips, the livid mark under his eye where he had struck him. The intense hatred he felt for this man swept across him fiercely, for an instant driving out of his heart all thought of mercy. As suddenly he remembered the helpless woman yonder, within easy view, possibly even then upon her knees in supplication. It was this conception that aroused him. He withdrew his dull gaze from off that hateful, mocking face, his clenched hands opening, his mind responding to a new-born will. "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord"---like an echo, perhaps from the very prayer her lips were speaking, the solemn words came into his consciousness. With face white, and lips trembling, he stepped suddenly back, and flung up one hand.

"Don't fire, boys!" he commanded, his voice ringing clear and purposeful. "Drop your guns; it's all right. This is my game, and I intend to play it out alone."

Farnham laughed, the quick reaction possibly affecting even his iron nerves. Winston whirled and fronted him, the gray eyes blazing.

"Damn you, you sneaking, sneering brute!" he burst forth. "You thief, you woman-beater, you unspeakable cur! I surrender to the sheriff of Gulpin County, not to you. I've got the evidence to send you to the penitentiary, and I'll do it, even though I stand myself in the shadow of death while I bear witness to your infamy. You think this arrest will shut my mouth! You imagine this will render me harmless! But, by God, it will not! I'll fight you until the last breath leaves my body. I'll tear you out from the protection of law; I'll show you the kind of a man you have stacked up against. I don't know whether this murder charge is all a trick or not; I don't more than half believe Jack Burke is dead. But be that as it may, I'll pull you down, Biff Farnham, not in any revenge for wrong done me, but to save a woman whom you

know. I 'll do it, damn you, though it cost me my life!"

The sheriff's iron hand fell in restraint upon his shoulder, the burly body interposed between them.

"You're all right," Hayes said quietly, his eyes pleasantly interested. "You 've been squar' with me, young fellow, an' I 'm goin' ter be squar' with you. You kin bet on that. They 'll give you a chance down below to fight out your quarrel with Farnham."

Winston, his quick rage as instantly fading, drew one hand across his face, the real danger of his present situation flowing back suddenly to mind.

"Where do you mean to take us?" he questioned.

"San Juan."

"Right away?"

"Wal, 'bout as soon as we kin git you back ter whar the hosses are, yonder."

"You promise us protection from that 'Independence' outfit?"

The sheriff nodded decisively.

"Never lost no prisoner yet to a mob," he replied confidently. "I reckon thar'll be one hell of a fight before I do now. However, you don't need to worry, young man. On second thought, I 'll have the hosses brought over here, an' we 'll go down this trail."

Winston glanced about into the faces of Hicks and the Swede. There was no help forthcoming from either, but he had already reached a definite decision for himself.

"Very well," he said calmly, "I 'll go with you quietly, sheriff, only I don't need any hand-cuffing."

"Never use 'em," and Hayes affectionately patted his gun. "I reckon this yere instrument will do the business all right if any misunderstandin' should arise atween us goin' down. However, I 'll trouble yer to discard them weapons for the sake o' peace."

Without a word the engineer unbuckled his belt, tossed it over to Hicks, and then slowly turned his body about to prove himself entirely disarmed. Then he smiled, and extended his hand. The sheriff grasped it cordially.

"There need be no hard feeling between us, Hayes," he said pleasantly. "You 're only doing your sworn duty; I understand that. But there 's something rotten in this affair somewhere. All I ask is a square deal."

"An' yer kin bet you'll git it, Mr. Winston, er Sam Hayes will find out why. This yere 'Independence' outfit is no favorites o' mine, an' if the whole difficulty turns out ter be nothin' but a minin' squabble, the jury ain't likely ter be very hard on yer. That's my way o' figgerin' on it, from what little I know." He glanced keenly about, seeking to gain a clearer idea of their immediate surroundings. "Maybe you an' Swanson better mosey back yonder to the cabin, where I can keep an eye on you easy, while I send after the hosses. Farnham, climb back on top of the dump there, an' give them boys the signal to come on."

The gambler removed his hat, running one hand carelessly through his hair, his thin lips sufficiently parted to reveal his white teeth.

"I hardly think we are exactly done yet, Mr. Sheriff," he said sarcastically. "I'm not very much worried regarding your suddenly expressed sympathy for this fellow, or your desire to get him off unscratched; but I feel compelled to insist upon receiving all the law allows me in this game we're playing. There's another warrant in your pocket for Winston."

"By thunder, yes; I'd clear forgot it," fumbling at his papers.

"Well, I had n't; matter of some personal importance to me," the voice taking on a lazy, insolent drawl. "Of course, the fellow is under arrest all right, but that murder business is only part of it--I want my wife."

Winston started forward, crouching as though he would spring directly at the other's throat.

"Your wife?" he exclaimed madly, his voice choking. "Your wife? You've sworn out a warrant for me on account of your wife?"

"Something of that nature, I believe," gazing at him insolently. "Abduction I think the lawyers call it, and I notice you've got the lady hidden away back yonder now." He pointed across the other's shoulder. "Caught with the goods. Oh, you're a fine preacher of morals, but I've got you dead to rights this time."

Winston stood as though carved from stone, his face deathly white, his lips compressed, his gray eyes burning, never wavering from that mocking face. With all his strength of will he battled back the first mad impulse to throttle the man, to crush him into shapeless pulp. For one awful moment his mind became a chaos, his blood throbbing fire. To kill would be joy, a relief inexpressible. Farnham realized the impulse, and drew back, not shrinking away, but bracing for the contest. But the engineer gripped himself in time.

"Hayes," he ejaculated hoarsely, "let the lady decide this. If she says no, then, by God, I'll fight you all single-handed before he ever puts touch upon her!"

Old Bill Hicks was beside him in a single stride, his face blazing.

"I'm damned if yer will!" he growled madly. "I'm in on this deal, law er no law. The whole blame thing is a bluff, an' I'll not stan' fer it no longer. Yer step back thar, Sam Hayes, er else Gulpin County will be lookin' 'round fer another sheriff. I've got plumb ter the limit o' patience in this game."

Winston grasped the old man's uplifted arm, whirling him sharply around.

"No," he exclaimed almost wearily, "it's not to be a fight yet; let--let her decide between us."

She was already coming, walking alone directly across the open space toward them. The eyes of the bewildered men were upon her, marking the white face, rendered more noticeable by its frame of dark, uncovered hair, the firm, womanly chin, the tightly compressed lips, the resolute, unwavering eyes. She walked firmly, confidently forward, her head proudly uplifted, a stately dignity about her bearing which could not be ignored. If she perceived either Winston or Farnham in that group she gave no sign, never halting until she stood directly before Sam Hayes. Involuntarily, unconscious of the act, the sheriff pulled off his hat, and stood twirling it in his hands.

"Is it indeed true," she asked, her voice thrilling with suppressed feeling, "that you possess a warrant sworn out by Biff Farnham, charging Mr. Winston with the abduction of his wife?"

"Yes, ma'am," and the man changed the weight of his body to the other foot. "I 'm sorry ter say it 's true."

She lifted one hand suddenly to her forehead as though in pain.

"And you intend to serve it?"

"I have no choice, ma'am; I 'm an officer of the law."

There followed a pause, seemingly endless, the eyes of the men turned away. She lifted her head, sweeping her gaze swiftly across the faces, and a flush crept into the white cheeks.

"Gentlemen," her voice low and clear, but with a slight falter occasionally yielding peculiar power to the words, "it is true I am that man's wife." She looked directly at him, apparently oblivious of his attempt at smiling indifference. "By the laws of God and men I am his wife. I neither deny this, nor have ever sought to escape from its obligations. To me, the vows of marriage were sacred when first assumed; they remain no less sacred now. This man is fully aware of how I feel in this regard; he knows I have proved true in spirit and letter to my vows; he knows exactly why I am not living with him; why I am earning my own living in the world; why I am here in this position to-day. He knows it all, I say, because the desertion was his, not mine; and his present deliberate, cowardly attempt to besmirch my character by doing an injury to another is an unbearable insult, an outrage more serious than if he had struck me a physical blow. The one I might forgive, as I have before forgiven, but the other is beyond the limits of pardon, if I would retain my own self-respect. I am a woman, an honorable woman, and my reputation is more to me than life."

She paused, breathing heavily, her head flung back, Her hands clenched as though in desperate effort at self-control.

"You---you!" the words seemed fairly forced from between her lips, "there has never been a time when I would not have gone to you at a word, at your slightest expressed desire. However I may have despised you in my secret heart, I remained loyal outwardly, and would have gone to you in response to the call of duty. There is no such duty now. You have openly insulted and degraded me; you have accused me before the world; you have dragged my name in the muck; you have attempted to dethrone my womanhood. The past is over; it is over forever. The law may continue to hold me as your wife, but I am not your wife. The records of the church may so name me, but they are false. A God of love could never have linked me to such a brute---the very thought is infamy. Do not touch me! Do not speak to me! I believe I could kill you easier than I could ever again yield to you so much as a word."

She reeled as though about to fall, her hand pressed against her heart. Before an arm could be out-stretched in support, she had rallied, and turned away. With head lowered, her face shadowed by her hair she walked slowly toward the cabin. No man in the group stirred until she had disappeared. Then the sheriff fumblingly replaced his hat, his eyes wandering in uncertainty from Farnham to Winston.

"By God!" he exclaimed, as though in relief, catching his breath quickly and wiping his forehead. "By God! but that was fierce." Recalling his own duty he reached out his hand and laid it heavily upon the shoulder of the man standing next him. It chanced to be the Swede.

"Go on into the cabin," he commanded, a returning sternness in the order.

The surprised man stared at him in dull bewilderment.

"Vat for Ay go--hey?"

"Because you 're under arrest."

"Vat dot you say? I vas arrest? Maybe you not know me, hey? Ay tells you vat Ay vas mighty quick. Ay ban Nels Swanson; Ay ban Lutheran; Ay ban shovel---"

"Oh, shut up; ye 're under arrest, I tell you---move on now."

"Vat vas dis under arrest?" the blue eyes losing their mildness, the drooping moustache beginning to bristle. "Ay no understand 'bout dis arrest. Vat Ay do, hey?"

"Helped to kill Jack Burke."

The startled Norseman stared at him, gulping, his eyes fairly protruding from his face, his breath hissing between his gritted teeth. The wild berserker blood was surging hot through his veins.

"Ut vas von lie! You kill me so! By tamn, no!"

That instant, insane with fright, he grasped the astonished officer in the vise of his great hands, swung him into the air, and dashed him down headlong upon the rocks. Uttering a yell like that of some wild animal, the fellow was off, striking against Winston with his body as he passed, leaping recklessly across the rocks, heading straight toward the nearest thicket. It was all the work of a moment. Farnham whirled and sent one shot after him; then, as suddenly remembering his own peril, wheeled back to face the others, the smoking revolver in his hand. Amid the quick turmoil old Mike sprang to the summit of the rock rampart, his face flaming with enthusiasm.

"Go it, Swanska!" he yelled, encouragingly. "Go it, ye crazy white-head! Be the powers, but it's the foinest runnin' Oi 've sane fer a whoile. Saints aloive! but wud ye moind thim legs! 'Twas a kangaroo, begorry, an' not a monkey he come from, or Oi 'm a loiar. Go it, Swanny, ould bye! Howly St. Patrick! but he 'll be out o' the State afore dhark, if he only kapes it up. It 's money Oi 'm bettin' on the Swade!"

Winston stepped swiftly across to the motionless sheriff, and knelt down beside him, his face gravely anxious. The unfortunate man lay huddled up, breathing heavily, his head bleeding freely from two plainly visible wounds. The engineer turned him over, one hand feeling for his heart. Slowly the young man rose to his feet, standing beside the body, his gray eyes fastened upon Farnham. Here was a condition of affairs he must decide upon for himself, decide instantly, decide in spite of law, in spite of everything.

"He appears to be rather badly hurt; not seriously, I think, but the man is unconscious, and in no condition to be removed," he said, managing to hold his voice to a strange quiet. "I consider myself his prisoner, and shall remain with him until he becomes fit to travel. Farnham, I do not acknowledge your deputyship, and if you attempt to arrest me it will be at your peril. There are four of us here against you, but we 'll give you a chance---go back to your own! Not a word, if you care to live! Go, damn you---go!"

They stood and watched him, until his slender figure disappeared behind the fringe of cedars. Then Hicks and Winston, neither man speaking a word, tenderly lifted the wounded sheriff from off the rocks, and bore him back into the shelter of the cabin.

CHAPTER XXIII

A NEW VOLUNTEER

The desperate seriousness of their situation was only too evident. Both men recognized this, yet had no opportunity then to reflect over its possibilities, or plan for relief. Without exchanging a word, except as related to their present labor, the two at once began ministering to the relief of Hayes, confident that Brown, stationed without, would guard vigorously against any surprise attack. The two wounds upon the sheriff's head were extremely ugly in appearance, being both deep and jagged, and having bled profusely. However, when carefully washed and probed, neither proved particularly severe or dangerous. In less than an hour, conscious yet exceedingly weak and becoming somewhat feverish, the injured man, dazed in mind but fairly comfortable in body, had been safely stowed away in a bunk, with every prospect of an early recovery.

Not until all this had been accomplished did his anxious nurses venture to look thoughtfully into each others' faces and take direct cognizance of their own perilous position. Hicks stepped outside into the sunlight, wiping the perspiration from off his face, and a moment later Winston joined him, the two standing in grave silence, gazing off toward the apparently deserted "Independence." The strain of the past night and day had plainly marked them both, yet it was not exposure and toil alone that gave such anxiety to their faces. Finally Hicks turned from his long scrutiny and glanced back toward the younger man, stroking his goat's beard solemnly.

"Looks ter me like we'd managed ter drop into a mighty bad hole, an' was up agin the real thing," he began gloomily, yet hastening to add in explanation, "not as I have any notion o' cavin', you onderstand, only I ain't overly pleased with the situation, an' thet 's a fact. I never yit objected in particular ter no fair fight, not o' any kind, free fer all, or stan' up, but I ain't used ter buckin' agin the law nohow, an' someway thet seems ter be 'bout what we 're up agin this trip. Beats hell the way things turned out, don't it?"

Winston nodded without opening his lips. He was thinking more earnestly about Miss Norvell's unpleasant position than of their own, yet compelled himself to attention.

"Now, this yere Farnham is a gambler an' a thief; he 's all round crooked, an' we 've got a cinch on him fer the penitentiary. But we ain't got the right holt," the old miner continued, squinting his eyes as if thus endeavoring to get the thought firmly lodged in his brain. "He 's ben made a deputy sheriff. He kin turn that crowd o' toughs over thar into a posse, an' come over here with the whole law o' the State backin' them in any deviltry they decide on, even ter killin' off the lot o' us for resistin' officers. Es Sam Hayes said, if we shoot, we 'll be a-shootin' up Gulpin County. An' yet, by thunder, we 've plumb got ter do it, er git off the earth. I jest don't see no other way. Biff, he won't care a damn how he gits us, so he gits us afore we have any chance ter turn the tables on him, an' shift the law over ter our side. Hayes can't help any, fer he 's out o' his head. Consequent, it's up ter us. Thet warrant business, an' deputy sheriff racket, was a blame smart trick, all right. It would 'a' corralled us good an' proper if thet fool Swede had n't run amuck. Not that he left us in no bed o' roses, but, at least, we got a fightin' chance now, an' afore we did n't have even that. I was inclined ter let yer surrender to the sheriff, fer Sam Hayes is a squar' man, but not ter Farnham an' his gang---not much, Mary Ann! Thet would mean lynchin', an' I know it. So, I reckon we jest got to plug it out, an' trust ter luck. Thet 's my view-point, but ye 're a more higher edycated man ner me, Mr. Winston, an' maybe you kin see some other way out."

The old man sat down on an outcropping stone, pulled out his pipe and lit it, puffing thick rings of smoke into the air with manifest enjoyment. Winston did not answer until the other again turned his eyes upon him questioningly.

"I was busy thinking," explained the engineer, "but must confess the situation looks about as bad to me as it does to you. The silver lining of this cloud is not apparent. Of course, we 've got the right of it, but in some way Fate has managed to leave us set square against the law. We 're outlaws without having done a thing to warrant it. There is n't but one possible way out, and that is for us to get on the right side again. Now, how can it be done? Some one of us will have to

go down to San Juan, before those fellows get over here in force, swear out warrants against Farnham and his partners, and have this whole affair probed to the bottom. We 've got them, if we can only get the ear of the District Attorney, and shift this fight into the courts. The trouble is, Farnham was smart enough to get there ahead of us, and he 'll win out if we don't move quick and block him. I can't go myself, for I 'm a prisoner, and must remain with the sheriff, or will be considered a fugitive. The only question is, Can any one hope to get through?"

Hicks permitted his gaze to stray out across the dim valley below, then up toward the ragged summit of the overhanging crest of rocks. Through the smoke of his pipe he deliberately surveyed Stutter Brown, perched motionless at the edge of his watchtower, a Winchester silhouetted black against the stone.

"Not down that way, anyhow," he announced, finally, pointing with his pipe-stem. "I reckon a mosquiter could n't git through along that trail ternight. Ever hear tell o' Daggett Station?"

Winston rubbed his chin, endeavoring to recall the name.

"I 'm not sure. Is it the water-tank and section-house, next stop below Bolton Junction, on the main line?"

"You 've called the tarn. Wal, it's over thar," pointing apparently into the heart of the mountain, "straight south, twenty miles as ther crow flies from the foot o' this rise, across as barren a sand waste as ever broke a man's heart--nary drop o' water from start ter finish, an' hot--oh, hell!" He paused, thinking. "But I hardly reckon them people would ever think 'bout guardin' that way out, an' a good rider could make it easy afore daylight, an' catch the train East."

"How do you get down?"

"Through a long, twistin' ravine; it's a mean place fer travellin', an' you have ter lead the hoss till yer strike the sand."

"Ever cross there yourself?"

"Wal, no," stroking his beard; "but Stutter come back that way onct, from a hunt or something. He never said nothin' when he struck in, but yer could 'a' scraped alkali off him with a hoe, an' he drunk a whole bucket o' water without takin' breath. So I reckon it wa'n't no pleasure jaunt."

"Then it's got to be Stutter," decided Winston, rising to his feet, "for we must get word to San Juan. I 'm going inside to see how Hayes is feeling."

"I reckon that's the ticket," agreed Hicks, gloomily, "but I 'm blamed if I like losin' him. He 's a fightin' man, that Stutter, after he onct gits his blood stirred up, an' I 'm sorter expectin' a lively time yere when it gits dark. It 'll be Farnham's last chance ter put us out o' the way, an' he 's likely ter take it. I 'll bet Stutter won't go, leastwise without the gal; he 's natural bull-headed, besides bein' in love. That makes an ornery combination."

Within the cabin, the door closed behind him, the single small window shedding a dim light across the apartment, Winston turned, his hand still upon the latch, and confronted Beth Norvell and Mercedes. Their presence there was so unexpected that the young man paused in sudden embarrassment, ready words failing him. The two were seated close together on rude stools beneath the window, where they had evidently been in intimate conversation. The former, her gaze lowered upon the floor, did not glance up; but Mercedes flashed her black eyes into his face, recognizing his confusion, and hastening to relieve it. Warm-hearted, impulsive, already beginning to experience the value of true love, the young Mexican was eager to bring these two into a better understanding. Her quick smile of welcome swept away for an instant all memory of the other's apparent indifference.

"Ah, eet vas good you come, senior. See, ve shut up here like prisoners; ve see nottings, ve hear nottings, ve know nottings. Now ve make you tell us eet all, de whole story. Miladi here, she tink eet all ver' bad; she cry, de tear yet in her eye, an' I know not vat to tell to make her feel bettah. She 'fraid for ever'ting, but most I tink, she 'fraid for you, senior."

Miss Norvell hastily laid her hand upon the girl's sleeve in remonstrance, her face showing grave in the dim light.

"No, no, Mercedes; you must not say too much, or Mr. Winston will think us both very foolish."

"Eet vas not foolish for us to vant to know, vas eet, senior?"

"Assuredly not." He walked across the narrow room, glanced into the face of the sleeping sheriff, came back beside them, and leaned against the wall. The movement served to yield him confidence and self-control, to decide him as to his future course. "What is it you are so desirous of knowing?"

"Vy, de whole ting, senior, de whole ting."

He gazed directly into the partially upturned face of the other, as though urging her also to speak.

"We do not in the least comprehend the situation here, Mr. Winston," she responded, her voice low and steady. "No one has taken the trouble to explain. We realize, of course, it must be serious, but possibly the strain would prove less if we understood clearly what must be met."

The engineer bowed, drawing toward him an empty cracker-box, and sat down facing them both.

"I will relate the circumstances to you in all their unpleasantness," he began quietly. "Perhaps your woman wit may discover some loophole which has escaped us." Clearly, yet rapidly, he reviewed the salient points of the controversy between Farnham and the "Little Yankee," his own brief connection with it, the discoveries made in the lower levels of the "Independence," his desperate struggle with Burke, the swearing out and serving of warrants, the sudden change in situation which had placed them legally in the wrong, the accident to the sheriff, the curt dismissal of his deputy, and the probable consequences. His voice grew deep as he proceeded, marking the intense interest with which they followed his recital. Then he unfolded briefly the plan adopted for relief. It was the impulsive Mexican who broke the silence that followed his conclusion.

"Si, I see dat!" she exclaimed, leaning eagerly forward, her head between her hands. "Eet vas ver' good vay. But you tink dar be fight soon? You tink so? Beell, he tink so? Den you no like dat de Senor Brown be away? No, no, you no like be lef' alone ven de fight come? He big, strong, brav'; he bettah as ten men, hey? Eet vas so, I tell you. I go vis de message, si; Senor Brown he stay here. Would not dat be de bettah?"

Winston shifted uneasily upon his cracker-box, his gaze wandering from the animated face confronting him to that of the other farther back amid the shadows, still grave and full of doubt.

"You?" he exclaimed in surprise. "Surely you do not suppose we would ever permit you to attempt such a thing."

"No? An' vy not, senior?" springing impulsively to her feet, her eyes opening wide. "Maybe you tink I not know how ride? Maybe you tink I vas 'fraid of de dark? or dat I lose my vay? You tink me leetle girl," and she snapped her fingers indignantly. "Do dat? Of course I do dat! *Sapristi!* Eet vas easy. Just ride twenty mile. Bah! I do dat lots o' times. My pony he take me in tree, four hour sure. He nice pony, an' he lofe Mercedes."

"But you do not know the way, girl, and the ride must be made at night."

"De vay---poof! You speak ver' foolish. De vay?---you tink I cannot find de vay! Vy, I Mexicana, senior; I know de vay of de desert; I read de sign here, dar, everyvere, like miladi does de book. I know how; si, si. Senior Brown he show me how get down de side of de mountain, den I know de res'. Twenty mile south to de rail; I read de stars, I feel de wind, I give de pony de quirt, and it vas done---*bueno!*"

Winston sat silently watching her, impressed by the earnestness of her broken English, the eloquent energy of her gesticulations.

"Vas dat not de bettah vay, senior? I no good here; I just girl in de vay, an' ven de fight come maybe I be 'fraid. But Senior Brown he not git 'fraid; he fight hard, more as ten men. So I help too; I just ride de pony, but I help. I go San Juan; I see de Distric' Attorney." She clapped her hands, laughing at the thought. "Si, I know de Distric' Attorney ver' veil. He tink Mercedes ver' nice girl; he tink I dance bettah as any he ever saw; he say so to me. He do vat Mercedes vant, vat she say vas de right ting---sure he do. Vas dat not de bettah, senior?"

"Possibly," yet secretly questioning her motives, "but---but really, you know, I always supposed you to be a friend of Farnham's!"

The girl instantly flushed crimson to the roots of her black hair, bringing her hands together sharply, her eyes straying from Winston to the suddenly uplifted face of Miss Norvell.

"No, no," she said, at last, her voice softer. "He vas not to me anything! She know how it vas; maybe she tell you sometime. Not now, but sometime. I jus' vant do right. I vant serve Senior Brown, not dat Farnham no more. No, no! once, maybe, I tink dat man ver' nice; I tink him good friend; he say much promise Mercedes. Now I tink dat no more---I know he lie all de time; I see tings as dey vas right, an' I try be good girl. You sabe all dat, senior?"

"I understand some of it at least," and he smiled back into her pleading eyes, "enough to trust you. If Hicks and Brown consent, your going will be all right with me."

"*Bueno!*" and she dropped him a deep Spanish courtesy, executing a quick dancing step toward the door. "Den eet vill be so. I no 'fraid. I go see dem both. *Adios.*"

The door opened, and she flashed forth into the fading sunlight; it closed behind her, and left the two alone among the shadows.

CHAPTER XXIV

AN AVOWAL OF LOVE

Winston sat gazing at the delicate contour of her face, partially turned away from him, the long, silken lashes shading eyes lowered upon the floor. A single gleam of the westering sun rested in golden beauty across her dark hair, stirred by the slight breeze blowing through the open window. In the silence he could hear his heart beat, and distinguish the faint sound of her breathing. She was the first to speak, yet without moving her head.

"Is it true that you are now under arrest?" she questioned, her voice scarcely audible.

"Technically yes, although, as you may perceive, the sheriff is powerless to prevent an escape if I desired to attempt one."

"Is it because of that---that charge he made?"

He arose to his feet in brave attempt at self-control.

"Oh, no, certainly not! I think that was merely a threat, a cowardly threat, utterly without provocation, without purpose, unless he sought in that way to work you a serious injury. The real charge against me is murder. It appears that the man I fought with in the mine later died from his injuries."

She turned both face and body toward him, her eyes filled with agony.

"The man died? Will it be possible for you to prove yourself innocent?"

"It may be possible, but it does not appear easy. I hope to show that all I did was in self-defence. I did not strike the man a deadly blow; in the struggle he fell and was injured on the sharp rocks. In every sense his death was unintentional, yet there is nothing to sustain me but my own testimony. But I shall not flee from the issue. If I have taken human life I will abide the judgment. God knows I never dreamed of killing the man; never once supposed him seriously injured. You, at least, believe this?"

"I believe all you tell me."

The man's grasp on the casing of the window tightened, his eyes upon the mass of black hair.

"Strangely enough," he continued, "this whole affair has gone wrong from the start; nothing has turned out in the natural way. Criminals have been made into officers of the law, and honest men changed into outlaws. Now it seems impossible to conjecture how the adventure will terminate."

She sat looking up at him, scarcely seeing his face, her hands clasped in her lap.

"All the world 's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," she said, quoting the familiar words as if in a dream. "We are such puppets in the great play! How strange it all is! How dangerously close real life is, always skirting the precipice of tragedy! Plans fail, lines tangle, and lives are changed forever by events seemingly insignificant. To-morrow is always mystery. I wonder, is it not a dim consciousness of this that renders the stage so attractive to the multitude? Even its burlesques, its lurid melodramas, are never utterly beyond the possible. Everywhere are found stranger stories than any romancer can invent; and yet we sometimes term our lives commonplace." She leaned back against the wall, a sob coming into her voice. "What---what is going to be the end of this---for me?"

"Whatever you will," he exclaimed passionately, forgetful of all but her power over him. "It is you who must choose."

"Yes, it is I who must choose," her face still uplifted. "Because I am not a leaf to float on the air, my destiny decided by a breath of wind, I must choose; yet how can I know I decide rightly? When heart and conscience stand opposed, any decision means sacrifice and pain. I meant those hasty words wrung out of me in shame, and spoken yonder; I meant them then, and yet they haunt me like so many sheeted ghosts. 'Tis not their untruth, but the thought will not down that the real cause of their utterance was not the wrong done me. It had other birth."

"In what?"

She did not in the least hesitate to answer, her eyes clear and honest upon his own.

"In my love for you," she answered, quietly, her cheeks reddening to the frank avowal.

He grasped her hands, drawing her, unresisting, toward him.

"You confess this to me?"

"Yes, to you; but to you only because I trust you, because I know you as an honorable man," she said, speaking with an earnest simplicity irresistible. "I am not ashamed of the truth, not afraid to acknowledge it frankly. If there be wrong in this; that wrong has already been accomplished; the mere uttering of it cannot harm either of us. We know the fact without words. I love you; with all my heart I love you. I can say this to you here in the silence, yet I could not speak it openly before the world. Why? Because such love is wrong? Under God I do not know; only, the world would misunderstand, would question my motives, would misjudge my faith. By the code I am not the mistress of my heart; it has been legally surrendered. But you will not misjudge, or question. If I could not trust, I could not love you; I do both. Now and here, I put my hands in yours, I place my life, my conscience, in your keeping. For good or evil, for heaven or hell, I yield to you my faith. Tell me what I am utterly unable to decide for myself alone: What is my duty, the duty of a woman situated as I am?"

He held her hands still, crushing them within his own, yet the color, the hope which had brightened his face, faded. A moment the two sat silent, their eyes meeting, searching the depths.

"Beth," he asked at last, "is this right?"

"Is what right?"

"That you should cast such a burden upon me. I told you I could not be your conscience. All my desire, all my hope tends in one direction. That which to you appears wrong, to me seems the only right course. My heart responded eagerly to every word of renunciation spoken out there in your indignation. They were just and true. They gave me courage to believe the battle was over; that in soul and heart you were at last free."

She lowered her eyes in confusion to the floor, her bosom rising and falling to quick breathing.

"And now you discover me hesitating, undecided," she whispered, her lips trembling. "I know I am; there are moments when I hold myself unworthy of love. Yet believe me, I am honest, sincere, unselfish in all my thought regarding you. Perhaps the trouble is that I know myself, my nature, far too well; I dare not trust it to bring you happiness, unless I can come to you with unsullied conscience."

"Is it thought of divorce which yet remains so repugnant?"

She glanced up into his questioning face, her own cheeks flushing.

"I shrink from it in actual pain," she confessed, in instant frankness. "My whole nature revolts. Believe me, I am not blind, not insensible; I recognize the truth---all you would tell me---of the inalienable rights of womanhood. Neglect, distrust, brutality, open insult have all been my portion. The thousands all over the world accept these as worthy reasons for breaking their marriage vows. But can I? Can I who have ever condemned those others for doing so? Can I, who have ever held that sacrament to be sacred and enduring? And I realize that the temptation has not come because of the wrongs done to me. He has been all this before, many, many times, yet I have remained true and loyal, not questioning

my duty. It is the birth of a new love---God alone knows if I should say a guilty love---which has thus changed me, which has brought to my mind dreams of release. I pray you, try to understand me! How could happiness ever prove my portion, or yours through me, while such questionings continued to haunt my soul like ghosts?"

He released her clinging hands, turning away from her, his eyes staring unseeing out of the window. A moment she continued looking at him, her dry eyes anxiously pleading. Then she buried her face within her hands and waited, her whole body trembling. Twice Winston sought to speak, before sufficient courage came to him to allow of his turning back, and looking down upon her bowed figure.

"Beth," he said at last, his struggle revealed in his voice, "I should not be worthy that love you have given me so unreservedly, did I stoop now to its abuse. I could never forgive myself were I to urge you to do that which your conscience so clearly condemns. To me there is a marriage far more sacred and enduring than any witnessed by man, or solemnized by formal service---the secret union of hearts. We are one in this, and nothing can ever come between us. Then let all else wait; let it wait until God shall open a way along which we may walk in honor. Mutual sacrifice can never make us any less dear to each other. This condition may serve to separate us for a while, yet I believe the path will open, and that you will learn to perceive your duty from a broader view-point---one that will permit you to find happiness in true love, unhaunted by any memory of the false."

She arose slowly to her feet, the tears clinging to her lashes, both hands outstretched.

"Oh, I thank you! I thank you!" she exclaimed with deep fervor. "Those words prove you all I ever believed you to be. They give me hope, courage, patience to remain true to myself, true to my lifelong ideals of womanhood. I am certain you trust me, comprehend my motives, and will think no less of me because of my unwillingness to forfeit a conception of right. He is absolutely nothing to me---nothing. He never could be. There are times when I feel that his death even could not fitly atone for the evil he has wrought me. Never again will his influence touch my life to change its purpose. It is not he that keeps us apart; it is a solemn, sacred pledge made by a trusting girl in God's presence---a pledge I cannot forget, cannot break without forfeiting my self-respect, my honor."

He drew her gently to him, his eyes no longer filled with passion, yet containing a depth of love that left her helpless to resist his will.

"Beth, dear," he whispered, his lips almost pressing her cheek, "I will not think of him, but only of you. If you love me I am content. The mere knowledge itself is happiness. Tell me once again that this is true."

"It is true, forever true; I love you."

"May I have for this one time the pledge of your lips?"

A single instant she seemed to hesitate, her cheeks flushing hotly, her dark eyes lowered before his. But she lifted her face, and their lips met and clung, as though parting must be forever. Amid the closely gathering shadows he led her back to the vacated stool, and stood beside her, gently stroking the soft dark hair of the bowed head.

"You have plans?" he questioned quietly. "You have decided how you are to live while we await each other?"

"Yes," half timidly, as though fearful he might oppose her decision. "I believe I had better return to my work upon the stage." She glanced up at him anxiously. "You do not care, do you? It seems to me I am best fitted for that; I have ambition to succeed, and---and it affords me something worthy to think about."

"I recall you said once it would be a poor love which should interfere with the ideals of another."

"Yes, I remember. How long ago that seems, and what a change has since come over my conceptions of the power of love! I believe it still, yet in so different a way. Now I would surrender gladly all ambition, all dream of worldly success, merely to fee alone with the man I love, and bring him happiness. That---that is all I want; it is everything."

"And some day it shall be yours," he declared stoutly. "Some day when you comprehend that divorce is not always the evil that some delight to proclaim it; some day when you realize that it must be a far greater sin to wreck irretrievably your own life for a brute than to break those man-made bonds which bind you to him. It cannot be long until you learn this, for all nature condemns so unholy an alliance. Until then let it be the stage; only I ask you to strive for the very best it offers. Have confidence in yourself, little girl, in your ability, your power, your spark of genius touched by suffering. Every hour you pass now in hideous, misshapen melodrama is worse than wasted. You have that within you well worthy of better setting, nobler environment, and you wrong yourself to remain content with less. You are mine now wherever you go, whatever triumphs you win; mine in spite of the law, because I possess your heart. I should doubt myself far sooner than ever question your loyalty. I can lend you to the stage for a while---until I come for you in that glad hour when your lips shall bid me---but in the meantime I want you to be true to yourself, to the spirit of art within you. I want you to accomplish the highest purposes of your dreams; to interpret that in life which is worthy of interpretation."

"You believe I can?"

"I know you can. Never from that first night, when I stood in the wings and watched, have I ever questioned the possibilities of your future. You have art, emotion, depth of true feeling, application, a clear understanding of character---all that ever made any actress great. I love you, Beth; yet mine is a love too unselfish not to tell you this truth and stand aside rather than block your future."

She lifted her eyes to him, now cleared of their tears, and shining with eagerness.

"I will do all you say," she said earnestly, "do it because I love you. It shall not be for the people, the applause, the glitter and display, but alone for you. Whenever a triumph comes to me, I shall meet it whispering your name in my heart, knowing that you rejoice because I am proving worthy of your faith. It will be as if we worked together; the memory must help to make us both strong."

He bent lower, drew her closer to him, and held her thus in silence.

"Yes," he spoke at last, as though in thought, "I shall try to remember and be patient, so long as you feel it must be so."

They were sitting there still, the barest glimmer of twilight brightening the window above, their hands clasped, when Mercedes came back, overflowing with light-heartedness.

"Si, si, sure I did eet," she announced happily, dancing forward into the centre of the darkened room, and seemingly blind to the two before her. "Eet ees I that am to ride. *Bueno!* eet vill be mooch fun! Senor Brown he not like let me go; he tink I do all eet for him. Oh, de conceit of de men, ven I care not for anyting but de fun, de good time! But I talk him long vile, an' Beell he talk, an' maybe he say *si* for to git us rid of. Tink you not eet vas so, senor?"

CHAPTER XXV

THE PROOF OF LOVE

The dreaded night settled down dark but clear, a myriad of stars gloriously bright in the vast vault overhead, the clinging shadows black and gloomy along the tree-fringed ridge. Nature, hushed into repose, appeared alone in possession, the solemn silence of peaceful night enveloping the vast canyon and its overhanging mountains. Amid the gathering gloom all animate life seemed to have sought rest, to have found covert. The last glimpse which the watchful guardians of the "Little Yankee" gained of the surroundings of the "Independence" revealed nothing to awaken immediate alarm. A few men idly came and went about the shaft-house and ore-dump, but otherwise the entire claim appeared deserted. No hostile demonstration of any kind had been attempted since Farnham's retreat, and now no sign of contemplated attack was to be perceived. The large number of men visible earlier in the day had mysteriously disappeared; not even the searching field-glasses served to reveal their whereabouts. In the gathering darkness no lights bore witness to the slightest activity; everywhere it remained black and silent.

To those wearied men on guard this secrecy seemed ominous of approaching evil. They comprehended too clearly the vengeful nature of their enemy to be lulled thus into any false security. Such skulking could be accepted only as a symptom of treachery, of some deep-laid plan for surprise. But what? Would Farnham, in his desperation, his anxiety to cover up all evidences of crime, resort to strategy, or to force? Would he utilize the law, behind which he was now firmly entrenched, or would he rely entirely upon the numbers he controlled to achieve a surer, quicker victory? That he possessed men in plenty to work his will the defenders of the "Little Yankee" knew from observation. These were of the kind to whom fighting was a trade. They must be there yet, hiding somewhere in the chaparral, for none had retreated down the trail. Backed by the mandates of law, convinced that they had nothing to fear legally, that they were merely executing the decrees of court, they would hardly be likely to hesitate at the committal of any atrocity under such a leader. But where would they strike, and how? What could be the purpose of their delay? the object of their secrecy? That there must be both purpose and object could not be doubted; yet nothing remained but to wait for their revelation.

An obscuring mist hung over the canyon, stretching from wall to wall. Beneath the revealing starlight it was like looking down upon a restless, silent expanse of gray sea. A stray breath of air came sucking up the gorge, causing the many spectral trees outlined against the lighter sky to wave their branches, the leaves rustling as though swept by rain. There was a faint moaning among the distant rocks as if hidden caverns were filled with elves at play. It was weird, lonely, desolate,---straining eyes beholding everywhere the same scene of deserted wilderness.

Old Hicks lay flat under protection of the ore-dump, his ear pressed close to the earth, his contracted eyes searching anxiously those dark hollows in front, a Winchester, cocked and ready, within the grasp of his hand. Above, Irish Mike, sniffing the air as though he could smell danger like a pointer dog, hung far out across the parapet of rock, every eager nerve tingling in the hope of coming battle. Winston remained in the cabin door, behind him the open room black and silent, his loaded Winchester between his feet, gamely struggling to overcome a vague foreboding of impending trouble, yet alert and ready to bear his part. It was then that Stutter Brown led the saddled pony forward from out the concealment of bushes. The long awaited moment had come for action. To his whispered word, Mercedes fluttered promptly forth through the shadowed doorway, and pressed her face lovingly against the pony's quickly uplifted nose.

"See," she whispered, patting Brown's brawny arm even while she continued toying playfully with the silken mane, "he know me, he love me. He bettah as any man, for he nevah tell lie,---nevah,---only be nice all de time. He ride me till he drop dead, swift, quick, like de bird fly. So I make eet all right, senior. You see ven de daylight come I be San Juan. Den I make mooch fun for de Senior Farnham---sure I do."

"I-I reckon you 'll m-make it all right, l-l-little girl," answered the man regretfully, his voice hushed to a low growl, "b-but jest the same I a-ain't so darn g-g-glad ter l-let yer go. H-hanged ef I would, either, if I d-did n't th-think the toughest part o' it wus g-goin' ter be right yere."

She glanced almost shyly up into his shadowed face, her black eyes like stars.

"Si---dat vas eet. I vas de coward; I just runs away so 'fraid of de fight. I no like de fight von leetle bit. But I know you, senior; you vant to stay here, an' have de fun. You Americano an' like dat ver' mooch. I feel of de big arm, so, an' I know eet ees bettah dat you be here. I mooch like please you, senior."

He clasped her hand where it rested small and white against his sleeve, hiding it completely within his own great fist; when he spoke she could mark the tremble in the deep voice.

"Y-you 're a m-mighty fine girl," he managed to say, simply, "but we g-got ter go now. I-I reckon yer b-b-better walk fer a ways, as the p-pony will step lighter."

"I not care, senior," softly. "Eet be nice to walk; I nevah 'fraid vid you."

Brown led the way forward cautiously across the open space, one strong hand firm on the pony's bit, the other barely touching her dress as though it were something sacred. She endeavored to discern his face in the faint starlight, but the low-drawn hat brim shaded it into black lines, revealing nothing. The light, easy words she sought to speak, hoping thus to keep him from more serious talk, would not come to her lips. There was so much of silence and mystery on every side, so much of doubt in this venture, that, in spite of her gay manner, every nerve tingled with excitement. Glancing up at him she bit her lips in embarrassment. It was Stutter who finally found voice, his mind drifting back to what she had lately said in carelessness.

"Y-yer said that the p-p-pony never l-lied like a man," he began doubtfully. "Yer d-did n't mean that f-fer me, did yer?"

There was something so deeply pathetic about the tone in which he asked this as to hurt her, and the slender fingers still clasping his sleeve suddenly closed more tightly.

"Senior, you mus' not say dat; you mus' not tink dat. No, no! I speak that only in fun, senior---nevah I believe dat, nevah. You good man, more good as Mercedes; she not vort' von leetle bit de lofe you say to her, but she feel mooch shame to have you tink dat she mean you ven she speak such ting in fun."

He halted suddenly, all remembrance of their surroundings, their possible peril, as instantly erased from his mind. He merely saw that girl face upturned to his in the starlight, so fair and pleading, he merely heard that soft voice urging her unworthiness, her sorrow. A great, broad-shouldered giant he towered above her, yet his voice trembled like that of a frightened child.

"An' d-don't yer say that n-no more," he stuttered in awkwardness. "Somehow it hurts. L-Lord! yer don't h-have ter be s-s-so blame good ter be u-up ter my level. Th-they don't b-breed no a-angels back in ol' M-Missouri, whar I come from. It's m-mostly mules thar, an' I r-reckon we all g-git a bit mulish an' ornery. B-but I 'spect I 'm d-decent 'nough ter know the r-right sort o' girl when I s-stack up agin her. So I don't w-want ter hear no m-more 'bout yer not b-bein' good. Ye 're sure g-good 'nough fer me, an' th-that 's all thar is to it. Now, yer w-won't say that no more, w-will yer?"

"No, senior," she answered simply, "I no say dat no more."

He remained standing before her, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other, a great hulk in the gloom.

"Mercedes," he managed to say finally, "Ye're a-g-goin' ter ride away, an' m-maybe thar'll be o-one hell o' a fracas up yere afore the rest o' us g-g-git out o' this scrape. I d-don't reckon as it'll b-be me as will git h-hurt, but somehow I 'd f-feel a heap better if you 'd j-jest say them words what I a-asked yer to afore yer g-go, little g-girl; I would that."

She put her hands to her face, and then hid it against the pony's neck, her slight form trembling violently beneath the touch of his fingers. The strange actions of the girl, her continued silence, half frightened him.

"Maybe yer a-ain't ready yit?" he questioned, his manner full of apology.

"Oh, senior, I cannot say dat---sure I cannot," she sobbed, her face yet hidden. "Maybe I say so some time ven I know eet bettah how eet ought to be; si, maybe so. But not now; I not tink it be jus' right to say now. I not angry---no, no! I ver' glad you tink so of Mercedes---it make me mooch joy. I not cry for dat, senior; I cry for odder tings. Maybe you know some time, an' be ver' sorry vid me. But I not cry any more. See, I stan' up straight, an' look you in de face dis vay." She drew her hand swiftly across her eyes. "Dar, de tear all gone; now I be brav', now I not be 'fraid. You not ask me dat now---not now; to-morrow, nex' veek, maybe I know better how to say de trut' vat vas in my heart---maybe I know den; now eet all jumble up. I tink I know, but de vord not come like I vant eet."

He turned silently away from her, leading the pony forward, his head bent low, his shoulders stooped. There was a dejection apparent about the action which her eyes could not mistake. She touched him pleadingly.

"You no ver' angry Mercedes, senior?"

Brown half turned about, and rested one great hand upon her soft hair in mute caress.

"N-no, little girl, it a-ain't that," he admitted slowly. "Only I 'm b-blamed if I jest e-exactly grasp yer s-style. I reckon I 'll kn-know what yer mean s-sometime."

Could he have seen clearly he might have marked the swift, hot tears dimming her eyes, but he never dreamed of their presence, for her lips were laughing.

"Maybe so, senior, maybe. I glad you not angry, for I no like dat. Eet vas nice I fool you so; dat vas vat make de men lofe, ven dey not know everyting. Ven day know dem maybe eet all be over vid. So maybe I show you sometime, maybe not---*quien sabe?*"

If her lightly spoken words hurt, he realized the utter futility of striving then to penetrate their deeper meaning. They advanced slowly, moving in more closely against the great ridge of rocks where the denser shadows clung, the man's natural caution becoming apparent as his mind returned to a consideration of the dangerous mission upon which they were embarked. To-morrow would leave him free from all this, but now he must conduct her in safety to that mist-shrouded plain below.

They had moved forward for perhaps a dozen yards, the obedient pony stepping as silently as themselves, Mercedes a foot or two to the rear, when Brown suddenly halted, staring fixedly at something slightly at one side of their path. There, like a huge baleful eye glaring angrily at him, appeared a dull red glow. An instant he doubted, wondered, his mind confused. Tiny sparks sputtered out into the darkness, and the miner understood. He had blindly stumbled upon a lighted fuse, a train of destruction leading to some deed of hell. With an oath he leaped recklessly forward, stamping the creeping flame out beneath his feet, crushing it lifeless between his heavy boots and the rock.

There was an angry shout, the swift rush of feet, the red flare of a rifle cleaving the night with burst of flame. In the sudden, unearthly glare Brown caught dim sight of faces, of numerous dark figures leaping toward him, but he merely crouched low. The girl! he must protect the girl! That was all he knew, all he considered, excepting a passionate hatred engendered by one of those faces he had just seen. They were upon him in mass, striking, tearing like so many wild beasts in the first fierceness of attack. His revolver jammed in its holster, but he struck out with clenched fists, battering

at the black figures, his teeth ground together, his every instinct bidding him fight hard till he died. Once they pounded him to his knees, but he struggled up, shaking loose their gripping hands, and hurling them back like so many children. He was crazed by then with raging battle-fury, his hot blood lusting, every great muscle strained to the uttermost. He realized nothing, saw nothing, but those dim figures facing him; insensible to the blood trickling down the front of his shirt, unconscious of wound, he flung himself forward a perfect madman, jerking a rifle from the helpless fingers of an opponent, and smiting to right and left, the deadly-iron bar whirling through the air. He struck once, twice; he saw bodies whirl sidewise and fall to the ground. Then suddenly he seemed alone, panting fiercely, the smashed rifle-stock uplifted for a blow.

"It's the big fellow," roared a voice at his left. "Why don't you fools shoot?"

He sprang backward, crouching lower, his one endeavor to draw their fire, so as to protect her lying hidden among the rock shadows. He felt nothing except contempt for those fellows, but he could not let them hurt her. He stood up full in the starlight, shading his eyes in an attempt to see. Somebody cried, "There he is, damn him!" A slender figure swept flying across the open space like some dim night vision. A red flame leaped forth from the blackness. The two stood silhouetted against the glare, reeled backward as it faded, and went down together in the dark.

CHAPTER XXVI

BENEATH THE DARKNESS

Running blindly through the darkness toward the sound of struggle came Hicks and Winston. They caught no more than faint glimpses of scattering, fleeing figures, but promptly opened fire, scarcely comprehending as yet what it all meant. Hicks, dashing recklessly forward, tripped over a recumbent figure in the darkness, and the two paused irresolutely, perceiving no more of the enemy. Then it was that Stutter Brown struggled slowly up upon his knees, still closely clasping the slender figure of the stricken girl within his arms. She neither moved nor moaned, but beneath the revealing starlight her eyes were widely opened, gazing up into his face, appearing marvellously brilliant against the unusual pallor of her cheeks. Her breath came short and sharp as if in pain, yet the lips smiled up at him.

"Oh, God!" he sobbed, "it was you!"

"Si, senior," the words faltering forth, almost as if in mockery of his own hesitating speech. "Once I said maybe I show you. I not know how den--now I know."

"Sh-show me, little girl---in God's n-name, show me wh-what?"

"Eef eet vas true dat I lofe you, senior. Now you tink eet vas so; now you all'ays know vat vas in de heart of Mercedes. Dis bettah vay as talk, senior--nevah you doubt no more."

He could only continue to look at her, the intense agony within his eyes beyond all expression of speech, his words caught helpless in the swelling throat. She lifted one hand in weak caress, gently touching his cheek with her white fingers.

"Oh, please don't, senior. Eet hurt me mooch to see you feel dat bad. Sure eet does. Eet vas not de balls vat hurt---no, no! I know dey not reach to you eef dey hit me de first. Eet joys me to do dat---sure eet does."

"Little g-girl, little g-girl," he faltered, helplessly, his great hands trembling as he touched her. "It w-was you I t-tried ter save. I-I ran th-th-this way so th-they wouldn't sh-shoot toward yer."

She smiled happily up at him, softly stroking his hair, even while the lines of her face twitched from pain.

"Sure I know, senior. You von brav', good man---maybe now you all'ays tink I brav', good also. Dat be 'nough for Mercedes. Oh, dis be de better vay---de great God knows; sure He knows. Now, senior, I be yours all'ays, forever. I so happy to be lofed by good man. I just look in your face, senior, and tink, He lofe me, he ask me marry him. Maybe I not nevah do dat, for fear he tire, for fear he hear tings not nice about Mercedes. Dat make me sorrow, make me shame before him. Si, I know how it would be. I know de Americanos; dey ver' proud of dare vives, dey fight for de honor. So eet make me mooch 'fraid, I no vort' eet---no, no! I know not den de better vay. But de good Mother of God she show me, she tell me vat do---I run quick; I die for de man I lofe, an' den he all'ays know dat I lofe him; he know den better as eef I marry him. Si, si, eet vas all joy for Mercedes, now, my senior. Eet not hurt, eet make me glad to know."

Brown bent ever lower as he listened, his great body shaking in the effort to repress his sobs, his lips pressing against her white cheek.

"I kiss you now, senior," she whispered, faintly. "Just de once, like I vas your vife."

Their lips met, the very soul of each seemingly in the soft, clinging contact. Suddenly the poor girl sank backward, her head falling heavily upon his supporting arm, a peculiar shudder twitching her slender form.

"Mercedes!" he cried in alarm.

"Si, senior," the black eyes still wide open, but her words scarcely audible. "Eet is so hard to see you; maybe de stars hide behin' de cloud, but, but I lofe---"

"Yes, y-yes, I kn-know."

She lifted her arms, then dropped them heavily upon his bowed shoulders.

"Dar is such a brightness come, senior. Eet light everyting like eet vas de day. Maybe I be good too, now dat a good man lofe me; maybe de God forgif all de bad because I lofe. You tink so? Oh, eet---eet joys me so---senor! senor!"

Motionless, almost breathless, but for the sobs shaking his great figure, he held her tightly, bending low, her white cheek against his own, her head pillowed upon his arm. About them was the silence, the solemn night shadows, amid which waited Hicks and Winston earnestly watching. Finally, the latter spoke gently, striving to arouse the man; but Stutter Brown never lifted his head, never removed his eyes from the death-white face upheld by his arm. As though stricken to stone he remained motionless, seemingly lifeless, his face as pallid as the dead he guarded. Hicks bent over and placed one hand upon his shoulder.

"Stutter, ol' pard," he said, pleadingly. "I know it's mighty hard, but don't take on so; don't act that way. It can't do her no manner o' good now. It's all---all over with, an' you ain't helpin' her none a-settin' thar that way."

The smitten man drew a deep breath, glancing up into the kindly, seamed face bending over him, and about at the surrounding darkness. He acted like one suddenly aroused from sleep, unable to comprehend his situation. Slowly, with all the tenderness of love, he crumpled his old hat into the semblance of a pillow, placed it upon the rock, and lowered the girl's head until it rested softly upon it. Gently he passed his great hand in caress across the ruffled black hair, pressing it back from her forehead. He arose to his knees, to his feet, swaying slightly, one hand pressed against his head as he stared blankly into the faces of the two men.

"W-which way d-did he go?" he asked, almost stupidly. "Th-the feller w-who told 'em ter f-f-fire?"

Old Hicks, his eyes filled with misery, shook his head.

"Back ter the 'Independence,' I reckon," he admitted. "Most o' 'em I saw started that way."

Brown roughly jerked his gun from out its holster, holding the shining weapon up into the starlight.

"No, he didn't; not that one," he growled fiercely, his glance falling again upon the upturned features of the dead girl. "I saw him out thar runnin' toward our shaft-hole; h-he's up t-ter more d-deviltry. Y-you take k-keer o' her." His voice broke, then rang out strong. "By G-God, I 'll git the murderer!"

He pushed past between the two, shouldering them aside as though failing to see them, and, with the leap of a tiger, disappeared in the night. Each man had caught a glimpse of his face, drawn, white, every line picturing savagery, and shrank back from the memory. It was as if they had looked upon something too horrible for thought. A moment they stared after him, clutching their rifles as though in an agony of fear. Hicks first found words of expression.

"He 's gone mad! God pity him, he 's gone mad!"

Winston drew himself together sharply, one hand grasping the other's arm.

"Then leave it to him," he said, quickly. "Whoever did this deed deserves his punishment. Let us do what he bade us---look to the body of this poor girl."

They turned back, dreading their task, moving still as though half dazed. As they advanced, a dark body just beyond suddenly rose to its knees, and began crawling away. With a bound Hicks succeeded in laying hands upon the fellow, and flung him over, face upward to the stars. With gun at his head he held the man prostrate, staring down upon the revealed features in manifest astonishment.

"Damn me!" he cried, a new note of surprise in his voice, "Winston, look yere!"

"What is it?" and the younger man pressed forward, his rifle ready.

"Ain't that Burke? Ain't that the same feller they had you pinched fer murderin'?"

The helpless man lying upon the ground frowned savagely up at them, a dirty bandage bound about his head giving him a ghastly, unnatural appearance. For a long moment the startled engineer gazed down at him in incredulity, unable to distinguish the features clearly, his own heart beating rapidly in suspense.

"I half believe it is. Are you Jack Burke?"

The man attempted a grin, but there was little of merriment in the result.

"Oi think loikely ye 're as liable as any wan to know. Ye 're the lad that put this head on me, but that other divil it was that broke me arm. Let me up from here. Begorry! Oi 've had 'nough fightin' fer wan toime."

"Did you know I had been put under arrest on the charge of killing you?"

Burke grinned, this time in earnest.

"Divil a bit did Oi know anything about it. Farnham he tould me to keep damn quiet in the bunkhouse, out o' sight, but whin they wanted for to set this fuse off, it seems Oi was the only lad that could do the job, an' so they brought me out here along wid 'em. It 's a busted head an' a broken arm Oi 've got for me share o' the fun. Be the powers, now, let me git up!"

The two men, watching him closely, exchanged glances.

"All right, Burke," and Winston held up his rifle suggestively. "You can get up, only stay close to us, wid no tricks. I want you, and I want you bad. If you make any break, there 'll be a dead Irishman this time sure. Is that you, Mike?"

"Sure, sor."

"Good; you've come just in time. Drop your muzzle on this native son, and if the fellow makes a suspicious move, plug him, you understand?"

"Ye bet Oi do, sor. Sthep out there, Burke, yer slab-sided boss o' Swades, or Oi 'll show ye what a dacent Oirishman---an O'Brien, bedad,---thinks o' the loikes of ye; Oi will that."

With sympathetic gentleness, and in all the tenderness possible, their eyes moist, and everything else forgotten excepting their sad task, Hicks and Winston kneeled on the hard rock and lifted the slender figure of Mercedes in their arms. Slowly, without the exchange of a word, the little concourse turned in the darkness, and advanced in the direction of the cabin, bearing the silent burden. They walked with bowed heads and careful steps, their hearts heavy. With a faint whinny the girl's deserted pony trotted forward from out the shadow where he had been left, sniffed at her trailing skirt with outstretched nose, and fell in behind, walking with head bent almost to the ground as though he also understood and mourned. Winston glanced, marvelling, back at the animal, hastily brushing a tear from out his own eye; yet his lips remained set and rigid. He felt no doubt about who it was Brown was seeking through the black night. When they met, it would be a battle to the death.

Before the still open door of the cabin they silently lowered their burden in the shadow of the building. An instant they stood there listening intently for any sound to reach them from out the surrounding night. Then Winston, assuming the duty, stepped reluctantly forward endeavoring to peer within. His heart throbbed from the pain of that sudden message of death he brought.

"Beth," he called, perceiving no movement within, and compelling his voice to calmness. "Miss Norvell."

There was a slight movement near the farther wall, but it was the voice of the wounded sheriff which answered.

"Who are yer? What was all that firin' about just now? Damn if I ain 't too weak ter git up, but I got a gun yere, an' reckon I kin pull the trigger."

"It's Winston and Hicks. We 've had a skirmish out beyond the dump. Those fellows tried to blow up our shaft, and we caught them at it. Is Miss Norvell here?"

"No, I reckon not; she was sittin' yere talkin' to me when that shootin' begun, an' then she ran out the door thar. Anybody git hurt?"

"The little Mexican girl was killed. We have brought her body here."

"Good God!"

"And we 've also got a prisoner, sheriff. It 's that same Jack Burke you arrested me for killing. He seems very much alive."

There was a rustling back in the darkness, as if the man within was endeavoring to draw his body into a sitting posture. Then he swore savagely, pounding his fist into the side of the bunk, as though seeking thus to relieve his feelings.

"Burke!" he fairly exploded at last, his anger appearing to stifle utterance. "Jack Burke! Hell! Is that true? Oh, Lord! but I wish I could git out o' yere. That damn Farnham swore out that warrant down in San Juan, ther blame, ornery cur. It was a low-down, measly trick, an' he actually had the nerve ter use me ter play out his game fer him. Lord! if ever I git my hand on him I 'll shut down hard."

No one answered him, the thought of all recurring reverently to the motionless, silent dead without. Bareheaded, the two men, groping through the darkness, bore Mercedes within in all tenderness, and placed the slender form upon the bed, covering it with the single sheet. Hicks remained motionless, bending over her, the kindly darkness veiling the mist of tears dimming his old eyes and the trembling of his lips as he sought, for the first time in years, to pray. But Winston turned instantly and walked over toward Hayes, his heart already filled with fresh anxiety.

"Where did she go, do you know?"

"Who? the young actress woman? I could n't see exactly, only she went outside. I thought I heard voices talkin' out thar later on, over beyond toward the window, but maybe I imagined it. Darn this ol' head o' mine! It keeps whirlin' round every time I move, like it was all wheels."

The engineer, his face white with determination, strode to the door. Beyond doubt it was Biff Farnham whose voice Brown had recognized, commanding his men to fire; it was Farnham who had disappeared in the direction of the "Little Yankee" shaft-house. What fresh devilry was the desperate gambler engaged upon? What other tragedy was impending out there in the black night?

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SHADOW OF CRIME

Winston could never afterward recall having heard any report, yet as he stepped across the threshold a sharp flare of red fire cleft the blackness to his left. As though this was a signal he leaped recklessly forward, running blindly along the narrow path toward the ore-dump. Some trick of memory led him to remember a peculiar swerve in the trail just beneath the upper rim of the canyon. It must have been about there that he saw the flash, and he plunged over the edge, both hands outstretched in protection of his eyes from injury should he collide with any obstacle in the darkness. The deep shadows blinded him, but there was no hesitancy, some instinct causing him to feel the urgent need of haste. Once he stumbled and fell headlong, but was as instantly up again, bruised yet not seriously hurt. His revolver was jerked loose from his belt, but the man never paused to search for it. Even as he regained his feet, his mind bewildered by the shock, his ears distinguished clearly the cry of a woman, the sound of heavy feet crushing through underbrush. It was to his right, and he hurled himself directly into the thick chaparral in the direction from whence the sound came.

He knew not what new terror awaited him, what peril lurked in the path. At that moment he cared nothing. Bareheaded, pushing desperately aside the obstructing branches, his heart throbbing, his clothing torn, his face white with determination, he struggled madly forward, stumbling, creeping, fighting a passage, until he finally emerged, breathless but resolute, into a little cove extending back into the rock wall. From exertion and excitement he trembled from head to foot, the perspiration dripping from his face.

He stopped. The sight which met him for the moment paralyzed both speech and motion. Halfway across the open space, only dimly revealed in the star-light, her long hair dislodged and flying wildly about her shoulders, the gleam of the weapon in her hand, apparently stopped in the very act of flight, her eyes filled with terror staring back toward him, stood Beth Norvell. In that first instant he saw nothing else, thought only of her; of the intense peril that had so changed the girl. With hands outstretched he took a quick step toward her, marvelling why she crouched and shrank back before him as if in speechless fright. Then he saw. There between them, at his very feet, the face upturned and ghastly, the hands yet clinched as if in struggle, lay the lifeless body of Biff Farnham. As though fascinated by the sight, Winston stared at it, involuntarily drawing away as the full measure of this awful horror dawned upon him: she had killed him. Driven to the deed by desperation, goaded to it by insult and injury, tried beyond all power of human endurance, she had taken the man's life. This fact was all he could grasp, all he could comprehend. It shut down about him like a great blackness. In the keen agony of that moment of comprehension Winston recalled how she had once confessed temptation to commit the deed; how she had even openly threatened it in a tempest of sudden passion, if this man should ever seek her again. He had done so, and she had redeemed her pledge. He had dared, and she had struck. Under God, no one could justly blame her; yet the man's heart sank, leaving him faint and weak, reeling like a drunken man, as he realized what this must mean---to her, to him, to all the world. Right or wrong, justified or unjustified, the verdict of law spelled murder; the verdict of society, ostracism. It seemed to him that he must stifle; his brain was whirling dizzily. He saw it all as in a flash of lightning---the arrest, the pointing fingers, the bitterness of exposure, the cruel torture of the court, the broken-hearted woman cowering before her judges. Oh, God! it was too much! Yet what could he do? How might he protect, shield her from the consequences of this awful act? The law! What cared he for the law, knowing the story of her life, knowing still that he loved her? For a moment the man utterly forgot himself in the intensity of his agony for her. This must inevitably separate them more widely than ever before; yet he would not think of that---only of what he could do now to aid her. He tore open his shirt, that he might have air, his dull gaze uplifting piteously from the face of the dead to the place where she stood, her hands pressed against her head, her great eyes staring at him as though she confronted a ghost. Her very posture shocked him, it was so filled with speechless horror, so wild with undisguised terror. Suddenly she gave utterance to a sharp cry, that was half a sob, breaking in her throat.

"Oh, my God! my God!---you!"

The very sound of her voice, unnatural, unhuman as it was, served to bring him to himself.

"Yes, Beth, yes," he exclaimed hoarsely through dry lips, stepping across the body toward her. "You need not fear me."

She drew hastily back from before him, holding forth her hands as though pressing him away, upon her face that same look of unutterable horror.

"You! You! Oh, my God!" she kept repeating. "See! see there!---he is dead, dead, dead! I---I found him there; I---I found him there. Oh, my God!---that face so white in the starlight! I---I heard the words, and---and the shot." She pressed both hands across her eyes as though seeking to blot it out. "I swear I heard it! I---I do not know why I came here, but I---I found him there dead, dead! I---I was all alone in the dark. I---I had to touch him to make sure, and---and then it was you."

"Yes, yes," he said, realizing she was blindly endeavoring to clear herself, yet thinking only how he might soothe her, inexpressibly shocked by both words and manner. "I know, I understand---you found him there in the dark, and it has terrified you."

He approached closer, holding forth his own hands, believing she would come to him. But instead she shrank away as a child might, expecting punishment, her arms uplifted, shielding her face.

"No, no; do not touch me; do not touch me," she moaned. "I am not afraid of you, only I could not bear it."

"Beth!" He compelled his voice to sternness, confident now that this hysteria could be controlled only through the exercise of his own will. "You must listen to me, and be guided by my judgment. You must, you shall, do as I say. This is a most terrible happening, but it is now too late to remedy. We cannot restore life once taken. We must face the fact and do the very best we can for the future. This man is dead. How he died can make no difference to us now. You must go away from here; you must go away from here at once."

"And---and leave him alone?"

The whispered words stung him, his distressed mind placing wrong construction on the utterance.

"Has he been so much to you that now you must sacrifice yourself needlessly for him?" he questioned quickly.

"No, not that---not that," a shudder ran through her body, "but he---he was my husband. You forget."

"I do not forget. God knows it has been burden enough for me. But you have no further duty here, none to him. You have to yourself and to me."

"To---to you?"

"Yes, to me. I will put it that way, if it will only stir you to action. I can not, will not, leave you here alone to suffer for this. If you stay, I stay. In Heaven's name, Beth, I plead with you to go; I beg you to be guided in this by me."

"You---you will go with me?" her voice trembling, yet for the first time exhibiting a trace of interest. "If I go, you will go?"

"Yes, yes; can you suppose I would ever permit you to go alone? Do you give me your promise?"

She still held her head pressed between the palms of her hands, her dishevelled hair hanging far below the waist, her dark eyes, wild and filled with terror, roving about as though seeking to pierce the surrounding darkness.

"Oh, my God! I don't know!" she cried in a breathless sob. "I don't know! Why won't you go? Why won't you go, and leave me here with him, until some one else comes? I cannot understand; my brain is on fire. But that would be better---yes, yes! Do that. I---I am not afraid of him."

He caught her outflung hand firmly within his own grasp. She shuddered, as if the contact were painful, yet made no effort to escape, her eyes widening as she looked at him.

"No, I will not go one step without you." He held her helpless, his face grown stern, seeing in this his only hope of influencing her action. "Can it be you believe me such a cur? Beth, we both comprehend the wrong this man has done,

the evil of his life the provocation given for such an act as this. He deserved it all. This is no time for blame. If we desired to aid him, our remaining here now would accomplish nothing. Others will discover the body and give it proper care. But, oh, God! do you realize what it will inevitably mean for us to be discovered here?--the disgrace, the stigma, the probability of arrest and conviction, the ruthless exposure of everything? I plead with you to think of all this, and no longer hesitate. We have no time for that. Leave here with me before it becomes too late. I believe I know a way out, and there is opportunity if we move quickly. But the slightest delay may close every avenue for escape. Beth, Beth, blot out all else, and tell me you will go!"

The intense agony apparent in his voice seemed to break her down utterly. The tears sprang blinding to her dry eyes, her head bent forward.

"And," she asked, as if the thought had not yet reached her understanding, "you will not go without---without me?"

"No; whatever the result, no."

She lifted her face, white, haggard, and looked at him through the mist obscuring her eyes, no longer wide opened in wildness.

"Then I must go; I must go," she exclaimed, a shudder shaking her from head to foot; "God help me, I must go!"

A moment she gazed blankly back toward the motionless body on the ground, the ghastly countenance upturned to the stars, her own face as white as the dead, one hand pressing back her dark hair. She reeled from sudden faintness, yet, before he could touch her in support, she had sunk upon her knees, with head bowed low, the long tresses trailing upon the ground.

"Beth! Beth!" he cried in an agony of fear.

She looked up at him, her expression that of earnest pleading.

"Yes, yes, I will go," she said, the words trembling; "but---but let me pray first."

He stood motionless above her, his heart throbbing, his own eyes lowered upon the ground. He was conscious of the movement of her lips, yet could never afterward recall even a broken sentence of that prayer. Possibly it was too sacred even for his ears, only to be measured by the infinite love of God. She ceased to speak at last, the low voice sinking into an inarticulate whisper, yet she remained kneeling there motionless, no sound audible excepting her repressed sobbing. Driven by the requirements of haste, Winston touched her gently upon the shoulder.

"Come, my girl," he said, the sight of her suffering almost more than he could bear. "You have done all you can here now."

She arose to her feet slowly, never looking toward him, never appearing to heed his presence. He noticed the swelling of her throat as though the effort to breathe choked her, the quick spasmodic heaving of her bosom, and set his teeth, struggling against the strain upon his own nerves.

"You will go with me now?"

She glanced about at him, her eyes dull, unseeing.

"Oh, yes---now," she answered, as if the words were spoken automatically. He led her away, ignoring the constant efforts she made, as they climbed the bank, to gaze back across his shoulder. Finally the intervening branches completely hid that white, dead face below, and, as if with it had vanished all remaining strength of will, or power of body, the girl drooped her head against him, swaying blindly as she walked. Without a word he drew her close within his arm, her hair blowing across his face, her hand gripping his shoulder. It was thus they came forth amid the clearer starlight upon the ridge summit. Again and again as they moved slowly he strove to speak, to utter some word of comfort, of sympathy. But he could not---the very expression of her partially revealed face, as he caught glimpses of it, held him speechless. Deep within his heart he knew her trouble was beyond the ministrations of words. Some one was standing out in front of the cabin. His eyes perceived the figure as they approached, and he could not bring himself to speak of this thing of horror in her presence.

"Beth," he said gently, but had to touch her to attract attention, "I want you to sit here and wait while I arrange for our journey. You are not afraid?"

"No," her voice utterly devoid of emotion, "I am not afraid."

"You will remain here?"

She looked at him, her face expressionless, as though she failed to understand. Yet when he pointed to the stone she sat down.

"Yes," she answered, speaking those common words hesitatingly as if they were from some unfamiliar foreign tongue, "I am to do what you say."

She bent wearily down, her head buried within her hands. For a moment Winston stood hesitating, scarcely daring to leave her. But she did not move, and finally he turned away, walking directly toward that indistinct figure standing beside the cabin door. As he drew closer he recognized the old miner, his rifle half-raised in suspicion of his visitor. It must be done, and the engineer went at his task directly.

"Has Brown come back?"

"Shore; he 's in thar now," and Hicks peered cautiously into the face of his questioner, even while pointing back into the dark cabin. "He come in a while ago; never said no word ter me, but just pushed past in thar ter the bed, an' kneeled down with his face in the bed-clothes. He ain't moved ner spoke since. I went in onct, an' tried ter talk ter him, but he never so much as stirred, er looked at me. I tell yer, Mr. Winston, it just don't seem nat'ral; 't ain't a bit like Stutter fer ter act in that way. I just could n't stand it no longer, an' had ter git out yere into the open air. Damn, but it makes me sick."

"This has been a terrible night," the younger man said gravely, laying his hand upon the other's shoulder. "I hope never to pass through such another. But we are not done with it yet. Hicks, Farnham has been killed---shot. His body lies over yonder in that little cove, just beyond the trail. You will have to attend to it, for I am going to get his wife away from here at once."

"You are what?"

"I am going to take Miss Norvell away---now, to-night. I am going to take her across to Daggett Station, to catch the east-bound train."

Hicks stared at him open-eyed, the full meaning of all this coming to his mind by degrees.

"Good God! Do yer think she did it?" he questioned incredulously.

Winston shook him, his teeth grinding together savagely.

"Damn you! it makes no difference what I think!" he exclaimed fiercely, his nerves throbbing. "All you need to know is that she is going; going to-night; going to Daggett Station, to Denver, to wherever she will be beyond danger of ever being found. You understand that? She 's going with me, and you are going to help us, and you are going to do your part without asking any more fool questions."

"What is it you want?"

"Your horse, and the pony Mercedes was riding."

Hicks uttered a rasping oath, that seemed to catch, growling, in his lean throat.

"But, see yere, Winston," he protested warmly. "Just look at the shape your goin' now will leave us in yere at the 'Little Yankee.' We need yer testimony, an' need it bad."

Winston struck his hand against the log, as slight vent to his feelings.

"Hicks, I never supposed you were a fool. You know better than that, if you will only stop and think. This claim matter is settled already. The whole trouble originated with Farnham, and he is dead. Tomorrow you 'll bury him. The sheriff is here, and he's already beginning to understand this affair. He stands to help you. Now, all you 've got to do is to swear out warrants for Farnham's partners, and show up in evidence that tunnel running along your lead. It's simple as A B C, now that you know it's there. They can't beat you, and you don't require a word of testimony from me. But that poor girl needs me,---she's almost crazed by this thing,---and I 'm going with her, if I have to fight my way out from here with a rifle. That's the whole of it---either you give me those horses, or I 'll take them."

Old Hicks looked into the grim face fronting him so threateningly, the complete situation slowly revealing itself to his mind.

"Great Guns!" he said at last, almost apologetically. "Yer need n't do nothin' like that. Lord, no! I like yer first rate, an' I like the girl. Yer bet I do, an' I 'm damn glad that Farnham 's knocked out. Shore, I 'll help the both o' yer. I reckon Stutter 'd be no good as a guide ter-night, but I kin show yer the way down the ravine. The rest is just ridin'. Yer kin leave them hosses with the section-boss at Daggett till I come fer 'em."

CHAPTER XXVIII

ACROSS THE DESERT TO THE END

Never in the after years could Winston clearly recall the incidents of that night's ride across the sand waste. The haze which shrouded his brain would never wholly lift. Except for a few detached details the surroundings of that journey remained vague, clouded, indistinct. He remembered the great, burning desert; the stars gleaming down above them like many eyes; the ponderous, ragged edge of cloud in the west; the irregular, castellated range of hills at their back; the dull expanse of plain ever stretching away in front, with no boundary other than that southern sky. The weird, ghostly shadows of cactus and Spanish bayonet were everywhere; strange, eerie noises were borne to them out of the void---the distant cries of prowling wolves, the mournful sigh of the night wind, the lonely hoot of some far-off owl. Nothing greeted the roving eyes but desolation,---a desolation utter and complete, a mere waste of tumbled sand, by daylight

whitened here and there by irregular patches of alkali, but under the brooding night shadows lying brown, dull, forlorn beyond all expression, a trackless, deserted ocean of mystery, oppressive in its drear sombreness.

He rode straight south, seeking no trail, but guiding their course by the stars, his right hand firmly grasping the pony's bit, and continually urging his own mount to faster pace. The one thought dominating his mind was the urgent necessity for haste---a savage determination to intercept that early train eastward. Beyond this single idea his brain seemed in hopeless turmoil, seemed failing him. Any delay meant danger, discovery, the placing of her very life in peril. He could grasp that; he could plan, guide, act in every way the part of a man under its inspiration, but all else appeared chaos. The future?---there was no future; there never again could be. The chasm of a thousand years had suddenly yawned between him and this woman. It made his head reel merely to gaze down into those awful depths. It could not be bridged; no sacrifice, no compensation might ever undo that fatal death-shot. He did not blame her, he did not question her justification, but he understood---together they faced the inevitable. There was no escape, no clearing of the record. There was nothing left him to do except this, this riding through the night---absolutely nothing. Once he had guided her into safety all was done,---done forever; there remained to him no other hope, ambition, purpose, in all this world. The desert about them typified that forthcoming existence---barren, devoid of life, dull, and dead. He set his teeth savagely to keep back the moan of despair that rose to his lips, half lifting himself in the stirrups to glance back toward her.

If she perceived anything there was not the slightest reflection of it within her eyes. Lustreless, undeviating, they were staring directly ahead into the gloom, her face white and almost devoid of expression. The sight of it turned him cold and sick, his unoccupied hand gripping the saddle-pommel as though he would crush the leather. Yet he did not speak, for there was nothing to say. Between these two was a fact, grim, awful, unchangeable. Fronting it, words were meaningless, pitiable.

He had never before known that she could ride, but he knew it now. His eye noted the security of her seat in the saddle, the easy swaying of her slender form to the motion of the pony, in apparent unconsciousness of the hard travelling or the rapidity of their progress. She had drawn back the long tresses of her hair and fastened them in place by some process of mystery, so that now her face was revealed unshadowed, clearly defined in the starlight. Dazed, expressionless, as it appeared, looking strangely deathlike in that faint radiance, he loved it, his moistened eyes fondly tracing every exposed lineament. God! but this fair woman was all the world to him! In spite of everything, his heart went forth to her unchanged. It was Fate, not lack of love or loyalty, that now set them apart, that had made of their future a path of bitterness. In his groping mind he rebelled against it, vainly searching for some way out, urging blindly that love could even blot out this thing in time, could erase the crime, leaving them as though it had never been. Yet he knew better. Once she spoke out of the haunting silence, her voice sounding strange, her eyes still fixed in that same vacant stare ahead into the gloom.

"Isn't this Mercedes' pony? I---I thought she rode away on him herself?"

With the words the recollection recurred to him that she did not yet know about that other tragedy. It was a hard task, but he met it bravely. Quietly as he might, he told the sad story in so far as he understood it---the love, the sacrifice, the suffering. As she listened her head drooped ever lower, and he saw the glitter of tears falling unchecked. He was glad she could cry; it was better than that dull, dead stare. As he made an end, picturing the sorrowing Stutter kneeling in his silent watch at the bedside, she looked gravely across to him, the moisture clinging to the long lashes.

"It was better so---far better. I know how she felt, for she has told me. God was merciful to her;" the soft voice broke into a sob; "for me, there is no mercy."

"Beth, don't say that! Little woman, don't say that! The future is long; it may yet lead to happiness. A true love can outlast even the memory of this night."

She shook her head wearily, sinking back into the saddle.

"Yes," she said soberly, "love may, and I believe will, outlast all. It is immortal. But even love cannot change the deed; nothing ever can, nothing---no power of God or man."

He did not attempt to answer, knowing in the depths of his own heart that her words were true. For an instant she continued gazing at him, as though trustful he might speak, might chance to utter some word of hope that had not come to her. Then the uplifted head drooped wearily, the searching eyes turning away to stare once again straight ahead. His very silence was acknowledgment of the truth, the utter hopelessness of the future. Although living, there lay between them the gulf of death.

Gray, misty, and silent came the dawn, stealing across the wide desolation like some ghostly presence---the dawn of a day which held for these two nothing except despair. They greeted its slow coming with dulled, wearied eyes, unwelcoming. Drearier amid that weird twilight than in the concealing darkness stretched the desolate waste of encircling sand, its hideous loneliness rendered more apparent, its scars of alkali disfiguring the distance, its gaunt cacti looking deformed and merciless. The horses moved forward beneath the constant urging of the spur, worn from fatigue, their heads drooping, their flanks wet, their dragging hoofs ploughing the sand. The woman never changed her posture, never seemed to realize the approach of dawn; but Winston roused up, lifting his head to gaze wearily forward. Beneath the gray, out-spreading curtain of light he saw before them the dingy red of a small section-house, with a huge, rusty water-tank outlined against the sky. Lower down a little section of vividly green grass seemed fenced about by a narrow stream of running water. At first glimpse he deemed it a mirage, and rubbed his half-blinded eyes to make sure. Then he knew they had ridden straight through the night, and that this was Daggett Station.

He helped her down from the saddle without a word, without the exchange of a glance, steadying her gently as she stood trembling, and finally half carried her in his arms across the little platform to the rest of a rude bench. The horses he turned loose to seek their own pasturage and water, and then came back, uncertain, filled with vague misgiving, to where she sat, staring wide-eyed out into the desolation of sand. He brought with him a tin cup filled with water, and placed it in her hand. She drank it down thirstily.

"Thank you," she said, her voice sounding more natural.

"Is there nothing else, Beth? Could you eat anything?"

"No, nothing. I am just tired---oh, so tired in both body and brain. Let me sit here in quiet until the train comes. Will that be long?"

He pointed far off toward the westward, along those parallel rails now beginning to gleam in the rays of the sun. On the outer rim of the desert a black spiral of smoke was curling into the horizon.

"It is coming now; we had but little time to spare."

"Is that a fast train? Are you certain it will stop here?"

"To both questions, yes," he replied, relieved to see her exhibit some returning interest. "They all stop here for water; it is a long run from this place to Bolton Junction."

She said nothing in reply, her gaze far down the track where those spirals of smoke were constantly becoming more plainly visible. In the increasing light of the morning he could observe how the long night had marked her face with new

lines of weariness, had brought to it new shadows of care. It was not alone the dulled, lustreless eyes, but also those hollows under them, and the drawn lips, all combining to tell the story of physical fatigue, and a heart-sickness well-nigh unendurable. Unable to bear the sight, Winston turned away, walking to the end of the short platform, staring off objectless into the grim desert, fighting manfully in an effort to conquer himself. This was a struggle, a remorseless struggle, for both of them; he must do nothing, say nothing, which should weaken her, or add an ounce to her burden. He came back again, his lips firmly closed in repression.

"Our train is nearly here," he said in lack of something better with which to break the constrained silence.

She glanced about doubtfully, first toward the yet distant train, then up into his face.

"When is the local east due here? Do you know?"

"Probably an hour later than the express. At least, I judge so from the time of its arrival at Bolton," he responded, surprised at the question. "Why do you ask?"

She did not smile, or stir, except to lean slightly forward, her eyes falling from his face to the platform.

"Would---would it be too much if I were to ask you to permit me to take this first train alone?" she asked, her voice faltering, her hands trembling where they were clasped in her lap.

His first bewildered surprise precluded speech; he could only look at her in stupefied amazement. Then something within her lowered face touched him with pity.

"Beth," he exclaimed, hardly aware of the words used, "do you mean that? Is it your wish that we part here?"

"Oh, no, not that!" and she rose hastily, holding to the back of the bench with one hand, and extending the other. "Do not put it in that way. Such an act would be cruel, unwarranted. But I am so tired, so completely broken down. It has seemed all night long as though my brain were on fire; every step of the horse has been torture. Oh, I want so to be alone---alone! I want to think this out; I want to face it all by myself. Merciful God! it seems to me I shall be driven insane unless I can be alone, unless I can find a way into some peace of soul. Do not blame me; do not look at me like that, but be merciful---if you still love me, let me be alone."

He grasped the extended hand, bending low over it, unwilling in that instant that she should look upon his face. Again and again he pressed his dry lips upon the soft flesh.

"I do love you, Beth," he said at last, chokingly, "love you always, in spite of everything. I will do now as you say. Your train is already here. You know my address in Denver. Don't make this forever, Beth---don't do that."

She did not answer him; her lips quivered, her eyes meeting his for a single instant. In their depths he believed he read the answer of her heart, and endeavored to be content. As the great overland train paused for a moment to quench its thirst, the porter of the Pullman, who, to his surprise, had been called to place his carpeted step on the platform of this desert station, gazed in undisguised amazement at those two figures before him---a man bareheaded, his clothing tattered and disreputable, half supporting a woman who was hatless, white-faced, and trembling like a frightened child.

"Yas, sah; whole section vacant, sah, Numbah Five. Denvah; yas, sah, suttinly. Oh, I'll look after de lady all right. You ain't a-goin' 'long wid us, den, dis trip? Oh, yas; thank ye, sah. Sure, I'll see dat she gits dere, don't you worry none 'bout dat."

Winston walked restlessly down the platform, gazing up at the car-windows, every ounce of his mustered resolve necessary to hold him outwardly calm. The curtains were many of them closed, but at last he distinguished her, leaning against the glass, that same dull, listless look in her eyes as she stared out blindly across the waste of sand. As the train started he touched the window, and she turned and saw him. There was a single moment when life came flashing back into her eyes, when he believed her lips even smiled at him. Then he was alone, gazing down the track after the fast disappearing train.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SUMMIT OF SUCCESS

There followed three years of silence, three years of waiting for that message which never came. As though she had dropped into an ocean of oblivion, Beth Norvell disappeared. Winston had no longer the slightest hope that a word from her would ever come, and there were times when he wondered if it was not better so---if, after all, she had not chosen rightly. Love untarnished lived in his heart; yet, as she had told him out in the desert, love could never change the deed. That remained---black, grim, unblotted, the unalterable death stain. Why, then, should they meet? Why seek even to know of each other? Close together, or far apart, there yawned a bottomless gulf between. Silence was better; silence, and the mercy of partial forgetfulness.

Winston had toiled hard during those years, partly from a natural liking, partly to forget his heartaches. Feverishly he had taken up the tasks confronting him, sinking self in the thought of other things. Such work had conquered success, for he did his part in subjecting nature to man, thus winning a reputation already ranking him high among the mining experts of the West. His had become a name to conjure with in the mountains and mining camps. During the long months he had hoped fiercely. Yet he had made no endeavor to seek her out, or to uncover her secret. Deep within his heart lay a respect for her choice, and he would have held it almost a crime to invade the privacy that her continued silence had created. So he resolutely locked the secret within his own soul, becoming more quiet in manner, more reserved in speech, with every long month of waiting, constantly striving to forget the past amid a multitude of business and professional cares.

It was at the close of a winter's day in Chicago. Snow clouds were scurrying in from over the dun-colored waters of the lake, bringing with them an early twilight. Already myriads of lights were twinkling in the high office buildings, and showing brilliant above the smooth asphalt of Michigan Avenue. The endless stream of vehicles homeward bound began to thicken, the broad highway became a scene of continuous motion and display. After hastily consulting the ponderous pages of a city directory in an adjacent drug store, a young man, attired in dark business suit, his broad shoulders those of an athlete, his face strongly marked and full of character, and bronzed even at this season by out-of-door living, hurried across the street and entered the busy doorway of the Railway Exchange Building. On the seventh floor he unceremoniously flung open a door bearing the number sought, and stepped within to confront the office boy, who as instantly frowned his disapproval.

"Office hours over," the latter announced shortly. "Just shuttin' up."

"I am not here on business, my lad," was the good-natured reply, "but in the hope of catching Mr. Craig before he got away."

The boy, still somewhat doubtful, jerked his hand back across his shoulder toward an inner apartment.

"Well, his nibs is in there, but he 's just a-goin'."

The visitor swung aside the gate and entered. The man within, engaged in closing down his roll-top desk for the day, wheeled about in his chair, quite evidently annoyed by so late a caller. An instant he looked at the face, partially shadowed in the dim light, then sprang to his feet, both hands cordially extended.

"Ned Winston, by all the gods!" he exclaimed, his voice full of heartiness. "Say, but I'm glad to see you, old man. Supposed it was some bore wanting to talk business, and this happens to be my busy night. By Jove, thought I never was going to break away from this confounded desk--always like that when a fellow has a date. How are you, anyhow? Looking fine as a fiddle. In shape to kick the pigskin at this minute, I'll bet a hundred. Denver yet, I suppose? Must be a great climate out there, if you're a specimen. Must like it, anyhow; why, you've simply buried yourself in the mountains. Some of the old fellows were in here talking about it the other day. Have n't been East before for a couple of years, have you, Ned?"

"Considerably over three, Bob, and only on urgent business now. Have been hard at it all day, but thought I would take a chance at finding you in, even at this hour. Knew your natural inclination to grind, you know. I take a train for the West at midnight."

"Well, I rather guess not," and Craig picked up his hat from the top of the desk. "Do you imagine I'll let go of you that easily, now that you are here? Well, hardly. You've got to give up that excursion for one night at least, even if I'm compelled to get you jugged in order to hold you safe. I can do it, too; I have a pull with the police department. My automobile fines are making them rich."

"But you just mentioned having an engagement, or rather a date, which I suppose means the same thing."

Craig smiled indulgently, his dark eyes filled with humor.

"That's exactly the ticket. Glad to see you keep up with the slang of the day; proof you live in the real world, possess a normal mind, and feel an interest in current events. Altogether most commendable. That engagement of mine happens to be the very thing I want you for. Most glorious event in our family history, at least within my remembrance. My birth probably transcended even this in importance, but the details are not clear. You will add *eclat* to the occasion. By Jove, it will be immense; paterfamilias and mater-ditto will welcome you with open arms. They often speak of you; 'pon my word they do, and I don't know of another fellow anywhere they'd rather have join in our little family celebration. Oh, this is a great night for Old Ireland. Stay? Why, confound it, of course you'll stay!"

"But see here, Bob, at least give me the straight of all this. What's happening? What is it you are stacking me up against?"

"Box party at the Grand. Here, have a cigar. Just a family affair, you know. First night; certain to be a swell crowd there; everything sold out in advance. Supper afterwards, private dining-room at the Annex---just ourselves; no guests, except only the Star and her manager."

"The Star? I never heard that you people went in for theatricals?"

"Lord! they never did; but they've experienced a change of heart. You see, Lizzie took to it like a duck to water---she was the baby, the kid, you know---and, by thunder, the little girl made good. She's got 'em coming and going, and the pater is so proud of her he wears a smile on him that won't come off. It's simply great just to see him beau her around downtown, shedding real money at every step. Nothing is too good for Lizzie just now."

"And she is the Star?"

"Sure, and the lassie is going to have an ovation, unless all signs fail. Society has got a hunch, and that means a gorgeous turnout. The horse-show will be a back number. Lord, man, you can't afford to miss it! Why, you 'd never see anything like it in Denver in a thousand years."

Winston laughed, unable to resist entirely the contagious enthusiasm of his friend.

"You certainly make a strong bid, Bob; but really if I did remain overnight I 'd much prefer putting in the hours talking over old times. With all due respect to your sister, old boy, I confess I have n't very much heart for the stage. I 've grown away from it; have n't even looked into a playhouse for years."

"Thought as much; clear over the head in business. Big mistake at your age. A night such as Lizzie can give you will be a revelation. Say, Ned, that girl is an actress. I don't say it because she 's my sister, but she actually is; they 're all raving over her, even the critics. That's one reason why I want you to stay. I 'm blame proud of my little sister."

"But I have n't my evening dress within a thousand miles of here."

"What of that? I have no time now to run out to the house and get into mine. I 'm no lightning change artist. Lizzie won't care; she 's got good sense, and the others can go hang. Come on, Ned; we 'll run over to the Chicago Club and have a bite, then a smoke and chat about Alma Mater; after that, the Grand."

* * * * *

The great opera house was densely crowded from pit to dome, the boxes and parquet brilliant with color and fashion, the numberless tiers of seats rising above, black with packed, expectant humanity. Before eight o'clock late comers had been confronted in the lobby with the "Standing Room Only" announcement; and now even this had been turned to the wall, while the man at the ticket window shook his head to disappointed inquirers. And that was an audience to be remembered, to be held notable, to be editorially commented upon by the press the next morning.

There was reason for it. A child of Chicago, daughter in a family of standing and exclusiveness, after winning notable successes in San Francisco, in London, in New York, had, at last, consented to return home, and appear for the first time in her native city. Endowed with rare gifts of interpretation, earnest, sincere, forceful, loving her work fervently, possessing an attractive presence and natural capacity for study, she had long since won the appreciation of the critics and the warm admiration of those who care for the highest in dramatic art. The reward was assured. Already her home-coming had been heralded broadcast as an event of consequence to the great city. Her name was upon the lips of the multitude, and upon the hearts of those who really care for such things, the devotees of art, of high endeavor, of a stage worthy the traditions of its past. And in her case, in addition to all these helpful elements, Society grew suddenly interested and enthralled. The actress became a fashion, a fad, about which revolved the courtier and the butterfly. Once, it was remembered, she had been one of them, one of their own set, and out of the depths of their little pool they rose clamorously to the surface, imagining, as ever, that they were the rightful leaders of it all. Thus it came about, that first night--the stage brilliant, the house a dense mass of mad enthusiasts, jewelled heads nodding from boxes to parquet in recognition of friends, opera glasses insolently staring, voices humming in ceaseless conversation, and, over all, the frantic efforts of the orchestra to attract attention to itself amid the glitter and display.

Utterly indifferent to all of it, Ned Winston leaned his elbow on the brass rail of the first box, and gazed idly about over that sea of unknown faces. He would have much preferred not being there. To him, the theatre served merely as a stimulant to unpleasant memory. It was in this atmosphere that the ghost walked, and those hidden things of life came back to mock him. He might forget, sometimes, bending above his desk, or struggling against the perplexing problems of his profession in the field, but not here; not in the glare of the footlights, amid the hum of the crowd. He crushed the

unread programme within his hand, striving to converse carelessly with the lady sitting next to him, whom he was expected to entertain. But his thoughts were afar off, his eyes seeing a gray, misty, silent expanse of desert, growing constantly clearer in its hideous desolation before the advancing dawn.

The vast steel curtain arose with apparent reluctance to the top of the proscenium arch, the chatter of voices ceased, somewhat permitting the struggling orchestra to make itself felt and heard. Winston shut his teeth, and waited uneasily, the hand upon the rail clenched. Even more than he had ever expected, awakened memory tortured. He would have gone out into the solitude of the street, except for the certainty of disturbing others. The accompanying music became faster as the inner curtain slowly rose, revealing the great stage set for the first act. He looked at it carelessly, indifferently, his thoughts elsewhere, yet dimly conscious of the sudden hush all about him, the leaning forward of figures intent upon catching the opening words. The scene portrayed was that of a picturesque Swiss mountain village. It was brilliant in coloring, and superbly staged. For a moment the scenery; with great snow-capped peaks for background, caught his attention. It was realistic, beautifully faithful to nature, and he felt his heart throb with sudden longing to be home, to be once more in the shadow of the Rockies. But the actors did not interest him, and his thoughts again drifted far afield.

The act was nearly half finished before the Star made her appearance. Suddenly the door of the chalet opened, and a young woman emerged, attired in peasant costume, carelessly swinging a hat in her hand, her bright face smiling, her slender figure perfectly poised. She advanced to the very centre of the wide stage. The myriad of lights rippled over her, revealing the deep brown of her abundant hair, the dark, earnest eyes, the sweet winsomeness of expression. This was the moment for which that vast audience had been waiting. Like an instantaneous explosion of artillery came the thunder of applause. Her first attempted speech lost in that outburst of acclaim, the actress stood before them bowing and smiling, the red blood surging into her unrouged cheeks, her dark eyes flashing like two diamonds. Again and again the house rose to her, the noise of greeting was deafening, and a perfect avalanche of flowers covered the stage. From boxes, from parquet, from crowded balcony, from top-most gallery the enthusiastic outburst came, spontaneous, ever growing in volume of sound, apparently never ending. She looked out upon them almost appealingly, her hands outstretched in greeting, her eyes filling with tears. Slowly, as if drawn toward them by some impulse of gratitude, she came down to the footlights, and stood there bowing to left and right, the deep swelling of her bosom evidencing her agitation.

As though some sudden remembrance had occurred to her in the midst of that turmoil, of what all this must mean to others, to those of her own blood, she turned to glance lovingly toward that box in which they sat. Instantly she went white, her hands pressing her breast, her round throat swelling as though the effort of breathing choked her. Possibly out in front they thought it acting, perhaps a sudden nervous collapse, for as she half reeled backward to the support of a bench, the clamor died away into dull murmur. Almost with the ceasing of tumult she was upon her feet again, her lips still white, her face drawn as if in pain. Before the startled audience could awaken and realize the truth, she had commenced the speaking of her lines, forcing them into silence, into a hushed and breathless expectancy.

Winston sat leaning forward, his hand gripping the rail, staring at her. But for that one slender figure the entire stage before him was a blank. Suddenly he caught Craig by the arm.

"Who is that?" he questioned, sharply. "The one in the costume of a peasant girl?"

"Who is it? Are you crazy? Why, that 's Lizzie; read your programme, man. She must have had a faint spell just now. By Jove, I thought for a moment she was going to flop. You 're looking pretty white about the lips yourself, ain't sick, are you?"

He shook his head, sinking back into his seat. Hastily he opened the pages of the crushed programme, his hand shaking so he was scarcely able to decipher the printed lines. Ah! there it was in black-faced type: "Renee la Roux---*Miss Beth*

Norvell."

CHAPTER XXX

THE MISSION OF A LETTER

All through the remainder of the play he sat as one stunned, scarcely removing his eyes from the glittering stage, yet seeing nothing there excepting her. He could not later have recalled a single scene. Between the acts he conversed rationally enough with those about him, congratulating her people upon the brilliant success of the evening, and warmly commending the work of the Star. Yet this was all mechanical, automatic, his mind scarcely realizing its own action.

She never glanced in that direction again; during all the four acts not once did she permit her eyes to rest upon their box. The others may not have noticed the omission, but he did, his interpretation of the action becoming a pain. It served to strengthen the resolve which was taking possession of him. He noticed, also, that she played feverishly, vehemently, not with that quiet restraint, that promise of reserve power, always so noticeable in the old days. It caused him to realize that she was working upon her nerves, holding herself up to the strain by the sheer strength of will. The papers the next day commented upon this, hinting at nervousness, at exhilaration consequent upon so notable a greeting. But Winston knew the cause better--he knew the spectre which had so suddenly risen before her, turning her white and frightened at the very moment of supreme triumph. There, in front of them all, under the full glare of the lights, herself the very focus of thousands of eyes, she had been compelled to fight down her heart, and win a victory greater than that of the actress. In that instant she had conquered herself, had trodden, smiling and confident, over the awakened memories of the past.

After the curtain had fallen--fallen and lifted, again and again, to permit of her standing in the glare, smiling happily, and kissing her hands toward the enthusiastic multitude--he passed out with the others, still partially dazed, his mind remaining undecided, irresolute. With the cool night air fanning his cheeks as their car rolled southward, clearer consciousness came back, bringing with it firmer resolve. She had not wanted him; in all those years there had not come from her a single word. Now, on this night of her triumph, in the midst of family rejoicing, he had no part. It had all been a mistake, a most unhappy mistake, yet he would do now everything in his power to remedy it. His further presence should not be allowed to detract from her happiness, should not continue to embarrass her. The past between them was dead; undoubtedly she wished it dead. Very well, then, he would help her to bury it, now and forever. Not through any neglect on his part should that past ever again rise up to haunt her in the hour of success. She had discovered her ideal, she had attained to the height of her ambition. She should be left to enjoy the victory undisturbed. Within the hotel rotunda, under the multicolored lights, he halted Craig, hurrying forward to a conference with the steward.

"I am awfully sorry, old man," he explained apologetically, "but the fact is, I do not feel well enough to remain down here to the spread. Nothing serious, you know--indigestion or something like that. I'll run up to my room and lie down for a while; if I feel better I may wander in later."

Craig looked concerned.

"Thought you were mighty white about the gills all the evening, Ned--the lobster salad, likely. I hate letting you go, awfully; upon my word, I do. I wanted Lizzie to meet you; she 's always heard me singing your praises, and your not being there will prove quite a disappointment to her. But Lord! if you 're sick, why, of course, there's no help for it. Come down later, if you can, and I 'll run up there as soon as I can break away from the bunch. Sure you don't need the house physician?"

"Perfectly sure; all I require is rest and a bit of sleep. Been working too hard, and am dead tired."

He sank down within the great arm-chair in the silence of his own room, not even taking trouble to turn on the lights; mechanically lit a cigar, and sat staring out of the window. Before him the black, threatening cloud-shadows hung over the dark water of the lake; far below resounded the ceaseless clatter of hoofs along the fashionable avenue. He neither saw nor heard. Over and over again he reviewed the past, bringing back to memory each word and glance which had ever, passed between them. He was again with the "Heart of the World" strollers, he was struggling with Burke in the depths of the mine, he was passing through that day and night of misfortune on the ridge overlooking Echo Canyon, he was riding for life--her life--across the trackless desert. It all came before him in unnatural vividness, seemingly as though each separate scene had been painted across that black sky without. Then he perceived the great playhouse he had just left, the glorious glitter of lights, the reverberation of applause, the cheering mob of men and women, and her--her bowing and smiling at them, her dark eyes dancing with happiness and ignoring him utterly, her whole body trembling to the intoxication of success. Oh, it was all over; even if there had been no gulf of death between them, it was all over. She had deliberately chosen to forget, under the inspiration of her art she had forgotten. It had usurped her thought, her ambition, her every energy. She had won her way through the throng, yet the very struggle of such winning had sufficed to crowd him out from memory had left the past as barren as was the desert amid the dreariness of which they had parted. He set his teeth hard, striking his clenched fist against the cushioned arm of the chair. Then he sat silent, his cigar extinguished. Once he glanced at his watch, but already the hour was too late for any hope of catching the west-bound train, and he dropped it back in his pocket, and sat motionless. Suddenly some one rapped upon the outside door. It would be Craig, probably, and he called out a regretful "Come in." A bell-boy stood there, his buttoned-up figure silhouetted against the lights in the hall.

"Lady in Parlor D asked me to hand you this, sir," the boy said.

He accepted the slight bit of paper, scarcely comprehending what it could all mean, turned on an electric bulb over the dresser, and looked at it. A single line of delicate writing confronted him, so faint that he was compelled to bend closer to decipher: *"If you are waiting my word, I send it."*

He caught at the dresser-top as though some one had struck him, staring down at the card in his hand, and then around the silent room, his breath grown rapid. At first the words were almost meaningless; then the blood came surging up into his face, and he walked toward the door. There he paused, his hand already upon the knob. What use? What use? Why should he seek her, even although she bade him come? She might no longer care, but he did; to her such a meeting might be only a mere incident, an experience to be lightly talked over, but to him such an interview could only prove continual torture. But no! The thought wronged her; such an action would not be possible to Beth Norvell. If she despatched this message it had been done honestly, done graciously. He would show himself a craven if he failed to face whatever awaited him below. With tightly compressed lips, he closed the door, and walked to the elevator.

She stood waiting him alone, slightly within the parlor door, her cheeks flushed, her red lips parted in an attempt to smile. With a single glance he saw her as of old, supremely happy, her dark eyes clear, her slender form swaying slightly toward him as if in welcome. For an instant their gaze met, his full of uncertainty, hers of confidence; then she stretched out to him her two ungloved hands.

"You gave me a terrible scare to-night," she said, endeavoring to speak lightly, "and then, to make matters worse, you ran away. It was not like you to do that."

"I could not bring myself to mar the further happiness of your night," he explained, feeling the words choke in his throat as he uttered them. "My being present at the Opera House was all a mistake; I did not dream it was you until too late. But the supper was another thing."

She looked intently at him, her expression clearly denoting surprise.

"I really cannot believe you to be as indifferent as you strive to appear," she said at last, her breath quickening. "One does not forget entirely in three short years, and I---I caught that one glimpse of you in the box. It was that---that look upon your face which gave me courage to send my card to your room." She paused, dropping her eyes to the carpet, her fingers nervously playing with the trimming of her waist. "It may, perhaps, sound strange, yet in spite of my exhibit of feeling at first discovering your presence, I had faith all day that you would come."

"Is it possible you mean that you wished me there?"

"Quite possible; only it would have been ever so much better had I known before. It actually seemed when I saw your face to-night as if God had brought you---it was like a miracle. Do you know why? Because, for the first time in three years, I can welcome you with all my heart."

"Beth, Beth," utterly forgetting everything but the mystery of her words, his gray eyes darkening from eagerness, "what is it you mean? For God's sake tell me! These years have been centuries; through them all I have been waiting your word."

She drew in her breath sharply, reaching out one hand to grasp the back of a chair.

"It---it could not be spoken," she said, her voice faltering. "Not until to-day was it possible for me to break the silence."

"And now---to-day?"

She smiled suddenly up at him, her eyes filled with promise.

"God has been good," she whispered, drawing from within the lace of her waist a crumpled envelope,---"oh, so good, even when I doubted Him. See, I have kept this hidden there every moment since it first came, even on the stage in my changes of costume. I dared not part with it for a single instant---it was far too precious." She sank back upon the chair, holding out toward him the paper. "Read that yourself, if my tears have not made the lines illegible."

He took it from her, his hands trembling, and drew forth the enclosure, a single sheet of rough yellow paper. Once he paused, glancing toward where she sat, her face buried in her arms across the chair-back. Then he smoothed out the wrinkles, and read slowly, studying over each pencil-written, ill-spelled word, every crease and stain leaving an impression upon his brain:

"SAN JUAN, COL., DEC. 12, 1904.

"Deer Miss: I see your name agin in a Denver paper what Bill brought out frum town ternight, an read thar that you was goin ter play a piece in Chicago. I aint seen yer name in ther papers afore fer a long time. So I thot I 'd write yer a line, cause Bill thinks yer never got it straight bout ther way Biff Farnham died. He ses that you an Mister Winston hes got ther whol affair all mixed up, an that maybe it's a keepin ther two of yer sorter sore on each other. Now, I dont wantter butt in none in yer affairs, an then agin it aint overly plisent fer me to make a clean breast ov it this way on paper. Not that I 'm afeard, er nothin, only it dont just look nice. No more do I want anything whut I did ter be makin you fokes a heep o trouble. That aint my style. I reckon I must a bin plum crazy whin I did it, fer I wus mighty nigh that fer six months after---et least Bill ses so. But it wus me all right whut killed Farnham. It wan't no murder es I see it, tho I was huntin him all right, fer he saw me furst, an hed his gun out, when I let drive. Enyhow, he got whut wus comin ter him, an I aint got no regrets. We're a doin all right out yere now, me an Bill---ther claim is payin big, but I never aint got over thinkin bout Mercedes. I shore loved her, an I do yit. You was awful good to her, an I reckon she 'd sorter want me to tell you jist how it wus. Hopin this will clar up som ov them troubles between you an Mister Winston, I am Yours with

respects,

"WILLIAM BROWN."

Winston stood there in silence, yet holding the paper in his hand. Almost timidly she glanced up at him across the back of the chair.

"And you have never suspected who I was until to-night?"

"No, never; I had always thought of Bob's sister as a mere child."

She arose to her feet, taking a single step toward him.

"I can only ask you to forgive me," she pleaded anxiously, her eyes uplifted. "That is all I can ask. I ought to be ashamed, I am ashamed, that I could ever have believed it possible for you to commit such a deed. It seems incredible now that I have so believed. Yet how could I escape such conviction? I heard the voices, the shot, and then a man rushed past me through the darkness. Some rash impulse, a desire to aid, sent me hastily forward. Scarcely had I bent over the dead body, when some one came toward me from the very direction in which that man had fled. I supposed he was coming back to make sure of his work, and---and---it was you. Oh, I did not want to believe, but I had to believe. You acted so strangely toward me, I accepted that as a sign of guilt; it was a horror unspeakable."

"You thought---you actually thought I did that?" he asked, hardly trusting his own ears.

"What else could I think? What else could I think?"

This new conception stunned him, left him staring at her, utterly unable to control his speech. Should he tell her? Should he confess his own equally mad mistake? the reason why all these years had passed without his seeking her? It would be useless; it would only add to her pain, her sense of wounded pride. Silence now would be mercy.

"Beth," he said, controlling his voice with an effort, "let us think of all this as passed away forever. Let us not talk about it, let us not think about it any more. You have reached the height which you set out to gain; or, possibly you have not yet fully attained to your ideal, yet you have travelled far toward it. Has it satisfied? Has it filled the void in your life?"

She returned his questioning look frankly.

"Do you remember what I once said in a cabin out in Colorado?"

"I think so; yet, to avoid mistake, repeat it now."

"I told you I would give up gladly all ambition, all dreams of worldly success, just to be alone with the man I loved, and bring him happiness. To-night, as then, that is all I wish---everything."

A moment neither moved nor spoke.

"Beth," he whispered, as though half afraid even yet to put the question, "am I all you wish---everything?"

"Yes, everything---only you must wait, Ned. I belong still to the public, and must play out my engagement. After that it shall be home, and you."

They stood there facing each other, the soft light from the shaded globes overhead sparkling in her dark hair, her cheeks flushed, her eyes smiling at him through a mist of tears. Unresisted, he drew her to him.