

FICTION

Francis Lynde

The Helpers

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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THE HELPERS

BY FRANCIS LYNDE



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***TO THE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE
GUILD COMPASSIONATE,
GREETING:***

Forasmuch as it hath seemed good in the eyes of many to write of those things which make for the disheartening of all humankind, these things are written in the hope that the God-gift of loving-kindness, shared alike by saint and sinner, may in some poor measure be given its due.

The Author.

THE HELPERS

[1]

CHAPTER I

THE curtain had gone down on the first act of the opera, and Jeffard found his hat and rose to go out. His place was the fourth from the aisle, and after an ineffectual attempt to make a passageway for him without rising, the two young women and the elderly man stood up and folded their opera chairs. Being driven to think pointedly of something else, Jeffard neglected to acknowledge the courtesy; and the two young women balanced the account by discussing him after he had passed out of hearing.

"I think he might at least have said 'Thank you,'" protested the one in the black-plumed picture-hat, preening herself after the manner of ruffled birds and disturbed womankind. "I'm in love with your mountains, and your climate, and your end-of-the-century impetus, but I can't say that I particularly admire Denver manners."

The clear-eyed young woman in the modest toque laughed joyously.

"Go on, Myra dear; don't mind me. It's so refreshing to hear an out-of-church opinion on one's self. I know our manners are perfectly primitive, but what can you expect when every train from the East brings us a new lot of people to civilize? When you are tempted to groan over our shortcomings it'll comfort you wonderfully if you will just stop long enough to remember that a good many of us are the newest of new tenderfoots!"

"Tenderfoots! What an expression!"

"It's good English, though we did use to say 'tenderfeet' before the 'Century Dictionary' set us right. And it calls the turn, as poppa would say."

She of the far-reaching plumes bent her eyebrows in severe deprecation.

"Connie, your slang is simply vicious. Will you be good enough to tell me what 'calls the turn' means?"

"Ask poppa."

Appealed to by the censorious one, the elderly man stopped twiddling the bit of gold quartz on his watch-guard long enough to explain. He did it with a little hesitancy, picking his way among the words as one might handle broken glass, or the edged tools of an unfamiliar trade. He was a plain man, and he stood in considerable awe of the picture-hat and its wearer. When he had finished, the toque made honorable amends.

"I beg your pardon, Myra. Really, I didn't know it had anything to do with gambling. But to go back to our manners: I'll give you the ponies and the phaeton if I don't convince you that the absent-minded gentleman on our left here is the tenderest of tenderfoots--most probably from Philadelphia, too," she added, in mischievous afterthought.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"You think not? Just wait and you'll see. Oh, cousin mine, you've a lot to learn about your kind, yet. If you stay out here six months or a year, you will begin to think your philosophy hasn't been half dreamful enough."

"How absurd you are, Constance. If I didn't know you to be"--

"Wait a minute; let me start you off right: good, and sensible, and modest, and unassuming, and dutiful, and brimful of fads"--she checked the attributes off on her fingers. "You see I have them all by heart."

The little cloud of dust puffing from beneath the drop-curtain began to subside, and the thumping and rumbling on the stage died away what time the musicians were clambering back to their places in the orchestra. Miss Van Vetter swept the aisles and the standing-room with her opera-glass.

"You will not have a chance to prove it, Connie. He isn't coming back."

"Don't you believe it. I am quite sure he is a gentleman who always gets the worth of his money."

"What makes you say that?"

"Oh, I don't know; intuition, I suppose. That's what they call it in a woman, though I think it would be called good judgment in a man."

Taking him at his worst, Miss Elliott's terse characterization of Henry Jeffard was not altogether inaccurate, though, in the present instance, he would not have gone back to the theatre if he had known what else to do with himself. Indeed, he was minded not to go back, but a turn in the open air made him think better of it, and he strolled in as the curtain was rising. Whereupon the elderly man and the two young women had to stand again while he edged past them

to his chair.

This time he remembered, and said something about being sorry to trouble them. Miss Elliott's chair was next to his, and she smiled and nodded reassuringly. Jeffard was moody and disheartened, and the nod and the smile went near to the better part of him. He kept his seat during the next intermission, and ventured a civil commonplace about the opera. The young woman replied in kind, and the wheel thus set in motion soon rolled away from the beaten track of trivialities into a path leading straight to the fulfillment of Miss Elliott's promise to her cousin.

"Then you haven't been long in Denver," she hazarded on the strength of a remark which betrayed his unfamiliarity with Colorado.

"Only a few weeks."

"And you like it? Every one does, you know."

Jeffard tried to look decorously acquiescent and made a failure of it.

"I suppose I ought to be polite and say yes; but for once in a way, I'm going to be sincere and say no."

"You surprise me! I thought everybody, and especially new-comers, liked Denver; enthusiastically at first, and rather more than less afterward."

"Perhaps I am the exception," he suggested, willing to concede something. "I fancy it depends very much upon the point of view. To be brutally frank about it, I came here--like some few hundreds of others, I presume--to make my fortune; and I think I would better have stayed at home. I seem to have arrived a decade or two after the fact."

The young woman never swerved from her intention by a hair's-breadth.

"Yes?" she queried. "It's too true that these are not the palmy days of the 'Matchless' and the 'Little Pittsburg,' notwithstanding Creede and Cripple Creek. And yet it would seem that even now our Colorado is a fairer field for ambition and energy than"--

She paused, and Jeffard, with an unanalyzed impression that it was both very singular and very pleasant to be talking thus freely with a self-contained young woman whose serenity was apparently undisturbed by any notions of conventionality, said, "Than a city of the fifth class in New England, let us say. Yes, I concede that, if you include ambition; but when it comes to a plain question of earning a living"--

"Oh, as to that," she rejoined, quite willing to argue with him now that her point was gained, "if it is merely a question of getting enough to eat and drink I suppose that can be answered anywhere. Even the Utes managed to answer it here before the Government began feeding them."

He regarded her curiously, trying to determine her social point of view by the many little outward signs of prosperity which tasteful simplicity, unhampered by a lean purse, may exhibit.

"I wonder if you know anything at all about it," he said, half musingly.

"About getting something to eat?" Her laugh was a ripple of pure joy that had the tonic of the altitudes in it. "I dare say I don't--not in any practical way; though I do go about among our poor people. That is what makes me uncharitable. I can't help knowing why so many people have to go hungry."

Jeffard winced as if the uncharity had a personal application.

"We were speaking of fortunes," he corrected, calmly ignoring the fact that his own remark had brought up the question of the struggle for existence. "I think my own case is a fair example of what comes of chasing ambitious phantoms. I gave up a modest certainty at home to come here, and"--The musicians were taking their places again, and he stopped abruptly.

"And now?" The words uttered themselves, and she was sorry for them when they were beyond recall.

His gesture was expressive of disgust, but there was no resentment in his reply.

"That was some time ago, as I have intimated; and I am still here and beginning to wish very heartily that I had never come. I presume you can infer the rest."

The leader lifted his baton, and the curtain rose on the third act of the opera. At the same moment the curtain of unacquaintance, drawn aside a hand's-breadth by the young woman's curiosity, fell between these two who knew not so much as each other's names, and who assumed--if either of them thought anything about it--that the wave of chance

which had tossed them together would presently sweep them apart again.

After the opera the ebbing tide of humanity did so separate them; but when the man had melted into the crowd in the foyer, the young woman had a curious little thrill of regret; a twinge of remorse born of the recollection that she had made him open the book of his life to a stranger for the satisfying of a mere whim of curiosity.

Miss Van Vetter was ominously silent on the way home, but she made it a point of conscience to go to Constance's room before her cousin had gone to bed.

"Connie Elliott," she began, "you deserve to be shaken! How did you dare to talk with that young man without knowing the first syllable about him?"

Constance sat down on the edge of the bed and laughed till the tears came.

"Oh, Myra dear," she gasped, "it's worth any amount of disgrace to see you ruffle your feathers so beautifully. Don't you see that I talked to him just because I didn't know any of the syllables? And he told me a lot of them."

"I should think he did. I suppose he will call on you next."

Connie the unconventional became Miss Elliott in the smallest appreciable lapse of time. "Indeed, he will not. He knows better than to do that, even if he is a ten--"

But Miss Van Vetter was gone.

CHAPTER II

WHEN Jeffard left the theatre he went to his room; but not directly. He made a detour of a few squares which took him down Sixteenth Street to Larimer, and so on around to his lodging, which was in the neighborhood of the St. James hotel.

After the manner of those whose goings and comings have reached the accusative point, he took the trouble to assure himself that the burning of a cigar in the open air was the excuse for the roundabout walk; but the real reason showed its head for a moment or two when he slackened his pace at one point in the circuit and glanced furtively up at a row of carefully shaded windows in the second story of a building on the opposite side of the street.

The lower part of the building was dark and deserted; but in the alley there was a small hallway screened by a pair of swing doors with glass eyes in them, and at the end of the hallway a carpeted stair leading up to the lighted room above. It was to keep from climbing this stair that Jeffard had gone to the theatre earlier in the evening.

Opposite the alley he stopped and made as if he would cross the street, but the impulse seemed to expend itself in the moment of hesitation, and he went on again, slowly, as one to whom dubiety has lent its leaden-soled shoes. Reaching his room he lighted the gas and dropped into a chair, his hands deep-buried in his pockets, and a look of something like desperation in his eyes.

The suggestive outline of his Western experience sketched between the acts of the opera for the young woman with the reassuring smile was made up of half-truths, as such confidences are wont to be. It was true that he had come to Colorado to seek his fortune, and that thus far the quest had been bootless. But it was also true that he had begun by persuading himself that he must first study his environment; and that the curriculum which he had chosen was comprehensive, exhaustive, and costly enough to speedily absorb the few thousand dollars which were to have been his lure for success.

His walk in life hitherto had been decently irreproachable, hedged in on either hand by such good habits as may be formed by the attrition of a moral community; but since these were more the attributes of time and place than of the man, and were unconsciously left behind in the leave-takings, a species of insanity, known only to those who have habitually worn the harness of self-restraint, had come upon him in the new environment. At first it had been but a vagrant impulse, and as such he had suffered it to put a bandage on the eyes of reason. Later, when he would fain have removed the bandage, he found it tied in a hard knot.

For the hundredth time within a month he was once more tugging at the knot. To give himself the benefit of an object-lesson, he turned his pockets inside out, throwing together a small heap of loose silver and crumpled bank-notes on the table. After which he made a deliberate accounting, smoothing the creases out of the bills, and building an accurate little pillar with the coins. The exact sum ascertained, he sat back and regarded the money reflectively.

"Ninety-five dollars and forty-five cents. That's what there is left out of the nest-egg; and I've been here rather less than four months. At that rate I've averaged, let me see"--he knitted his brows and made an approximate calculation--"say, fifty dollars a day. Consequently, the mill will run out of grist in less than two days, or it would if the law of averages held good--which it doesn't, in this case. Taking the last fortnight as a basis, I'm capitalized for just about one hour longer."

He looked at his watch and got up wearily. "It's Kismet," he mused. "I might as well take my hour now, and be done with it." Whereupon he rolled the money into a compact little bundle, turned off the gas, and felt his way down the dark stair to the street.

At the corner he ran against a stalwart young fellow, gloved and overcoated, and carrying a valise.

"Why, hello, Jeffard, old man," said the traveler heartily, stopping to shake hands. "Doing time on the street at midnight, as usual, aren't you? When do you ever catch up on your sleep?"

Jeffard's laugh was perfunctory. "I don't have much to do but eat and sleep," he replied. "Have you been somewhere?"

"Yes; just got down from the mine--train was late. Same old story with you, I suppose? Haven't found the barrel of money rolling up hill yet?"

Jeffard shook his head.

"Jeff, you're an ass--that's what you are; a humpbacked burro of the Saguache, at that! You come out here in the

morning of a bad year with a piece of sheepskin in your grip, and the Lord knows what little pickings of civil engineering in your head, and camp down in Denver expecting your lucky day to come along and slap you in the face. Why don't you come up on the range and take hold with your hands?"

"Perhaps I'll have to before I get through," Jeffard admitted; and then: "Don't abuse me to-night, Bartrow. I've about all I can carry."

The stalwart one put his free arm about his friend and swung him around to the light.

"And that isn't the worst of it," he went on, ignoring Jeffard's protest. "You've been monkeying with the fire and getting your fingers burned; and, as a matter of course, making ducks and drakes of your little stake. Drop it all, Jeffard, and come across to the St. James and smoke a cigar with me."

"I can't to-night, Bartrow. I'm in a blue funk, and I've got to walk it off."

"Blue nothing! You'll walk about two blocks, more or less, and then you'll pull up a chair and proceed to burn your fingers some more. Oh, I know the symptoms like a book."

Jeffard summoned his dignity, and found some few shreds and patches of it left. "Bartrow, there is such a thing as overdrawing one's account with a friend," he returned stiffly. "I don't want to quarrel with you. Good-night."

Three minutes later the goggle-eyed swing doors opened and engulfed him. At the top of the carpeted stair he met a hard-faced man who was doubling a thick sheaf of bank-notes into portable shape. The outgoer nodded, and tapped the roll significantly. "Go in and break 'em," he rasped. "The bank's out o' luck to-night, and it's our rake-off. I win all I can stand."

Jeffard pushed through another swing door and went to the faro-table. Counting his money he dropped the odd change back into his pocket and handed the bills to the banker.

"Ninety-five?" queried the man; and when Jeffard nodded, he pushed the requisite number of blue, red, and white counters across the table. Jeffard arranged them in a symmetrical row in front of him, and began to play with the singleness of purpose which is the characteristic of that particular form of dementia.

It was the old story with the usual variations. He lost, won, and then lost again until he could reckon his counters by units. After which the tide turned once more, and the roar of its flood dinned in his ears like the drumming of a tornado in a forest. His capital grew by leaps and bounds, doubling, trebling, and finally quadrupling the sum he had handed the banker. Then his hands began to shake, and the man on his right paused in his own play long enough to say, "Now's yer time to cash in, pardner. Yer nerve's a-flickerin'!"

The prudent advice fell upon deaf ears. Jeffard's soul was Berserk in the fierce battle with chance, and he began placing the counters upon certain of the inlaid cards before him, stopping only when he had staked his last dollar. Five minutes afterward he was standing on the sidewalk again, drawing in deep breaths of the keen morning air, and wondering if it were only the possession of the thing called money that kept one's head from buzzing ordinarily. In the midst of the unspoken query the shuffling figure of a night tramp sidled up to him, and he heard imperfectly the stereotyped appeal.

"Hungry, you say? Perhaps I'll be that, myself, before long. Here you are."

The odd change jingled into the outstretched palm of the vagrant, and for the first time in a fairly industrious life Jeffard knew what it felt like to be quite without money.

"That is, I think I do, but I don't," he mused, walking slowly in the direction of his room. "It isn't breakfast-time yet; and by the same token, it isn't going to be for a good while. I believe I can sleep the clock around, now that I've reached the bottom."

CHAPTER III

WHEN one has sown the wind, and the whirlwind harvest is begun, it is easy to imagine that the first few strokes of the sickle have gathered in all the bitterness there is in the crop. Some such illusory assumption lent itself to Jeffard's mood when he assured himself that he had finally reached the bottom; but the light of a new day, and a habit of early rising which was not to be broken at such short notice, brought a clearer perspective.

In lieu of breakfast he walked up one street and down another, carefully avoiding the vicinity of the St. James for fear Bartrow might offer him hospitality, and dodging the haunts of his few acquaintances in the downtown thoroughfares for the same reason. This drove him to the residence district; and out in Colfax Avenue he met the elderly man whom he had taken to be the father of the young woman with the kindly nod and smile.

Seeing him in daylight, Jeffard recognized a familiar figure of the Mining Exchange and the brokers' offices, and thought it not unlikely that he might presently stumble upon the home of the young woman. He found it a square or two farther out, identifying it by a glimpse of the young woman herself, who was on the veranda, looping up the tendrils of a climbing rose.

At sight of her Jeffard forgot his penalties for the moment, and the early morning sunshine seemed to take on a kindlier glow. She was standing on the arm of a clumsy veranda-chair, trying vainly to reach the higher branches of the rose, and Jeffard remarked that she was small almost to girlishness. But the suggestion of immaturity paused with her stature. The rounded arms discovered by the loose sleeves of her belted house-gown; the firm, full outline of her figure; the crowning glory of red-brown hair with the heart of the sunlight in it; the self-contained poise on the arm of the great chair; these were all womanly, and the glimpse stirred the waters of a neglected pool in Jeffard's past as he went on his aimless way along the avenue.

There was a closely written leaf in the book of memory which he had sought to tear out and destroy; but the sight of the graceful figure poised on the arm of the big chair opened the record at the forbidden page, and the imagined personality of the sweet-faced young woman with the red-brown hair and sympathetic eyes set itself antithetically over against the self-seeking ambition of the girl who had written her own epitaph in the book of his remembrance. He gave place to the sharply defined contrast for a time, indulging it as one who plunges not unwillingly into the past for the sake of escaping the present, and banishing it only when his shortening shadow gave token that the chance of a breakfast invitation was no longer to be apprehended.

But when he turned his face cityward it was with a conscious avoidance of the route which would lead him past the house with a climbing rose on one of its veranda pillars. For what had a man to whom the proletariat's highway was already opening up its cheerless vista to do with love, and dalliance, and heaven-suggestive pictures of domestic beatitude?

Once more in Sixteenth Street, the moneyless reality thrust itself upon him with renewed insistence, and he turned a corner abruptly to escape an acquaintance who was crossing the street. The shame of it was too new to strike hands with dissimulation as yet, and companionship was least of all things to be desired. If he could but win back to his room unaccosted and lock himself in until the sharpness of hunger should have exorcised the devil of humiliation, he might hope to be able to face an accusing world with such equanimity as may be born of desperation.

But fate willed otherwise. As he was passing a deep-set doorway giving on the sidewalk, a friendly arm shot out and barred the way. Jeffard looked up with an unspoken malediction on his tongue. It was Bartrow. In his haste to gain his lodging the shamed one had forgotten the proximity of the St. James hotel.

"You're a chump!" declared the broad-shouldered young miner, backing Jeffard against the wall and pinning him fast with one finger. "You're no man's man, and you're not fit to live in a man's town. Why didn't you come around to breakfast this morning, like decent people?"

"I'm not boarding at the St. James now." Jeffard tried to say it naturally, but the evasion was palpable enough.

"What of that? Couldn't you afford to be sociable once in a way?"

Jeffard prevaricated, and since he was but a clumsy liar, contrived to fall into a snare of his own setting.

"I was up too early for you, I guess. When I came by, the clerk told me you weren't down yet."

Bartrow shook his head and appeared to be much moved.

"What an abnormal liar that clerk must be," he commented reflectively. "I asked him five minutes ago if any one had

inquired for me, and he said no."

Jeffard hung his head and would have tried to break away; but Bartrow locked arms with him and dragged him whither he would.

"I'll forgive you this time," he went on, laughing at Jeffard's discomfiture. "I suppose you had your reasons for dodging, and while it's ten to one they were no good, that leaves one chance in your favor. Have a smoke?"

Now Jeffard's poverty-pride was fire-new as yet, and though the smell of Bartrow's cigar made him faint with desire, he refused the gift.

"Haven't quit, have you?" Bartrow demanded.

"No--yes; that is, I have for the present. I'm not feeling very well this morning."

"You look it; every inch of it. Let's go around and see what the money people are doing. Maybe that'll chirk you up a bit."

Jeffard yielded, partly because Bartrow's impetus was always of the irresistible sort, and partly because he could think of no plausible objection on the spur of the moment. Bartrow talked cheerily all the way around to the Mining Exchange, telling of his claims and prospects in Chaffee County, and warming to his subject as only a seasoned Coloradoan can when the talk is of "mineral" and mining. Jeffard, being hungry, and sick with a fierce longing for tobacco, said little, and was duly thankful that Bartrow required no more than a word now and then to keep him going. None the less he watched narrowly for a chance to escape, and was visibly depressed when none offered.

In the crowded Exchange the poverty-pride began to lose the fine keenness of its edge. The atmosphere of the room was pungent with cigar smoke, and the tobacco craving rose up in its might and smote down Jeffard's self-respect.

"If you'll excuse me a minute, Dick, I believe I'll go out and get a cigar as a measure of self-defense," he said; and Bartrow supplied his need, as a matter of course. It was a shameful subterfuge, and he loathed himself for having descended to it. Nevertheless, he took the cigar which Bartrow made haste to offer, and lighted it. The first few whiffs made him dizzy, but afterward he was better company for the enthusiast.

While they were talking, the elderly man with the bit of quartz on his watch-chain came in, and Jeffard inquired if Bartrow knew him.

"Know Steve Elliott? I should say I do. Everybody knows him, barring now and then a tenderfoot like yourself. Besides being one of the most lovable old infants on top of earth, he's one of Denver's picturesques. That old man has had more ups and downs than any three men in Colorado; and that's saying a good deal."

"In what way?"

"Oh, every way. He's a Fifty-niner, to begin with; came across the plains in a bull-train to hunt for mineral. He found it--Steve would find it if anybody could--but some sharp rascal euchred him out of it, and he's been finding it and losing it at regular intervals ever since."

Jeffard blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling, and took in the outward presentment of the pioneer in an appraisive eye-sweep. "This is one of the finding intervals, I take it."

"Sure. He's on top just now,--rather more so than usual, I believe,--but the 'pioneer's luck' will catch him again some day, and just as likely as not he'll be hustling around for a grub-stake."

"Man of family?" queried Jeffard.

"Yes, if a daughter's a family. His wife died in one of the lean years a long time ago. But say, Jeffard, you ought to know the daughter. She's as pretty as a peach, and as bright as a new nickel. She's had her share of the ups and downs, and they've made a queer little medley of her. Trap and tandem and a big house on Capitol Hill one month, and as like as not two rooms in a block and a ride in the street-cars the next. That's about the way Connie Elliott's had it all her life, and it's made her as wide awake as a frosty morning, and as good as a Sister of Charity."

"I can believe all that," Jeffard admitted, meaning more than he said.

"Yes, you're safe in believing all the good things you hear about Steve Elliott and his daughter. They're good people. By the way, why can't you come up to the house with me some evening and get acquainted? They've a Philadelphia cousin staying with them now, and you might compare notes on the 'wild and woolly' with her."

Jeffard had a string of excuses ready, ending with, "Besides, there are particular reasons why I don't wish to meet

Miss Elliott just now--reasons that I can't explain."

"Reasons be hanged! Just you stand still a minute while I go get the old man and introduce you. You'll like him a whole lot."

Bartrow did his part, but by the time he had pulled Elliott out of the throng in front of the quotation board, Jeffard was two squares away, headed once more for the suburbs. This time he crossed the river and tramped for hours in the Highlands. He told himself he was killing time and keeping out of the way of the luncheon hour; but in reality he was fighting a desperate battle with pride, or self-respect, or whatever it is that makes a man who is not a born vagrant shrink from that species of cannibalism which begins with the eating of one's personal possessions.

It was an unequal fight at best, since hunger was the besieger, but Jeffard made shift to prolong it until the long day of fasting was drawing to its close. He yielded at last, as needs must when famine drives, but the capitulation was upon conditions, and his heart was soft with repentant kneadings. Since one must eat to live, the pride-quencher must come to pass; but the doing of it should be the pivot upon which he would turn back to sanity and industrious thrift. The loss of his small patrimony and the hard-earned savings by which it had been fairly doubled was shrewd upon him, but he told himself that the consequences of his folly must be set over against the experience; that he must be content to begin again at the bottom, as his father had before him, thankful for the youth and strength which made such a beginning possible.

From the preliminary survey of penitence to plotting out the map of good intentions is an easy stage, and Jeffard beguiled the long tramp toward by building air-castles spacious and many-storied, with the new resolutions for their foundations. But when the sidewalks of the streets were once more under his feet, the pride-quencher necessity urged itself afresh, plying the lash of shame until he was driven to tramp yet other squares before he could attain to the plunging point.

He was passing the Albany when the climax was reached, and he turned aside to get a light for the carefully economized stump of Bartrow's cigar before setting out to find a pawnshop where his pride might suffer least. At the cigar counter in the rotunda a giant in rough tweeds, with an unshorn beard and the fine bronze of the grazing plains on face and hands, was filling his case with high-priced Cubans from an open box. At sight of Jeffard he dropped the cigar-case and roared out a mighty welcome.

"Well, I'll be ----! Jeffard, my boy, where under the canopy did you drop from? If I haven't had a search-warrant out for you all day, I'm a liar and the truth has shook me. Been to dinner?--but of course you haven't; or if you have, you are going to eat another with me right now. How've you been? and where in Tophet have you been hiding out?"

Jeffard smiled. "That's the place--in Tophet and elsewhere; but I haven't been out of town since you were here last."

"The devil you haven't! Then what did that muley maverick at the hotel mean when he said you were gone?"

"Gone from the hotel, I guess he meant. I've been 'eating around,' as we used to say back in the Berkshire Hills."

"Have, eh? Well, you're going to 'eat around' with me to-night, savez? I was just going to swear a few lines and go up and eat by myself. Come on; let's get a move. I've got a train-load of steers on the iron, and I'm due to chase 'em at eight-thirty. But before I forget it, here"--the big man found a compact little wad of bank-notes in his vest pocket and thrust it into Jeffard's hand. "I counted that out the next morning and meant to give it back to you, but the thing got away from me slick and clean."

"Give it back to me?" queried Jeffard, with a sudden swelling of the throat that made his voice husky and tremulous, "what is it?"

"Why, it's the hundred I borrowed of you the last time we took in the menagerie together. What's the matter with you? Don't tell me you don't remember it, or I shall go kick myself around the block for an over-honest idiot!"

Jeffard did not remember it; could but dimly recall the circumstances now that he was reminded of them. The lending had been in a moment of supreme excitement in the midst of a feverish attack of the dementia; the loan was in celluloid counters, in fact, and not in legal tender at all. And having been made, it was swiftly lost sight of in the varying fortunes of the sitting. None the less, the return of it at the precise moment when it was most needed drove the thankfulness to his eyes, and the lights of the great rotunda swam in a misty haze when he thought of the humiliating thing from which the small Providence had saved him.

"Pettigrew," he said, when he could trust himself to speak, "you're an honest man, and that's the worst that can be said of you. I had forgotten it long ago. Take me in and fill me up. I've been tramping all day, and it runs in my mind that I've skipped a meal or two."

CHAPTER IV

THE dancing party at the Calmaines' was a crush, as Mrs. Calmaine's social enlargements were wont to be. For an hour or more the avenue had been a-rumble with carriages coming and going, and a trickling stream of bidden ones flowed steadily inward under the electric-lighted awning, which extended the welcome of the hospitable house to the very curb.

Thanks to Myra Van Vetter, whose tiring was always of the most leisurely, the Elliots were fashionably late; and the elderly man, with the hesitant air accentuated by the unwonted dress-coat, had much ado to win through the throng in the drawing-rooms with his charges. His greeting to the hostess was sincere rather than well-turned in its phrasing; but Mrs. Calmaine was sweetly gracious.

"So glad to see you, Stephen," she protested; "the old friends can never be spared, you know." She shook hands with unaffected cordiality, and her tactful use of the elderly man's Christian name went far toward effacing the afflictive dress-coat. "Miss Van Vetter, you are quite radiant to-night. You spoil all one's ideals of Quaker demureness."

"Oh, Myra's demure enough, only you have to be her country cousin to find it out," put in Connie maliciously; and when her father and Miss Van Vetter had made room for later comers, she waited for another word with the hostess.

"Just a hint, before I'm submerged," she began, when her opportunity came. "I'm unattached, and particularly good-natured and docile to-night. Make use of me just as you would of Delia or Bessie. You've everybody here, as usual, and if I can help you amuse people"--

"Thank you, Connie, dear; that is very sweet of you. There are people here to-night who seem not to belong to any one. Here comes one of them now."

Constance looked and saw a young man making his way toward them; a soldierly figure, with square shoulders and the easy bearing of one who has lived much in the open; but with a face which was rather thoughtful than strong, though its lines were well masked under a close-trimmed beard and virile mustaches. She recognized her unintroduced acquaintance of the theatre; and a minute or two afterward, when Mrs. Calmaine would have presented the new-comer, Miss Elliott had disappeared.

"Let's sit down here, Teddy; this is as good a place as any. You poor boy! it bores you dreadfully, doesn't it? How trying it must be to be *blase* at--shall I say twenty? or is it twenty-one?"

The dancing was two hours old, and Connie and the smooth-faced boy who stood for the hopes of the house of Calmaine were sitting out the intermission on a broad step of the main stair.

"Oh, I'm young, but I'll outgrow that," rejoined the youth tolerantly. "All the same, you needn't bully me because you've a month or two the advantage. Shall I go and get you something to eat, or drink?"

"No, thank you, Teddy; I'm neither hungry nor thirsty. But you might give me the recipe for being good-natured when people make game of you."

"Yes; I think I see myself giving you points on that," said the boy, with frank admiration in his eyes. "I'm not running an angel-school just at present."

Connie's blush was reproachful. "You ridiculous boy!" she retorted. "You'll be making love to me next, just the same as if we hadn't known each other all our lives. Do you talk that way to other girls? or are you only practicing on me so that you can?"

Teddy Calmaine shook his head. "There isn't anybody else," he asserted, with mock earnestness. "My celestial acquaintance is too limited. When the goddess goes, there are no half-goddesses to take her place."

Connie sniffed sympathetically, and then laughed at him. "You ought to have seen me yesterday, when poppa brought old Jack Hawley home with him. Poppa and Jack were partners in the 'Vesta,' and Mr. Hawley hadn't seen me since I was in pinafores. He called me 'little girl,' and wanted to know if I went to school, and how I was getting along!"

Young Calmaine made a dumb show of applause. "*O umbrae Pygmaeorum!* Why wasn't I there to see! But you mustn't be too hard on old Jack. Half the people here who don't know you think you're an escaped schoolgirl; I've heard 'em. That's why I took pity on you and"--

"Teddy Calmaine, go away and find me somebody to talk to; a grown man, if you please. You make me tired."

The boy got up with a quizzical grin on his smooth face. "I'll do it," he assented affably; "I'm no end good-natured, as you remarked a few minutes ago."

When he was gone Connie forgot him, and fell into a muse, with the sights and sounds of the crush for its motive. From her perch on the stair she could look down on the shifting scene in the wide entrance hall, and through the archway beyond she had a glimpse of the circling figures in the ball-room swaying rhythmically to the music. It was all very delightful and joyous, and she enjoyed it with a zest which was yet undulled by satiety. None the less, the lavishness of it oppressed her, and a vague protest, born of other sights and scenes sharply contrasted but no less familiar to the daughter of Stephen Elliott, began to shape itself in her heart. How much suffering a bare tithe of the wealth blazing here in jewels on fair hands and arms and necks would alleviate. And how many hungry mouths might be filled from the groaning tables in the supper-room.

Miss Elliott came out of her reverie reluctantly at the bidding of her late companion. Teddy Calmaine had obeyed her literally; and when she turned he was presenting the soldierly young man with the pointed beard and curling mustaches.

"Miss Elliott, this is Mr. Jeffard. You said you wanted a"--

"An ice, Teddy," she cut in, with a look which was meant to be obliterative. "But you needn't mind it now. Will you have half a stair-step, Mr. Jeffard?"

She made room for him, but he was mindful of his obligations.

"Not if you will give me this waltz."

She glanced at her card and looked up at him with a smile which was half pleading and half quizzical. "Must I?"

He laughed and sat down beside her. "There is no 'must' about it. I was hoping you would refuse."

"Oh, thank you."

"For your sake rather than my own," he hastened to add. "I am a wretched dancer."

"What a damaging admission!"

"Is it? Do you know, I had hoped you wouldn't take that view of it."

"I don't," she admitted, quite frankly. "We take it seriously, as we do most of our amusements, but it's a relic of barbarism. Once, when I was a very little girl, my father took me to see a Ute scalp-dance,--without the scalps, of course,--and--well, first impressions are apt to be lasting. I never see a ball-room in action without thinking of Fire-in-the-Snow and his capering braves."

Jeffard smiled at the conceit, but he spoke to the truism.

"I hope your first impressions of me won't be lasting," he ventured. "I think I was more than usually churlish last night."

She glanced up quickly. "There should be no 'last night' for us," she averred.

"Forgive me; you are quite right. But no matter what happens there always will be."

Her gaze lost itself among the circling figures beyond the archway, and the truth of the assertion drove itself home with a twinge of something like regret. But when she turned to him again there was unashamed frankness in the clear gray eyes.

"What poor minions the conventions have made us," she said. "Let us be primitive and admit that our acquaintance began last night. Does that help you?"

"It will help me very much, if you will let me try to efface the first impression."

"Does it need effacing?"

"I think it must. I was moody and half desperate."

He stopped, and she knew that he was waiting for some sign of encouragement. She looked away again, meaning not to give it. It is one of the little martyrdoms of sympathetic souls to invite confidences and thereby to suffer vicariously for the misdoings of the erring majority, and her burdens in this wise were many and heavy. Why should she go out of her way to add to them those of this man who ought to be abundantly able to carry his own? Thus the

unspoken question, and the answer came close upon the heels of it. But for her own curiosity,--impertinence, she had begun to call it,--the occasion would never have arisen.

"I am listening," she said, giving him his sign.

Being permitted to speak freely, Jeffard found himself suddenly tongue-tied. "I don't know what I ought to say,--if, indeed, I ought to say anything at all," he began. "I think I gave you to understand that the world had been using me rather hardly."

"And if you did?"

A palpitant couple, free of the waltz, came up the stair, and Jeffard rose to make way. When the breathless ones perched themselves on the landing above, he went on, standing on the step below her and leaning against the baluster.

"If I did, it was an implied untruth. It's a trite saying that the world is what we make it, and I am quite sure now that I have been making my part of it since I came to Denver. I'm not going to afflict you with the formula, but I shall feel better for having told you that I have torn it up and thrown it away."

"And you will write out another?"

"Beginning with to-morrow. I leave Denver in the morning."

"You are not going back?" She said it with a little tang of deprecation in the words.

His heart warmed to the small flash of friendly interest, and he smiled and shook his head. "No, that would never do--without the fortune, you know. I'm going to the mountains; with pick and shovel, if need be. I should have started to-night if I hadn't found Mrs. Calmaine's invitation. She has been very good to me in a social way, and I could do no less than come." He said it apologetically, as if the dip into the social pool on the eve of the new setting forth demanded an explanation.

She smiled up at him. "Does it need an apology? Are you sorry you came?"

"Sorry? It's the one wise thing I've done these four months. I shall always be glad--and thankful." It was on his tongue to say more; to dig the pit of confession still deeper, as one who, finding himself at the shrine of compassionate purity, would be assoilzied for all the wrong-doings and follies and stumblings of a misguided past; to say many things for which he had no shadow of warrant, and to which the self-contained young woman on the step before him could make no possible rejoinder; but the upcoming of the man whose name stood next on Connie's card saved him. A moment later he was taking his leave.

"Not going to break away now, are you, Jeffard?" said the fortunate one, helping Connie to rise.

"Yes; I must cut it short. I leave town in the morning. Miss Elliott, will you bid me Godspeed?"

She put her hand in his and said what was meet; and to the man who stood beside her the parting appeared to be neither more nor less than conventionally formal. But when Jeffard was free of the house and swinging along on his way cityward, the spirit of it made itself a name to live; and out of the God-speed and the kindly phrase of leavetaking the new-blown fire of good intention distilled a subtle liqueur of jubilation which sang in his veins like the true wine of rejuvenescence; so nearly may the alchemy of pure womanhood transmute sounding brass, or still baser metal, into the semblance of virgin gold.

So Jeffard went his way reflective, and while he mused the fire burned and he saw himself in his recent stumblings in the valley of dry bones as a thing apart. From the saner point of view it seemed incredible that he could ever have been the thrall of such an ignoble passion as that which had so lately despoiled him and sent him to tramp the streets like a hungry vagrant. As yet the lesson was but a few hours old, but the barrier it had thrown up between the insensate yesterday and the rational to-day seemed safely impassable. In the strength of reinstated reason, confidence returned; and close upon the heels of confidence, temerity. His reverie had led him past the corner where he should have turned westward, and when he took cognizance of his surroundings he was standing opposite the alley-way of the glass-eyed doors. He glanced at his watch. It was midnight. Twenty-four hours before, almost to the minute, he had been dragged irresistibly across the street and up the carpeted stair to the lair of the dementia-demon.

He looked up at the carefully shaded windows, and a sudden desire to prove himself came upon him. Not once since the first hot flashes of the fever had begun to quicken his pulse, had he been able to go and look on and return scathless. But was he not sane now? and was not the barrier well builded? If it were not--if it stood only upon the lack of opportunity--

He crossed the street and threaded the narrow alley, tramping steadily as one who goes into battle,—a battle which may be postponed, but which may by no means be evaded. The swing doors gave back under his hand, and a minute later he stood beside the table with the inlaid cards in its centre, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, and his breath coming in sharp little gasps.

It was a perilous moment for any son of Adam who has been once bitten by the dog of avarice gone mad. The run of luck was against the bank, and the piles of counters under the hands of the haggard ones girdling the table grew and multiplied with every turn of the cards. Jeffard's lips began to twitch, and the pupils of his eyes narrowed to two scintillant points. Slowly, and by almost imperceptible advances, his right hand crept from its covert, the fingers tightly clenched upon the small roll of bank-notes,—the Providential windfall which must provision any future argosy of endeavor.

The dealer ran the cards with monotonous precision, his hands moving like the pieces of a nicely adjusted mechanism. Jeffard's fingers unclosed and he stood staring down at the money in his palm as if the sight of it fascinated him. Then he turned quickly and tossed it across to the banker. "Reds and whites," he said; and the sound of his own voice jarred upon his nerves like the rasping of files in a saw-pit.

Two hours later, he was again standing on the narrow footway in the alley, with the swing doors winging to rest behind him. Two hours of frenzied excitement in the dubious battle with chance, and the day of penitence and its hopeful promise for the future were as if they had not been. Halfway across the street he turned and flung his clenched fist up at the shaded windows, but his tongue clave to his teeth and the curse turned to a groan with a sob at the end of it. And as he went his way, sodden with weariness, the words of a long-forgotten allegory were ringing knell-like in his ears:--

"When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh in dry places seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty and swept and garnished. Then goeth he and taketh with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first."



CHAPTER V

It was on the day following the dancing party at the Calmains' that Constance Elliott arrayed herself in a modest street dress, and ran down to the library where Miss Van Vetter was writing letters.

"You'd better change your mind, Myra, and come along with me. It'll do you good to see how the other half lives," she said coaxingly.

Miss Van Vetter calmly finished her sentence before she replied.

"Thank you, Connie; but I believe not. I know it is the proper fad nowadays to go slumming, but I can't do it; it's a matter of principle with me."

Connie's eyebrows arched in mild surprise. "That's a new one," she commented. "I've heard all kinds of excuses, but never that. How do you diagram it?"

"It is simple enough. One sees plenty of misery in the ordinary course of things without making a specialty of looking for it; and when you've done everything that your money and sympathy can do, it is only a single drop in the great ocean of human wretchedness, after all. More than that, you have added to the sum total of the world's suffering by just so much as the miseries of the others hurt you through your compassion."

"Myra, dear, if I didn't know that you are better than your theories, I should try to humble you. What will you do if the evil day ever comes to you?"

"Unload my woes upon some such angelic and charitable sister of mercy as you are, I suppose," rejoined Miss Van Vetter complacently. "But that doesn't make it necessary for me to go about and shed literal tears with those who weep, now. I prefer to do it by proxy." She took a gold piece from her purse and offered it to Constance. "Take this, and make some poor wretch comfortable for ten or fifteen minutes on my account."

Miss Elliott was not yet canonized, and she refused the contribution with an indignant little stamp of her foot. "Myra Van Vetter, you're worse than a heathen! I wouldn't touch your money with the tip of my finger; I'd be afraid it would burn me. I hope you'll learn for yourself some day what the cold shoulder of charity is--there!" And she swept out of the room with as much dignity as five-feet-one-and-a-half may compass upon extraordinary occasions.

Once on the other side of the library door, she laughed softly to herself and was instantly Connie the serene again.

"It does me a whole lot of good to boil over once in a while," she said, going out on the veranda. "Myra serves one beneficent end in the cosmogony in spite of herself: she's a perfect safety-valve for me. Tommie-e-e-e! O Tom! Are you out there?"

A ragged boy, sitting on the curb and shaking dice with a pair of pebbles, sprang up and ran to the gate. When the latch baffled him, as it usually did from the outside, he vaulted the fence and stood before her.

"Prompt as usual, aren't you, Tommie?"

"Ain't got nothin' else to do but to be promp'. Is it a basket, dis time, 'r wot?"

"It's a basket, and you'll find it in the kitchen."

Five minutes later the dwellers in the avenue might have seen a small procession headed townwards. Its component parts were a dainty little lady, walking very straight with her hands in the pockets of her jacket, and a ragged urchin bent sidewise against the weight of a capacious basket.

The street-car line was convenient, but Constance walked in deference to Tommie's convictions,--he objected to the car on the score of economy. "Wot's the use o' givin' a bloated corp'ration a nickel w'en a feller can mog along on his feets?" he had demanded, one day; and thereafter they walked.

What profits it to set down in measured phrase at what numbers in what streets the basket cover was lifted that afternoon? Doubtless, in that great day when the books shall be opened, it will be found that a faithful record has been kept, not only of the tumbler of jelly left with bedridden Mother M'Garrihan, the bottle of wine put into the hands of gaunt Tom Devins, who was slowly dying of lead-poisoning, and the more substantial viands spread out before the hungry children in drunken Owen David's shanty, but of all the other deeds of mercy that left a trail of thankful benisons in the wake of the small procession. Be it sufficient to say that the round was a long one, and that Constance spared neither herself nor her father's bank-account where she found misery with uplifted hands.

The basket had grown appreciably lighter, and Tommie's body was once more approaching the perpendicular, when the procession paused before an unswept stairway leading to the second story of a building fronting on one of the lower cross streets. Constance held out her hand for the basket, but the boy put it behind him.

"Wot's the matter with me?" he demanded.

"Nothing at all, Tommie. I only meant to save you a climb. The basket isn't heavy now, you know."

"S'posin' it ain't; ain't I hired to run this end o' the show? You jes' tell me where you want it put, an' that's right where I'm goin' to put it, an' not nowheres else."

She smiled and let him lead the way up the dusty stair. At a certain door near the end of the long upper corridor she signed to him to give her the basket. "Go to the head of the stairs and wait," she whispered. "I may want you."

When he was out of hearing she tapped on the door and went in. It was the interior of all others that made Constance want to cry. There was a sufficiency of garish furniture and tawdry knickknacks scattered about to show that it was not the dwelling-place of the desperately poor; but these were only the accessories to the picture of desolation and utter neglect having for its central figure the woman stretched out upon the bed. She was asleep, and her face was turned toward the light which struggled feebly through the unwashed window. Beauty there had been, and might be again, but not even the flush of health would efface the marks of Margaret Gannon's latest plunge into the chilling depths of human indifference. Connie tiptoed to the bedside and looked, and her heart swelled within her.

It had fallen out in this wise. On the Monday night Mademoiselle Angeline--known to her intimates as Mag Gannon--saw fuzzy little circles expand and contract around the gas-jets in the Bijou Theatre while she was walking through her part in the farce. Tuesday night the fuzzy circles became blurs; and the stage manager swore audibly when she faltered and missed the step in her specialty. On the Wednesday Mademoiselle Angeline disappeared from the Bijou altogether; and for three days she had lain helpless and suffering, seeing no human face until Constance came and ministered to her. And the pity of it was that while the fever wrought its torturous will upon her, delirium would not come to help her to forget that she was forgotten.

Constance had pieced out the pitiful story by fragments while she was dragging the woman back from the brink of the pit; and when all was said, she began to understand that a sick soul demands other remedies than drugs and dainties. Just what they were, or how they were to be applied, was another matter; but Constance grappled with the problem as ardently as if no one had ever before attacked it. In her later visits she always brought the conversation around to Margaret's future; and on the afternoon of the basket-procession, after she had made her patient eat and drink, she essayed once again to enlist the woman's will in her own behalf.

"It's no use of me trying, Miss Constance; I've got to go back when I'm fit. There ain't nothing else for the likes of me to do."

"How can you tell till you try? O Margaret, I wish you would try!"

A smile of hard-earned wisdom flitted across the face of the woman. "You know more than most of 'em," she said, "but you don't know it all. You can't, you see; you're so good the world puts on its gloves before it touches you. But for the likes of me, we get the bare hand, and we're playing in luck if it ain't made into a fist."

"You poor girl! It makes my heart ache to think what you must have gone through before you could learn to say a thing like that. But you must try; I can't let you go back to that awful place after what you've told me about it."

"Supposing I did try; there's only the one thing on earth I know how to do,--that's trim hats. Suppose you run your pretty feet off till you found me a place where I could work right. How long would it be before somebody would go to the missis, or the boss, or whoever it might be, and say, 'See here; you've got one of Pete Grim's Bijou women in there. That won't do.' And the night after, I'd be doing my specialty again, if I was that lucky to get on."

"But you could learn to do housework, or something of that kind, so you could keep out of the way of people who would remember you. You must have had some experience."

The invalid rocked her head on the pillow. "That'd be worse than the other. Somebody'd be dead sure to find out and tell; and then I'd be lucky if I got off without going to jail. And for the experience,--a minute ago you called me a girl, but I know you didn't mean it. How old do you think I am?"

Constance looked at the fever-burned face, and tried to make allowances for the ravages of disease. "I should say twenty-five," she replied, "only you talk as if you might be older."

"I'll be eighteen next June, if I'd happen to live that long," said Margaret; and Constance went home a few minutes

later with a new pain in her heart, born of the simple statement.

At the gate she took the empty basket and paid the boy. "That's all for to-day, but I want to give you some more work," she said. "Every morning, and every noon, and every night, until I tell you to stop, I want you to go up to that last place and ask Margaret Gannon if there is anything you can do for her. And if she says yes, you do it; and if it's too big for you to do, you come right up here after me. Will you do all that?"

"Will I? Will a yaller dorg eat his supper w'en he's hungry? You're jes' dead right I'll do it. An' I'll be yere to-morrer afternoon, promp'."

All of which was well enough in its way, but the problem was yet unsolved, and Constance had to draw heavily on her reserves of cheerfulness to be able to make an accordant one of four when Richard Bartrow called that evening after dinner.



CHAPTER VI

DURING the week following the day of repentance and backsliding, Jeffard's regression down the inclined plane became an accelerated rush. In that interval he parted with his watch and his surveying instruments, and made a beginning on his surplus clothing. It was a measure of the velocity of the descent that the watch, with the transit and level, brought him no more than seven knife-and-fork meals and an occasional luncheon. But the clothing being transmutable in smaller installments, did rather better.

Before the week was out, a bachelor's apartment in a respectable locality became an incongruous superfluity; and having by no means reached the philosophical level in his descent, he hid himself from all comers in a dubious neighborhood below Larimer Street.

The second week brought sharper misery than the first, since it enforced the pitiful shifts of vagrancy before he could acquire the spirit-breaking experience which makes them tolerable. But before many days the poor remnants of pride and self-respect gave up the unequal struggle, leaving him to his own devices; after which he soon learned how to keep an open and unbalanced meal-and-cigar account with his few unmercenary friends.

In a short time, however, the friendly tables began to grow scarce. Bartrow went back to his mine, and with his going the doors of the St. James's dining-room opened no more to the proletariat. Then came the return of John Pettigrew, whose hospitality was as boundless as the range whereon his herds grazed, and who claimed kinship with Jeffard because both chanced to be transplanted New Englanders. While Pettigrew stayed in Denver, Jeffard lived on the fat of the land, eating at his friend's table at the Albany, and gambling with the ranchman's money at odd hours of the day and night. But after Pettigrew left there was another lean interval, and Jeffard grew haggard and ran his weight down at the rate of a pound a day.

In the midst of this came a spasm of the reformatory sort, born of a passing glimpse of Stephen Elliott's daughter on one of her charitable expeditions. The incident brought him face to face with a fact which had been unconsciously lending desperation to despair. Now that the discovery could be no more than an added twist of the thumbscrew, he began to realize that he had found in the person of the sweet-faced young woman with the far-seeing eyes the Heaven-born alchemist who could, if she so willed, transmute the flinty perverseness of him into plastic wax, shaping it after her own ideals; that it was the unacknowledged beginning of love which had found wings for the short-lived flight of higher hopes and more worthy aspirations. The day of fasting and penitence had set his feet in the way leading to reinstatement in his own good opinion; but the meeting with Constance was answerable for a worthier prompting,—a perfervid determination to fight his way back to better things for righteousness' sake, knowing that no otherwise could he hope to stand with her on the Mount of Benediction.

It was against this anointing of grace that he had sinned; and it was in remorseful memory of it that he brushed his clothes, put on an ill-fitting air of respectability, and tramped the streets in a fruitless search for employment until he was ready to drop from fatigue and hunger. Nothing came of it. The great public, and notably the employing minority of it, is no mean physiognomist; and the gambler carries his hall-mark no less than the profligate or the drunkard.

At the close of one of these days of disheartenment, a day wherein a single cup of coffee had been made to stand sponsor for breakfast, luncheon, and dinner, Jeffard saw a familiar figure standing at the counter in one of the newspaper offices. Knowing his man, Jeffard stopped on the sidewalk and waited. If Lansdale had but the price of a single meal in his pocket, two men would share that meal that night.

There were two entrances to the newspaper office, and Jeffard watched beaglewise lest his chance of breaking his fast should vanish while he tarried. Presently Lansdale came out, and Jeffard fell upon him before he could latch the door.

"Salaam! Jeffard, my son," said the outcomer. "I saw you waiting for me. How goes the world-old struggle for existence?"

"Don't remind me of it, Lansdale; do you happen to have the price of a meal about you?"

Lansdale smiled, and gravely tucking Jeffard's arm under his own, steered diagonally across the street toward the open doors of a cafe.

"Now that is what our forefathers called Providence, and what we, being so much wiser in our own generation, call luck," he declared. "I had just got a check out of the post-office for a bit of work sent months ago to an editor whose name is unchanging. When you saw me I was closing a negotiation, by the terms of which the cashier of the 'Coloradoan' becomes my banker. Behold, now, the mysteries of—shall we say Providence? At any time within the six months I would

have sworn that the opportune moment for the arrival of this bit of money-paper had come; nevertheless Providence, and the slow-geared editor, get it here just in time to save two men from going to bed supperless. Why don't you say something?"

They were at the door of the cafe, and Jeffard gripped his companion's arm and thrust him in. "Can't you see that I'm too damned hungry to talk?" he demanded savagely; and Lansdale wisely held his peace until the barbarian in his guest had been appeased.

When the soup and fish had disappeared, Jeffard was ashamed of himself, and said as much.

"You mustn't mind what I said," he began, by way of making amends. "I used to think I was a civilized being, but, God help me, Lansdale, I'm not! When I've gone without food for twenty-four hours on end, I'm nothing more or less than a hungry savage."

Lansdale smiled intelligence. "I know the taste of it, and it's bad medicine--for the soul as well as for the body," he rejoined. "There is reason to suspect that Shakespeare never went hungry, else he wouldn't have said, 'Sweet are the uses of adversity.' They're not sweet; they're damnably bitter. A man may come forth of the winepress with bones unbroken and insight sharpened to the puncturing point; but his capacity for evil will be increased in just proportion."

"I don't want to believe that," said Jeffard, whose despair was not yet proof against a good meal in good company.

"You needn't, but it's true. The necessities breed a certain familiarity with evil. Moral metes and bounds have a trick of disappearing in the day of physical dearth. When hunger has driven a man over the ethical boundary a few times, the crossing becomes easy; and when hunger drops the whip, inclination is very likely to take it up."

Jeffard laughed. "The words of Agur the son of Jakeh," he quoted. "I believe you'd moralize if you were going to be hanged, Lansdale."

"Perhaps I should. What possible contingency could offer better opportunities? And am I not going to be hanged--or choked, which amounts to the same thing?"

Jeffard looked up quickly and saw what the myopia of hunger had hitherto obscured: that his companion's smooth-shaven face seemed gaunter than usual, and that his hands were unsteady when he lifted the knife and fork.

"Colorado isn't helping you, then," he said.

"No; but it isn't altogether Colorado's fault. The Boston medicine man said change of climate, plenty of outdoor indolence, nutritious food at stated intervals. I have all any one could ask of the first, and as little of either of the others as may be."

"But you do good work, Lansdale. I've always believed you could make it win, in time. Hasn't the time come yet?"

"No. What I can do easiest would bring bread and meat, if I could sell it; but a literary hack-writer has no business in Colorado--or anywhere else outside of the literary centres. In Boston I could always find an odd job of reviewing, or space-writing, or something that would serve to keep body and soul together; but here they won't have me even in the newspapers."

"Overcrowded, I suppose, like everything else in this cursed country."

"That's the alleged reason; but the fact is that I'm not a journalist. Your thoroughbred newspaper man has more or less contempt for a fellow who can't or won't write journalese."

They had attained to the dessert, and the waiter was opening a modest bottle of claret for them. Jeffard turned his wineglass down.

"What! Is that the way you flout a man's hospitality?" demanded Lansdale, in mock displeasure.

"No; I don't mean to do that. But I'm drunken with feasting now, and if I put wine into me I shall pawn the coat off my back before midnight for a stake to play with."

Lansdale smiled. "I'll see that you don't have to. Turn up your glass."

But Jeffard was obstinate, and sat munching raisins while Lansdale sipped his wine. When the waiter brought the cigars he came out of his reverie to say, "You want to live, don't you, Lansdale?"

The potential man of letters took time to think about it. "I suppose I do; else I shouldn't be starving to death in Denver," he admitted finally.

"And there is nothing but the lack of a little ready money that keeps you from giving the Boston doctor's prescription a fair trial. If I had the money I believe I'd change places with you; that is, I'd give you the money in exchange for your good chance of being able to shuffle off mortality without the help of extraneous means. I think I've had enough of it."

"Do you? That proves how little a man has learned when he thinks he has arrived. Now pull yourself together, and tell me what you really would do if you became suddenly rich."

"How rich?"

"Oh, make it a comfortable figure; say eight or ten thousand a month for an income."

"I'd do what I said I should,--change places with you; only I suppose that wouldn't be possible. Failing that"--He pondered over it for a moment, balancing his fork on the edge of his plate the while. "A few weeks ago I should have mapped out a future worth talking about. I had a lucid day, in which the things that make for ambition of the better sort had their inning. If you had asked me such a question then, I should doubtless have told you that I should try to realize the ideals of other days; to walk uprightly, and to hold great wealth as it should be held--in trust for the good of one's kind; to win the love of the ideal woman, perhaps; and, having won it, to sit at her feet until I had learned how to be God's almoner."

Lansdale's smile was not wholly cynical. "But now?" he queried.

"But now I know my own limitations. I think I should go back to the old farm in the Berkshire Hills, and try to make it earn me bread and meat."

"But you couldn't spend ten thousand a month on an abandoned farm, though I grant you it would be a pretty expensive luxury. What would you do with the lave of it?"

Jeffard's lips tightened, and his face was not pleasant to look upon. "I'd let it go on accumulating, piling up and up till there was no shadow of possibility that I should ever again come to know what it means to be without money. And even then I should know I could never get enough," he added.

This time Lansdale's smile was of incredulity. "Let me prophesy," he suggested. "When your lucky day overtakes you, you will do none of these things. Jeffard the fool may be heard of wherever the Associated Press has a wire or a correspondent; but Jeffard the miser will never exist outside of your own unbalanced imagination. Let's go out and walk. It's fervidly close in here."

Arm in arm they paced the streets until nearly midnight, talking of things practical and impracticable, and keeping well out of the present in either the past or the future. When Lansdale said good-night, he stuffed a bank-note into Jeffard's pocket.

"It's only a loan," he protested, when Jeffard would have made him take it back. "And there are no conditions. You can go and play with it, if that's what you'd rather do."

The suggestion was unfortunate, though possibly the result would have been the same in any event. Five minutes after parting from Lansdale, Jeffard had taken his place in the silent group around the table in the upper room; and by the time the pile of counters under his hand had increased to double the amount of Lansdale's gift, he was oblivious to everything save the one potent fact--that after so many reverses his luck had turned at last.

Five hundred and odd dollars he had at one time in that eventful sitting, and his neighbor across the corner of the table, a grizzled miner with the jaw of a pugilist and eyes that had a trick of softening like a woman's, had warned him by winks, nods, and sundry kicks under the table to stop. Jeffard scowled his resentment of the interference and played on, losing steadily until his capital had shrunk to fifty dollars. Then the miner rose up in his place, reached across, and gave Jeffard an open-handed buffet that nearly knocked him out of his chair.

"Dad blame you!" he roared; "I'll learn you how to spile my play! Stan' up and fight it out like a man!"

The game stopped at once. The dealer held his hand, and the banker reached for his revolver.

"You two gen'lemen cash in and get out o' here," he commanded. "This is a gen'leman's game, and we don't run no shootin'-gallery--leastwise, not unless I have to take a hand in it. Pass in your chips."

They both obeyed; the miner with maledictory reluctance, and Jeffard in a tremulous frenzy of wrath. When they reached the sidewalk, Jeffard flung himself savagely upon his assailant, only to learn that abstinence is a poor trainer, and that he was little better than a lay-figure in the grasp of the square-jawed one with the melting eyes. The big man

thrust him into a corner and held him there until he listened to reason.

"You blamed idjit! you hain't got sense enough to go in when it rains! Hold still, 'r I'll bump your head ag'inst the wall! As I was sayin', you don't know enough to pound sand. Every single time I've been in this dive, you've been here, too, a-blowin' yourself like you had a wad as big as a feather bed, and you know danged well you hain't got nothin'. And you wouldn't 'a' kep' a dern cent to-night, if I hadn't thumped you and raised a row. Now you go and hunt you a place to sleep while you've got dust enough to pay for it; and don't you come round here ag'in till you've put a whole grub-stake inside of you. Savez?"

CHAPTER VII

FROM the beginning of the cannibalistic stage of the journey down the inclined plane, Jeffard had determined that, come what might, he would keep enough of his wardrobe to enable him to present an outward appearance of respectability. With a vague premonition of the not improbable end of the journey he recoiled at the thought of figuring before a coroner's jury as a common vagrant.

This resolution, however, like all others of a prideful nature, went down before the renewed assaults of the allies, hunger and dementia. Whereby it speedily came to pass that he retained only the garments he stood in, and these soon became shabby and wayworn. Since, in his own estimation, if not in that of others, the clothes do make the man to a very considerable extent, Jeffard gradually withdrew from his former lounging-places, confining himself to the less critical region below Larimer Street during the day, and avoiding as much as possible the haunts of his former associates at all hours.

It was for this cause that Bartrow, on his return from Chaffee County, was unable to find Jeffard. Meeting Lansdale when the search had become unhelpful, the large-hearted man of the altitudes lamented his failure after his own peculiar fashion.

"When was it you saw him last?" he inquired of the transplanted Bostonian.

"It was about a week ago. To be exact, it was a week Tuesday. I remember because we dined together that evening."

"Now doesn't that beat the band? Here I've gone and got him a soft snap up on the range--good pay, and little or nothing to do--and he's got to go and drop out like a monte man's little joker. It's enough to make a man swear continuous!"

"I don't think he would have gone with you," Lansdale ventured.

"Wouldn't, eh? If I can find him I'll take him by the neck and make him go; savez? How do you put it up? Runaway? or a pile of bones out on the prairie somewhere?"

"It's hard to say. Jeffard's a queer combination of good and not so good,--like a few others of us,--and just now the negative part is on top. He was pretty low the night we were together, though when we separated I thought he was taking himself a little less seriously."

"Didn't talk about getting the drop on himself, or anything like that?"

"N--no, not in a way to leave the impression that he was in any immediate danger of doing such a thing."

Bartrow chewed the end of his cigar reflectively. "Hasn't taken to quizzing the world through the bottom of a whiskey-glass?"

"No, I should say not. Thus far, I think he has but the one devil."

"And that's the 'tiger,' of course. I knew about that; I've known it all along. The Lord forgive me! I don't know but I was the ring-master in that show. You know we chased around a good deal together, along at the first, and it's as likely as not I showed him a whole lot of things he'd better not have seen."

The half-cynical smile lightened upon Lansdale's grave face. "That is one of my criticisms of Western manners," he commented. "When you get hold of a stranger, you welcome him with open arms--and proceed to regale him with a near-hand view of the back yards and cesspools. And then you swear piteously when he goes back East and tells his friends what an abandoned lot you are."

Bartrow took the thrust good-naturedly, as he did most of his chastenings. "That's right; that's just about what we do. But you've been here long enough now to know that it's meant for hospitality. It's a way we've got into of taking it for granted that people come out here more to see the sights than for any other purpose."

"Oh, it's good of you--I don't deny that; only it's a little rough on the new-comer, sometimes. Take Jeffard's case, for example. He came to Denver with good introductions; I know, for I saw some of them. But a man in a strange city doesn't often go about presenting his social credentials. What he does is to make a few haphazard acquaintances, and let them set the pace for him. That is what Jeffard did, and I'll venture to say there have been nine evil doors open to him to one good one. You've known him longer than any one else--how many times have you invited him to spend a rational evening with you in the company of respectable people?"

"Good Lord, Lansdale; for Heaven's sake don't begin to open up that lead! We're all miserable sinners, and I'm the medicine-man of the tribe. I never asked the poor devil to go visiting with me but once, and that was after he was down."

"And then he wouldn't go, as a matter of course. But that is neither here nor there. I'll find him for you, if I can, and leave word for you at the St. James."

"You're a brick, Lansdale; that's about what you are. I'll get square with you some day. By the way, can't you come up to Steve Elliott's with me this evening and meet some good people?"

Lansdale laughed outright. "You're a good fellow, Bartrow, but you're no diplomat. When I go a-fishing into your mentality you'll never see the hook. Make my apologies to your friends, and tell them I'm an invalid."

And Bartrow, being densely practical, and so proof against irony of whatsoever calibre, actually did so that evening when he called upon Miss Elliott and her cousin.

"But your friend wasn't promised to us, Mr. Bartrow," objected Miss Van Vetter. "Why should he send excuses?"

"I'm blessed if I know," said honest Dick, looking innocently from one to the other of them. "But that's what he told me to do, and I've done it."

Constance laughed softly. "You're too good for any use, Dick. He was making game of you. Tell us how he came to say it."

Bartrow did that, also; and the two young women laughed in chorus.

"After you've had your fun out of it I wish you'd tell me, so I can laugh too," he said. "I can't see where the joke comes in, myself."

Constance enlightened him. "There isn't any joke--only this: he had just been scolding you about your inhospitality, and then you turn on him and ask him to go calling with you. Of course, he couldn't accept, then; it would have been like inviting himself."

"Well, what of it? I don't see why he shouldn't invite himself, if he felt like it. He's a rattling good fellow." And from thence the talk drifted easily to Jeffard, who was, or who had been, another good fellow.

At the mention of Jeffard's name, Constance borrowed the mask of disinterest, and laid her commands on Bartrow. "Tell us about him," she said.

"There isn't much to tell. He came here from somewhere back East, got into bad company, lost his money, and now he's disappeared."

"How did he lose his money?" Constance would have asked the question, but her cousin forestalled her.

"Gambled it," quoth Bartrow placidly.

Constance looked sorry, and Miss Van Vetter was plainly shocked. "How very dreadful!" said the latter. "Did he lose much?"

"Oh, no; you couldn't call it much--only a few thousands, I believe. But then, you see, it was his stake; it was all he had, and he couldn't afford to give it up. And now he has gone and hid out somewhere just when I have found a place for him. It makes me very weary."

"Can't you find any trace of him?" queried Constance. "That is singular. I should think he would have left his address."

Bartrow grinned. "Well, hardly. Man don't leave his address when he wants to drop out. That's the one thing he's pretty sure to take with him. But we'll run him down yet, if he's on top of earth. Lansdale has seen more of him lately than I have, and he is taking a hand. He and Jeffard used to flock together a good deal when the shoe was on the other foot."

Miss Van Vetter looked mystified; and Bartrow deemed it a matter for self-congratulation that he was able to comprehend the query in her eyes without having it hurled at him in so many words.

"That was while Jeffard had money, and Lansdale was trying to starve himself to death," he explained. "You see, Lansdale is a queer fish in some ways. When he's down he won't let anybody touch him on his money side, so we used to work all kinds of schemes to keep him going. Jeffard would study them up, and I'd help him steer them."

This was practical benevolence, and Connie's interest bestirred itself in its charitable part. "What were some of the schemes?" she asked.

"Oh, there were a lot of them. Lansdale can see farther into a millstone than most people, and we had to invent new ones as we went along. One time, Jeffard bought a common, every-day sort of a pocketbook, and rumbled it up and tramped on it till it looked as if it might have come across the plains in Fifty-nine. Then he put a twenty-dollar bill and some loose silver in it, and dropped it on the sidewalk where I was walking Lansdale up and down for his health. After a while, when he'd actually stumbled over it four or five times, Lansdale saw the wallet and picked it up. Right there the scheme nearly fell down. You see, he was going to make me take charge of it while he advertised it. I got out of it, somehow, but I don't believe he used a nickel of the money for a month."

Connie clapped her hands softly. "That was fine! Tell us some more."

"The next one was better, and it worked like a charm. Lansdale writes things for the papers, only the editors here wouldn't buy any of his work"--

"Why not?" interrupted Miss Van Vetter.

"I don't know; because it was too good, I guess. Anyway, they wouldn't buy it, so Jeffard went to work on that lead. I took him around and introduced him to Kershaw of the 'Coloradoan,' and he made Kershaw take fifty dollars on deposit, and got him to promise to accept some of Lansdale's stories. Kershaw kicked like the deuce--like the mischief, and didn't want to do it; but we bullied him, and then I got Lansdale to send him some stuff."

"Mr. Jeffard is an artist in schemes, and I envy him," said Connie. "What happened to that one?"

"Kershaw upset it by not printing the stuff. Of course, Lansdale watched the 'Coloradoan,' and when he found he wasn't in it, he wouldn't send any more. We caught him the next time, though, for something worth while."

"How was that?" It was Miss Van Vetter who asked the question; and Bartrow made a strenuous effort to evade the frontier idiom which stood ready to trip him at every turn when Myra Van Vetter's poised gaze rested upon him.

"Why, I happen to have a played-out--er--that is, a sort of no-account mine up in Clear Creek, and I made Lansdale believe I was the resident agent for the property, authorized to get up a descriptive prospectus. He took the job of writing it, and never once tumbled to the racket--that is, he never suspected that we were working him for a--oh, good Lord, why can't I talk plain English!--you know what I mean; he thought it was all straight. Well, he turned in the copy, and we paid him as much as he'd stand; but he has just about worried the life out of me ever since, trying to get to read proof on that prospectus. That one was Jeffard's idea, too, but I made him let me in on the assessment."

Before Miss Van Vetter could inquire what the "assessment" was, Stephen Elliott came in and the talk became general. An hour later, when Bartrow took his leave, Constance went to the door with him.

"Don't you really know where Mr. Jeffard is, Dick?" she asked.

Something in her tone set him upon the right track. "No; do you?"

"I know that he left Denver quite a while ago; about the time you were down last."

"How do you know it?"

"He told me he was going."

"The mischief he did! Where did you get acquainted with him?"

"At Mrs. Calmaine's."

Honest Dick ground his heel into the door-mat and thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his overcoat. What was in his mind came out shorn of euphemism.

"Say, Connie, do you care anything about him?"

"What a question!" she retorted, not pretending to misunderstand its pointing. "I've met him only once--or twice, I should say, though I didn't even know his name the first time."

"What did he tell you? about his going away, I mean."

"He said--but you've no right to ask me, Dick. It wasn't exactly a confidence, but"--

"Yes, I have a right to ask; he was my friend a good while before he was yours. Tell me what he said."

"He gave me to understand that things hadn't been going quite right with him, and he said he was going to the mountains to--to try to make another start."

Bartrow tucked Connie's arm under his own and walked her up and down the long veranda twice before he could bring himself to say the thing that was.

"He didn't go, Connie; he's here now, if he hasn't gone out on the prairie somewhere and taken a pot shot at himself. Lansdale saw him only a week or so ago."

"Oh, Dick!"

"It's tough, isn't it?" He stood on the step and buttoned his coat. "But I'm glad you know him--or at least, know who he is. If you should happen to run across him in any of your charity trips, just set Tommie on him and wire me if you find out where he burrows."

"You said you had found a place for him. Will it keep?"

"I'll try to hold it open for him, and if you wire, I'll come down and tackle him. He's too good a fellow to turn down in his little day of witlessness. Good-night; and good-by--for a week or so. I've got to go back on the morning train."



CHAPTER VIII

CONTRARY to the doctor's prophecy, Margaret Gannon's progress toward recovery was slow and rather uncertain. Constance professed to be sorry, but in her heart she was thankful, since the hesitant convalescence gave her time to try many expedients pointing toward the moral rehabilitation of her protegee. Ignoring Margaret's bodeful prediction, Constance coursed far and wide, quartering the domestic field diligently; but inasmuch as she was careful in each instance to state the exact truth, each endeavor was but the introduction to another failure.

"Why, Constance Elliott! The idea of your proposing such a thing to me!" said Mrs. Calmaine, upon whose motherly good sense Connie had leaned from childhood. "That is what comes of a girl growing up as you have without a mother to watch over her. Can't you understand how dreadful it is for you to mix up in such things? You can't touch pitch and not be defiled."

Connie was moved, first to tears, and presently to indignation.

"No, I can't understand anything of the kind," she retorted. "It's your privilege not to take Margaret if you don't want her; but it's mine to help her, if I can. And I mean to do it in spite of all the cruel prejudice in the world!"

"You talk like a foolish child, Connie. I can tell you beforehand that you won't succeed in getting the woman into any respectable household in Denver, unless you do it under false pretenses."

"So much the worse for our Christianity, then," Connie asserted stoutly. "If people won't help, they'll have it to answer to One who wasn't afraid to take a much worse woman by the hand. That's all I have to say about it."

Mrs. Calmaine smiled benignantly. She had daughters of her own, and knew how to make allowances for youthful enthusiasm.

"You will get over it, after a while, and then you'll see how foolish it is to try to reform the world single-handed," she rejoined. "You might as well try to move Pike's Peak as to think you can remodel society after your own enthusiastic notions. And when the reflective after-time comes, you'll be glad that society didn't let you make a martyr of yourself at its expense."

"And, Connie, dear; there is another side of the question which you should consider," she continued, going to the door with her visitor. "It's this: since society as a unit insists upon having this particular kind of reformative work turned over to organizations designed for the purpose, there must be a sufficient reason for it. You are not wiser than the aggregated wisdom of the civilized centuries."

Constance went her way, silenced, but by no means convinced; and she added three more failures to her long list before going home to luncheon. In the afternoon, she laid hold of her courage yet once again, and went to her minister, good Dr. Launceston, pastor of St. Cyril's-in-the-Desert. Here, indeed, she found sympathy without stint, but it was hopelessly void of practical suggestion.

"It is certainly most pitiful, Miss Elliott, pitiful to a degree; but I really don't see what is to be done. Had you any plan in view that, ah"--

"It is because all my plans have come to grief that I am here," said Connie.

"Dear, dear! and those cases are so very hard to deal with. Now, if it were a question of money, I dare say we could manage it quite easily."

Constance had some very clear ideas on reformative subjects, and one of them was that it was not less culpable to pauperize than to ignore.

"It isn't that," she made haste to say. "I could get money easily enough, but Margaret wouldn't take it. If she would, I should have small hopes for her."

"No," rejoined the clergyman reflectively; "you are quite right. It is not a problem to be solved by money. The young woman must be given a chance to win her way back to respectability by her own efforts. Do I understand that she is willing to try if the opportunity should present itself?"

"I'm afraid I can't say that she is--not without reservation," Connie admitted. "You see, she knows the cruel side of the world; and she is quite sure that any effort she might make would end in defeat and deeper disgrace."

"A very natural apprehension, and one for which there are only too good grounds," said the clergyman sadly. "We

are compassionate and charitable in the aggregate, but as individuals I fear we are very unmerciful. Had you thought of trying to send her to one of our institutional homes in the East? I might possibly be able to make such representations as would"--

Constance shook her head. "Margaret is a Roman Catholic, and I suggested the House of the Good Shepherd in one of our earlier talks. She fought the idea desperately, and I don't know that I blame her. She is just a woman like other women, and I believe she would gladly undertake an honest woman's work in the world; but that isn't saying she'd be willing to become a lay-sister."

"No, I suppose not; I quite agree with you. But what else can you do for her?"

"I don't know, Doctor Launceston,--oh, I don't know! But I'll never give up till I've done something."

In the momentary afflatus of which fine determination Constance went her way again, not wholly comfortless this time, but apparently quite as far from the solution of the problem as when she had latched Mrs. Calmaine's gate behind her.

As for the clergyman, the precious fervor of the young enthusiast left a spark in his heart which burst into flame on the following Sunday morning, when he preached a stirring sermon from the text, "Who is my neighbor?" to the decorous and well-fed congregation of St. Cyril's-in-the-Desert.

Leaving the rectory, Constance postponed the quest for that afternoon and went to pay her daily visit to Margaret. On the way downtown a happy thought came to her, and she welcomed it as an inspiration, setting it to work as soon as she had put the convalescent's room in order.

"You are feeling better to-day, aren't you, Margaret?" she began.

"Yes. I'm thinking I'll be able to go to work again before long; only Pete Grim mightn't have no use for me."

Constance brought the hair-brush, and letting Margaret's luxuriant hair fall in heavy masses over the back of the chair, began another of her ministries of service.

"Do you really want to go back to the Bijou?" she asked, knowing well enough what the answer would be.

"You know you needn't to ask that; it's just Pete Grim's place or something worse. I can't do no different"--she paused and the fingers of her clasped hands worked nervously--"and you can't help it, Miss Constance. I know you've been trying and worrying; but it ain't no use."

Connie did not find words to reply at once, but after a little she said: "Tell me more about your old home, Margaret."

"I've told you all there was to tell, many's the time since you found me with the fever."

"Let me see if I can remember it. You said your father was the village blacksmith, and that you used to sit in the shop and watch the sparks fly from the anvil as he worked. And when his day's work was done, he would take you on his shoulder and carry you home to your mother, who called you her pretty colleen, and loved you because you were the only girl. And then"--

"Oh, *don't!*" There was sharp anguish in the cry, and Margaret covered her eyes with her hands as if to shut out the picture. Constance waited until she thought she had given the seed time to germinate. Then she went on.

"And when you left home they mourned for you, not as one dead, but as one living and still beloved; and as long as they could keep track of you they begged you to come back to them. Margaret, won't you go?"

Margaret shook her head in passionate negation. "I can't--*I can't!* that's the one thing I can't do! Didn't I bring them shame enough and misery enough in the one day? and will I be going back to stir it all up again? having the people say, 'There's Pat Gannon's girl come back; she that went to the bad and broke her mother's heart.' Indeed, I'll not do that, Miss Constance, though the saints and the holy angels'll tell you I'd do anything else you'd ask."

This was Connie's happy thought; to induce Margaret to go back to her parents. When it proved to be but another rope of sand, she allowed it one sigh and changed front so cheerfully that Margaret never knew the cost of the effort.

"Then we must try something else," she insisted. "I'll never let you go back to the theatre--that's settled. You told me once you could trim hats. Have you ever done any other kind of sewing?"

Margaret knelt before her trunk and threw out an armful of her stage finery. "I made them," she said.

Constance examined the work critically. It was good, and she took courage. "That is our way out of the trouble,

Margaret. Why didn't we think of it before? When you are well enough, I'll get you a sewing-machine and find you all the work you can do."

Margaret went to the window and stood there so long that Constance began to tremble lest the battle were going evilward at the last moment. The fear was groundless, as she found out when the girl came back to kneel and cry silently with her face in Connie's lap.

"It isn't so much the love of you," she sobbed; "it's the knowing that somebody cares whether the likes of me goes straight to the devil or not. And never so much as a word about behaving myself, or confessing to the priest, or anything. Miss Constance,"--this with uplifted face, grown suddenly beautiful and glorified in the outshining of penitence,--"the devil may fly away with me,--he did that same one day,--but if he does, I'll not live to leave him have the good of it. I promise you that."

"I can trust you," said Constance; and she took her leave presently, wondering how the many-sided world could so unify itself in its merciless condemnation of the Magdalenes.

When she had closed Margaret's door behind her and was halfway to the stair, she heard sounds as of a scuffle coming from a corridor intersecting the main hallway at the landing. Her first impulse was to retreat to Margaret Gannon's room; but when she recognized Tommie's voice uplifted in alternate plea and imprecation, she went forward quickly. At the turn she met a gaunt, unshaven man leading Tommie by the ear, and her indignation slipped the leash without a thought of consequences.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself to abuse a child like that!" she began; and then two things happened: Jeffard released the boy, and Constance recognized in the gaunt figure the wreck of the man whom she had bidden God-speed on the stair at the Calmaine dancing party.

Jeffard flattened himself against the wall, bowed low, and was about to apologize, when Tommie, scenting an accusation, proceeded to vindicate himself by exploding a veritable bomb of consternation between the two.

"I warn't doin' ary single thing, Miss Constance, 'ceptin' jest wot you telled me to do. I caught on to his nibs down on de street an' follered him up yere; an' w'en I was takin' a squint t'rough de keyhole, jest to make sure, he outs an' nabs me."

For one dreadful instant Connie thought she must scream and run away. Then her wits came back, and she saw that deliverance could come only through swift confession.

"Tommie," she said hastily, "run down and wait for me on the sidewalk." And then to Jeffard: "The poor boy wasn't to blame; he was doing just what he had been told to do, and you have a right to ask--to--to know"--She stopped in pitiable embarrassment, and Jeffard flung himself into the breach with chivalric tact.

"Not another word, Miss Elliott, I implore you. It isn't the first time I have been taken for my double, and in broad daylight at that. May I go down and make my peace with the boy?"

Constance was too greatly perturbed not to catch gratefully at the chance to escape, and she made use of it while Jeffard was talking to Tommie at the foot of the stair. Taking Constance's nod and smile in passing as tokens of amity, the urchin allowed himself to be placated; and when Jeffard went back to his room he knew all that Tommie could tell him about Miss Elliott and her deeds of mercy.

That night, before he went out to tramp himself weary, Jeffard did a characteristic thing. He wrapped his last five-dollar note around a bit of plaster dug from the wall, and creeping through the corridor in his stocking feet, tossed the pellet over the transom into Margaret Gannon's room.

CHAPTER IX

At the breakfast-table the next morning, Constance had a shock that set her nerves a-jangle and banished her appetite. The exciting cause was a paragraph in the morning "Coloradoan" which her father had been reading between the fruit and the cereals.

"I wonder if that isn't the fellow Dick was looking for and couldn't find," he queried, passing the paper across the table with his finger on the suggestive paragraph.

It was a custom-hardened account of a commonplace tragedy. A man whose name was given as George Jeffrey had shot himself an hour before midnight on one of the bridges spanning Cherry Creek. Constance read the story of the tragedy with her father's remark in abeyance, and the shock came with the conviction that the self-slain one was Jeffard, whose name might easily become Jeffrey in the hurried notes of a news-gatherer. The meagre particulars tallied accurately with Bartrow's terse account of Jeffard's sociological experiment. The suicide was a late-comer from the farther East; he had spent his money in riotous living; and he had latterly been lost to those who knew him best.

It was characteristic of Stephen Elliott's daughter that she passed the paper back to her father without comment, and that she preserved an outward presentment of cheerfulness during the remainder of the meal. But when she was free she ran up to her room and was seen no more of her father or her cousin until the latter went upstairs an hour later to see if Connie were ready for her morning walk.

"Why, Connie, dear! What is the matter?"

Since her tap at the door went unanswered, Myra had turned the knob and entered. Connie was lying in a dejected little heap on the floor before the fireless grate. She shook her head in dumb protest at her cousin's question; but when Myra knelt beside her it all came out brokenly.

"You didn't see what poppa gave me to read: it was an account of a suicide. Mr. Jeffard has killed himself, and--and, oh, Myra! it's all my fault!"

"Mr. Jeffard? Oh, I remember now,--Mr. Bartrow's friend. But I don't understand; how could it have been your fault?"

"It was, it was! Don't you remember what Dick said? that Mr. Jeffard was in trouble, and that he had a place for him? I saw him yesterday, and I--*I didn't tell him!*"

"But, Connie, dear, how could you? You didn't know him." Getting no more than a smothered sob in reply to this, Myra asked for particulars, and Connie gave them sparingly.

"You say the name was George Jeffrey? Why do you think it was Mr. Jeffard? I can't for the life of me see how you are to blame, in the remotest sense; but if you are, it's foolish to grieve over it until you are quite sure of the identities. Isn't there any way you can find out?"

Connie sat up at that, but she refused to be comforted.

"There is a way, and I'll try it; but it's no use, Myra. I'm just as sure as if I had stood beside him when he did it. And I shall never, *never* forgive myself!"

She got up and bathed her eyes, and when she had made herself ready to go out, she refused Myra's proffer of company.

"No, dear; thank you, but I'd rather go alone," she objected; "I'll share the misery of it with you by and by, perhaps, but I can't just yet."

Her plan for making sure was a simple one. Tommie Reagan had known Jeffard living, and he would know him dead. Putting it in train, she found her small henchman selling papers on his regular beat in front of the Opera House; and inasmuch as he was crying the principal fact of the tragedy, she was spared the necessity of entering into details.

"Tommie, have you--did you go to see the man who killed himself last night?" she questioned.

"Nope; der ain't no morbid cur'osity inside o' me."

"Would you go?--if I asked you to?"

"W'y, cert; I'd take a squint at de old feller wid de hoofs an' horns if it'd do you any good."

"Then I'll tell you why I want you to go. I am afraid it is the man we were going to try to help."

The boy shut one eye and whistled softly. "My gosh! but dat's tough, ain't it now! An' jest w'en I'd got 'quainted with him an' was a-fixin' to give him a lift! Dat's wot I call hard luck!"

Constance felt that the uncertainty was no longer to be borne. "Go quickly, Tommie," she directed; "and hurry back as soon as you can. I'll wait for you in the drug store across the street."

The coroner's office was not far to seek, and the small scout was back in a few minutes.

"Dey wouldn't lemme look," he reported, "but I skinned round to where I could see de top o' his head. It's his nibs, right 'nough."

"Tommie! Are you quite sure?"

"Nope; feller ain't sure o' nothin' in dis world, 'ceptin' death an' de penitenchry," amended Tommie, doing violence to his convictions when he saw that his patron saint was sorely in need of comfort. "Maybe 'tain't him, after all. You jest loaf 'round yere a couple o' shakes while I skip down to his hotel an' see wot I can dig up."

The boy was gone less than a quarter of an hour, but to Constance the minutes marched leaden-footed. When Tommie returned, his face signaled discomfiture.

"I didn't send me card up," he explained, with impish gravity; "I jest went right up to his nibsey's room an' mugged in, a-thinkin' I'd offer him a paper if he happened to be there and kicked. Say, Miss Constance; 'tain't a-goin' ter do no good to cry about it. He ain't there, an' he ain't been there, 'nless he slep' in a chair."

Constance went home with a lump in her throat and her trouble writ large on her face, and Myra needed not to ask the result of the investigation. Miss Van Vetter was not less curious than she should have been, but something in Connie's eyes forestalled inquiry, and Myra held her peace.

Connie wore out the day as best she might, widening the rift of sorrow until it bade fair to become an abyss of remorse. When evening came, and with it a telegram from Bartrow, asking if she had yet learned Jeffard's whereabouts, it was too much, and she shared the misery with her cousin, as she had promised to, making a clean breast of it from the beginning. Something to her surprise, Myra heard her through without a word of condemnation or reproach.

"Now that is something I can understand," said Myra, when the tale was told. "The most of your charity work seems to me to be pitifully commonplace and inconsequent; but here was a mission which asked for all sorts of heroism, for which it promised to pay the highest of all prices, namely, the possibility of saving a man worth the trouble."

Now Connie was well assured that her love for her neighbor was no respecter of persons, and she made answer accordingly.

"I can't agree with you there, Myra. Mr. Jeffard's possible worth had nothing to do with it. I wanted to help him because--well, because it was mean in me to make him talk about himself that night at the opera. And besides, when I met him the next evening at Mrs. Calmaine's, he told me enough to make me quite sure that he needed all the help and encouragement he could get. Of course, he didn't say anything like that, you know; but I knew."

Myra's eyes promised sympathy, and Connie went on.

"Then, when I came upon him yesterday I was angry because he was hurting Tommie. And afterward, when I tried to explain, he made me understand that I mustn't reach down to him; and--and I didn't know any other way to go about it."

"That was a situation in which I should probably have horrified you," said Myra decisively. "I shouldn't have noticed or known anything about him at first, as you did; but in your place yesterday, and with your knowledge of the circumstances, I should have said my say whether he wanted to hear it or not. And I'd have made him listen to reason, too."

"You don't quite understand, Myra. It seemed altogether impossible; though if I had known what was in his mind I should have spoken at any cost."

Twenty times the pendulum of the chalet clock on the wall beat the seconds, and Myra was silent; then she crossed over to Connie's chair and sat upon the arm of it.

"Connie, dear, you're crying again,"--this with her arm around her cousin's neck. "Are you quite sure you haven't been telling me half-truths? Wasn't there the least little bit of a feeling warmer than charity in your heart for this poor fellow?"

Constance shook her head, but the denial did not set itself in words. "He was Dick's friend, and that was enough," she replied.

Miss Van Vetter's lips brushed her cousin's cheek, and Constance felt a warm tear splash on her hand. This was quite another Myra from the one she thought she knew, and she said as much.

"We're all puzzles, Connie dear, and the answers to most of us have been lost; but, do you know, I can't help crying a little with you for this poor fellow. Just to think of him lying there with no one within a thousand miles to care the least little bit about it. And if you are right--if it is Mr. Bartrow's friend--it's so much the more pitiful. The world is poorer when such men leave it."

"Why, Myra! What do you know about him?"

"Nothing more than you do--or as much. But surely you haven't forgotten what Mr. Bartrow told us."

"About his helping Mr. Lansdale?"

"Yes."

"No, I hadn't forgotten."

"It was very noble; and so delicately chivalrous. It seems as if one who did such things would surely be helped in his own day of misfortune. But that doesn't often happen, I'm afraid."

"No," Constance assented, with a sigh; and Myra went back to the question of identity.

"I suppose there is no possible chance that Tommie may have been mistaken?"

Constance shook her head. "I think not; he saw that I was troubled about it, and he would have strained a point to comfort me if the facts had given him leave. But I shall be quite sure before I answer Dick's message."

With that thought in mind, and with no hope behind it, Constance waylaid her father in the hall the next morning as he was about to go out.

"Poppa, I want you to do something for me; no, not that"--the elderly man was feeling in his pockets for his check-book--"it is something very different, this time; different and--and rather dreadful. You remember the suicide you read about, yesterday morning?"

"Did I read about one? Oh, yes; the man that shot himself down on the Platte, or was it Cherry Creek? The fellow I thought might be Dick's friend. What about it?"

"It's that. We ought to make sure of it for Dick's sake, you know. Won't you go to the coroner's office and see if it is Mr. Jeffard? It's a horrible thing to ask you to do, but"--

There was grim reminiscence in the old pioneer's smile. "It won't be the first one I've seen that died with his boots on. I'll go and locate your claim for you."

She kissed him good-by, but he came back from the gate to say: "Hold on, here; I don't know your Mr. Jeffard from a side of sole leather. How am I going to identify him?"

"You've seen him once," she explained. "Do you remember the man who sat next to me the night we went to hear 'The Bohemian Girl'?"

"The thirsty one that you and Myra made a bet on? Yes, I recollect him."

"I don't think he was thirsty. Would you know him if you were to see him again?"

"I guess maybe I would; I've seen him half a dozen times since,--met him out here on the sidewalk the next morning. Is that your man?"

"That was Mr. Jeffard," she affirmed, turning away that he might not see the tears that welled up unbidden.

"All right; I'll go and identify him for you."

So he said, and so he meant to do; but it proved to be a rather exciting day at the Mining Exchange, and he forgot the commission until he was about to board a homeward-bound car in the evening. Then he found that he was too late. The body of the suicide had been shipped East in accordance with telegraphic instructions received at noon. When he made his report to Constance, she fell back upon Tommie's assurance, and sent the delayed answer to Bartrow's

message, telling him that his friend was dead.

Having sorrowfully recorded all these things in the book of facts accomplished, it was not wonderful that Constance, coming out of Margaret Gannon's room late the following afternoon, should cover her face and cry out in something akin to terror when she cannoned against Jeffard at the turn in the dingy hallway. Neither was it remarkable that her strength should forsake her for the moment; nor that Jeffard, seeing her plight, should forget his degradation and give her timely help by leading her to a seat in the dusty window embrasure. At that the conventionalities, or such shreds of them as might still have bound either of them, parted asunder in the midst, and for the time being they were but a man and a woman, as God had created them.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" were her first words. "I--I thought you were dead!"

"I ought to be," was his comment. "But what made you think that?"

"It was in the newspaper--about the man who shot himself. I was afraid it was you, and when Tommie had been to see we were sure of it."

"In the newspaper?" he queried; and then, with a ghost of a smile which was mirthless: "It was a little previous, but so justifiable that I really ought to take the hint. Can't you tell me more? I'm immensely interested."

She told him everything from the beginning, concluding with a pathetic little appeal for forgiveness if she had done wrong in taking too much for granted.

"You couldn't well do that," he hastened to say. "And you mustn't ask forgiveness for motives which an angel might envy. But it is casting pearls before swine in my case, Miss Elliott. I have sown the wind, deliberately and with malice aforethought, and now I am reaping the whirlwind, and regretting day by day that it doesn't develop sufficient violence to finish that which it has begun."

"Please don't say that," she pleaded. "There are always hands stretched out to help us, if we could but see and lay hold of them. Why won't you let Dick help you when he is so anxious to do it? You will, now that you know about it, won't you?"

"I knew about it before. Lansdale told me, but I made him promise to drop it. It isn't that I wouldn't accept help from Bartrow as willingly as I would from any one in the world; it is simply that I don't care to take the chance of adding ingratitude to my other ill-doings."

"Ingratitude?"

"Yes. The man who allows his friend to help him in any crisis of his own making should at least be able to give bond for his good behavior. I can't do that now. I wouldn't trust myself to go across the street. I know my own potentiality for evil too well."

"But potentiality isn't evil," she protested. "It's only the power to do things, good or bad. And if one have that there is always hope."

"Not for me," he said shortly. "I have sinned against grace."

"Who hasn't?" Constance rejoined. "But grace doesn't die because it's sinned against."

He smiled again at that. "I think my particular allotment of grace is dead beyond the hope of resurrection."

"How can that be?"

He put his back to the window so that he had not to look in her eyes.

"Grace for most men takes the form of an ideal. So long as the condition to be attained is ahead there is hope, but when one has turned his back upon it"--

Indirection fences badly with open-eyed sincerity, and he did not finish. But the door was open now, and Constance meant to do her whole duty.

"I think I understand," she assented; "but I wish you would be quite frank with me. In a way, I am Mr. Bartrow's deputy, and if I have to tell him you refuse to let him help you, I shall have to give him a better reason than you have given me."

"You are inexorable," he said, and there was love in his eyes, despite his efforts reasonward. "I wish I dared tell you the whole miserable truth."

"And why may you not?"

"Because it concerns--a woman."

She shrank back a little at that, and he saw that she had misunderstood. Wherefore he plunged recklessly into the pool of frankness.

"The woman is a good woman," he went on quickly, "and one day not so very long ago I loved her well enough to believe that I could win my way back to decency and uprightness for her sake. It was a mistake. I had fallen lower than I knew, and the devil came in for his own."

Here was something tangible to lay hold of at last, and Connie made instant use of it.

"Does she know?" she asked.

The mirthless smile came and went again. "She thinks she does."

"But you haven't told her all; is that it?"

"I have tried to, but, being a good woman, she can't understand. I think I didn't fully understand, myself; but I do now."

"Is it so far beyond reparation?"

"It is indeed. If the devil's emissary who has brought me to this pass could be exorcised this moment I should never recover the lost ground of self-respect. There is nothing to go back to. If I had not to be despicable from necessity, I should doubtless be so from choice."

"I think you are harder with yourself than you would be with another. Can't you begin to believe in yourself again? I believe in you."

"You!--but you don't know what you are saying, Miss Elliott. See!"--his coat was buttoned to the chin, tramp-wise, and he tore it open to show her the rags that underlay it--"do you understand now? I have pawned the shirt off my back--not to satisfy the cravings of hunger, but to feed a baser passion than that of the most avaricious miser that ever lived. Do I make it plain that I am not worthy of your sympathy, or of Richard Bartrow's?"

For once the clear gray eyes were veiled, and her chin quivered a little when she spoke. "You hurt me more than I can tell," she said.

The dull rage of self-abasement in him flamed into passion at the sight of what he had done, but the bitter speech of it tarried at the sound of a heavy step on the stair. Constance rose from her seat in the window embrasure with a nervous thrill of embarrassment, but Jeffard relieved her at once. There was a vacant room on the opposite side of the corridor, and when the intruder appeared at the stair-head, Miss Elliott was alone.

She glanced at the man as he passed, and Jeffard, from his place behind the half-closed door of the vacant room, saw her draw back, and clenched his hands and swore softly, because, forsooth, she had for some fleeting pulse-beat of time to breathe the same air with the intruder. For he knew the man as a purveyor for Peter Grim's house of dishonor; a base thing for which wholesome speech has no name.

What followed was without sequence. Almost at the same instant the footsteps of the man ceased to echo in the empty corridor, there was a cry half angry and half of terror from Margaret Gannon's room, and Miss Elliott disappeared from Jeffard's limited field of vision. In the turning of a leaf Jeffard was at the door of the room in the end of the corridor. What he saw and heard made a man of him for the moment. Margaret Gannon had evidently been surprised at her sewing-machine; the work was still under the needle, and the chair was overturned. Margaret was crouching in the farthest corner of the room, with Miss Elliott standing over her like a small guardian angel at bay. The nameless one had his back to the door, and Jeffard heard only the conclusion of a jeering insult which included both of the women.

Now Jeffard had fasted for twenty-four hours, and the quick dash to the end of the corridor made him dizzy and faint; but red wrath, so it be fierce enough, is its own elixir. Thinking of nothing but that he should acquit himself as a man before the woman he loved, he flung himself upon the contemner of women with the vigor of a righteous cause singing in his veins like the wine of new life.

The struggle was short and decisive. In his college days Jeffard had been a man of his hands, and the fierce onset proved to be the better half of the battle. Constance caught her breath and cowered in the corner with Margaret when the two men went down together, but she gave a glad little cry when she saw that Jeffard had won the fall; that he had wrenched the drawn pistol from the other's grasp and flung it harmless across the room. Then there was another and a

fiercer grapple on the floor, and Jeffard's fist rose and fell like a blacksmith's hammer with the dodging head of his antagonist for its anvil.

The end of it was as abrupt as the beginning. In the midst of another wrestling bout the beaten one freed himself, bounded to his feet, and darted into the corridor with Jeffard at his heels. There was a sharp scurry of racing feet in the hall, a prolonged crash as of a heavy body falling down the stair, and Jeffard was back again, panting with the violence of it, but with eyes alight and an apology on his lips.

Constance ran to meet him and cut the apology short.

"The idea!" she protested; "when it was for Margaret's sake and mine! Are you sure you're not hurt?"

Jeffard's knuckles were cut and bleeding, but he kept that hand behind him.

"It's the other fellow who is hurt, I hope." Then to Margaret: "Do you know him? Are you afraid of him?"

Margaret glanced at Constance and hesitated. "He'll not be troubling me any more, I'm thinking. It's Pete Grim that sent him; and he was at me before I knew."

Jeffard picked up the captured weapon and put it on the sewing-machine.

"Take that to him if he comes again when you are alone. Miss Elliott, please stay here a moment until I can go down and see that the way is clear."

He was gone at the word, but he had barely reached the window with the dusty embrasure when she overtook him. There was a sweet shyness in her manner now, and he trembled as he had not in any stage of the late encounter.

"Mr. Jeffard," she began, "will you forgive me if I say that you have disproved all the hard things you were trying to say of yourself? You'll let me wire Dick, now, won't you?"

He shook his head because he was afraid to trust himself to speak. As between an abject appeal with his hopeless passion for its motive, and a plunge back into the abyss of degradation which would efface the temptation, there was nothing to choose.

"You will at least promise me that you will consider it," she went on. "I can't ask less."

If he did not reply immediately it was because he was trying to fix her image so that he should always be able to think of her just as she stood, with the afternoon sunlight falling upon her face, irradiating it and making a shimmering halo of the red-brown hair and deep wells of the clear gray eyes. A vagrant thought came to him: that it was worth a descent into the nether depths to have such a woman seek him out and plead with him for his soul's sake. He put it aside to deny her entreaty.

"I can't promise even that."

She was silent for a moment, and embarrassment came back and fought for holding-ground when she tried to bring herself to do the thing which compassion suggested. But compassion won; and Jeffard looked on with a half-cynical smile when she took a gold coin from her purse and offered it to him.

"Just for the present," she begged, with a beseeching look which might have melted a worse man.

He took the money, and the smile ended in an unpleasant laugh.

"You think I ought to refuse, and so I ought; as any man would who had a spark of manhood left in him. But that is why I take it; I have been trying to make you understand that I am not worth saving. Do I make it plain to you?"

"You make me very sorry," she quavered; and because her sorrow throttled speech, she turned and left him.

CHAPTER X

AFTER Constance had gone, Jeffard had an exceedingly bad half-hour. For a time he tramped up and down the deserted corridor, calling himself hard names and likening his latest obliquity to whatsoever unpardonable sin has been recorded against the most incorrigible of mankind. Love had its word, also--outraged love, acknowledged only to be openly flouted and spat upon; for one may neither do violence to a worthy passion, nor give rein to an unworthy, without paying for it, blow for blow. What would she think of him? What could she think, save that she had wasted her sympathy on a shameless vagabond who had sought to palm himself off on her and her friends as a gentleman?

The thought of it was stifling. The air of the musty hallway seemed suddenly to grow suffocating, and the muffled drumming of the sewing-machine in Margaret Gannon's room jarred upon him until it drove him forth to wander hot-hearted and desperate in the streets.

Without remembering that he had crossed the viaduct or ascended the hill, he finally found himself wandering in the Highlands. Drifting aimlessly on beyond the fringe of suburban houses, he came to the borders of a shallow pond what time the sun was poising for its plunge behind the upreared mountain background in the west. It was here, when he had flung himself down upon the warm brown earth in utter weariness of soul and body, that his good angel came once more and wrestled with him.

Looking backward he saw that the angle of the inclined plane had grown suddenly precipitous within a fortnight. Since the night of his quarrel with the well-meaning miner, the baize door at the head of the carpeted stair had been closed to him. In consequence he had been driven to the lair of a less carefully groomed but more rapacious wild beast whose keeper offered his patrons a choice between the more serious business of the gaming-tables, and the lighter diversions of a variety theatre. Jeffard had seen the interior of the Bijou on the earliest of his investigative expeditions in Denver, and had gone away sick at heart at the sight of it. Wherefore it was a measure of the depths to which he had descended that he could become an habitue of the place, caring nothing for the misery and depravity which locked arms with all who breathed its tainted atmosphere.

It was at the Bijou that he had lost the better part of the winnings rescued by the miner's bit of charitable by-play; and it was there, also, that he had thrown away the major portion of a second gift from Lansdale. For two nights in succession the lack of money had kept him away.

He took out Connie's offering and stared at it with lack-lustre eyes. With heedful manipulation here was the fuel to feed the fire of his besetting passion for some hours. Having permitted her to give and himself to take it, why should he quibble at the manner of its spending? When he saw that hesitancy implied another attempt to turn back at the eleventh hour, he felt that this was no longer possible. Try as he might, the shame of this last infamous thing would reach out and drag him back into the mire.

The alternative disposed of, the matter simplified itself. He had only to determine whether he should end it all before or after he had flung away this bit of yellow metal. The decision was so nicely balanced that he let it turn upon the flipping of the coin--heads for a sudden plunge into the pond, tails for a final bout with chance and the plunge afterward.

He spun the gold piece, and went down on his hands and knees to read the oracle in the fading light. It was the misshapen eagle that stared back at him from the face of the coin, and he took his reprieve sullenly, calling his evil genius a usurer.

He got upon his feet stiffly and turned his face toward the city. Then it occurred to him that it would be well to make his preparations while he could see. There was a house building on the little knoll above the pond; a brick and the binding-string from a bundle of lath would serve; and when he had secured them he sounded the pond around the edges with a stick. It was too shallow; but from a plank thrown across to the head of the drainage flume it proved deep enough, and here he left the brick and the bit of tarred twine.

Half an hour later he entered the Bijou. On the threshold he met the proprietor; and when he would have passed with a nod, Grim barred the way.

"Been layin' for you," announced the man of vice, sententiously. "Come into the box-office."

Jeffard obeyed mechanically. He was in the semi-stupor which anticipates the delirium of the gaming fever, and the man's voice sounded afar off. Grim led the way behind the bar to a windowless den furnished with a roll-top desk and two chairs. Closing the door, he waved Jeffard to a seat.

"Been sort o' sizin' you up lately, and I put it up that you're out o' luck. Does that call the turn?"

"I don't know how that concerns you," said Jeffard, with a sudden access of dull resentment.

"No more do I; but that's neither here nor yonder. You're down on your luck, ain't you?"

Jeffard nodded. "Call it that, if you like."

"Thought so. Broke most of the time, I reckon?"

"Yes; most of the time."

"Jes' so. Well, I'm goin' to put you on to a soft snap. I know all about you--who you are, where you come from, and all the rest. You've been playin' to lose right along, and now I'm goin' to give you a tip so you can play to win ever' time. See?"

Jeffard came out of his abstraction sufficiently to wonder what the man was driving at. "Make it short," he rejoined curtly.

Grim leaned back in his pivot-chair, and his hard face wrinkled under an evil smile.

"Don't be in a rush. Game runs all night, and you'll have plenty of time to go and blow in whatever you've got after I get through with you. Or, if you can't wait, go and blow it first, and we'll talk business afterwards."

"No," Jeffard objected sullenly. "If you have anything to say to me, say it now."

"Business before pleasure, eh? All right; here's the lay-out. I'm goin' to stake you with a suit o' good clothes, pay your board at the Albany or the Brown, whichever you like, and give you a roll to flash up that'll make you feel flush ever' time you look at it. Then"--

Jeffard's gesture was of impatience.

"Never mind about the details. What is the price of all this?"

"Mighty nigh nothin' at all. You had plenty o' friends a while back, and you'll have 'em again, as soon as you're flush. And when any of 'em feel like proddin' the tagger, why--you know where he's kep'; that's all."

While one might draw a breath there was murder in Jeffard's heart; in his weakness a rage that was childish in its vehemence took possession of him, and he covered his face with his hands to crush back the hot tears of impotence which sprang up and blinded him. Grim looked on unpityingly, waiting for what he conceived to be the inevitable. When Jeffard struggled to his feet, his face was white and he had to steady himself by the back of the chair.

"I thought I'd got to the bottom when I came here to-night," he began unsteadily, "but you've shown me my mistake. Thank God, I can yet say No to you, low as I am. Let me get out of here."

Knowing the strength of the gambler's chain, as well as the length thereof, Grim held his peace; and Jeffard pushed past the bar-tender and went out through the small door at the end of the bar. On the sidewalk a crowd beset the theatre entrance, and out of the midst of it came two men, striking and clutching at each other as they fought their way into the clear. Within arm's-length of Jeffard they separated. He saw the sheen of the electric light on a weapon, and darted between them in time to spoil the aim of the man who drew first. There was a flash and a report, a rush on the part of the crowd, and Jeffard found himself dodging and doubling swiftly through dark alleys and crooked covered ways, following the lead of the man whose life he had saved. After a time they came out in a silent street where there was light.

"Didn't know me, did you, pardner?" quoth the fugitive, relaxing his grasp on Jeffard's wrist. "Like as not you wouldn't 'a' done it if you had, but that don't saw no wood with me. That greaser had the drop on me, sure's yer born."

Whereupon Jeffard looked again, and recognizing his friendly enemy of the winning night, was glad, inasmuch as he had been able to cancel an obligation. None the less, his reply was ungracious enough.

"Oh, it's you, is it? Well, we're quits now. Good-night."

He turned and walked away, but at the corner the man overtook him. "Not that-a-way," he forbade, pointing up the street. "Somebody in the crowd'll be sure to know you, and you'll walk slap back into trouble after I done drug you out. The p'lice are there by this time, an' they don't care who, so they get a man 'r two to lock up."

Jeffard nodded, and made a circuit of the dangerous locality with his head up and the light of a steadfast purpose in his eyes. Whatever of vacillation there was in him an hour earlier had been thoroughly flailed out in the brief interview with Peter Grim. He knew now what he had to do, and the precise manner of its doing.

Keeping to the quieter streets, he came out in front of the St. James; and dodging the crowded lobby, made his way to the writing-room. Since he dare not go to the clerk for stationery, he was compelled to wait until some one left what he required. The chance befell presently, but when he came to write his note to Constance Elliott the thing was harder to do than he had prefigured it. What he finally wrote, after he had spoiled two of the three sheets of paper left by his predecessor in the chair at the writing-table, was this:--

"After what happened this afternoon, you will not think worse of me if I ask you to let me try to explain what must seem to you too despicable to be remembered. I can't hope to make you understand without being frank, and when, at some future time, you may learn the circumstances under which this is written, I shall hope for forgiveness.

"You may remember that I said I couldn't tell you the truth, because it concerns a woman. When I add that the woman is yourself, you will understand. I love you; I think I have been loving you ever since that evening which you said we were to forget--the evening at the theatre. Strangely enough, my love for you isn't strong in the strength which saves. I went from you that night when you had bidden me God-speed at Mrs. Calmaine's, and within the hour I was once more a penniless vagabond.

"When you were trying to help me this afternoon, I was trying to keep from saying that which I could never have a right to say. You pressed me very hard in your sweet innocence and loving sympathy,--you see, I am quite frank,--and when you finally gave me a chance to make the impossible thing that I longed to say still more impossible, I took it in sheer desperation. Nay, more; I purposed in my heart to so desecrate your gift as to make the thought of my love for you an unhallowed memory.

"That is all, I think, save, when it came to the brink, I found that there was still a deeper depth which was yet unplumbed, and which I trust I shall have the courage to leave unexplored."

When it was finished he wrapped the gold piece in a bit of paper, and, putting it in the envelope with the note, set out to find the house in Colfax Avenue. Having seen it but once, and that in daylight, it was not singular that it eluded him in the night; but it was surely the very irony of chance which led him to slip the envelope under the front door of a house two squares beyond that occupied by the Elliots, and which kept him from noticing the placard "For Rent" nailed upon the very door under which he thrust his message to Constance.

This single preliminary set in order, he faced once more toward the Highlands, lagging a little from sheer weariness as he went, but finding comfort in the thought that there would be infinite surcease from hunger and exhaustion at the end of this last pilgrimage.

There was time for reflection on the way, and he marvelled that his thoughts dwelt so persistently upon the trivial details of the thing he was about to do. He was a practiced swimmer; would the weight of a single brick be sufficient to overcome the instinct of self-preservation which might assert itself at the last moment? Probably, since he was weak from fasting, and would be encumbered with his clothing. Then another suggestion came to torment him: If he should tie the brick to his feet, as he had thought to, the water might not be deep enough, after all. Consequently, he must fasten it about his neck. And thereupon he had a fit of creeping horror at the thought of drowning with his face dragged down into the ooze and slime of the bottom.

Oddly enough, when he came to the brink of the pool these things ceased to trouble him; though even there it was impossible to turn the current of thought into a reflective channel. He made the effort for decency's sake. It was not meet that a thinking being should go out of life like the brutes that perish; without a thought for the past with its lacks and havings, or the future with its untried possibilities. But the effort returned to him void, and presently he stumbled upon the reason: the premeditated fact of self-murder shut him off alike from repentance for what had gone before, and from hope in what should come after.

Very good, he said; and flung himself down to make the most of the present. He was faint and weary, and it would be ill to drown a tired body. There was no moon, but the midsummer night was clear and still. The stars burned steadily overhead, and there was a soft light abroad which seemed to be a part of the atmosphere. Over in the west the black bulk of the range rose up to meet the sky; and poised above one of the highest peaks the planet Mars swung to its setting. Jeffard marked it, saying it should be his executioner; that when the rosy point of light should touch the black sky-line, he would rise up and go to his place.

Meanwhile it was soothing to lie stretched out upon the warm earth with no human future to prefigure, and no past insistent enough to disturb one with its annals. And there was still the present, with its soft light and its dim hemisphere of sky; its balmy air and its vague and shadowy horizon. It was good to be alone with nature in these last few moments; to have done with the tiresome world of man's marring; to be quit of man's presence.

The thought had scarcely shaped itself when it was made of none effect by the appearance of a man at the top of

the little knoll. The intruder came straight on, as if in no doubt as to his purpose, and sitting down on the end of the plank bridge, proceeded to fill and light his pipe without saying a word. Jeffard caught a glimpse of a bearded face by the flare of the match, and said, "Oh, it's you again, is it?"

"Right you are, pardner. Hope I ain't intrudin'."

"I suppose you have as good a right here as I have. But I might suggest that the night is fine and the world large, and that there are times when a man has no use for his fellows."

The new-comer smoked in silence for a full minute before he removed his pipe to say:--

"That's a sort of a gilt-edged invitation for me to mog off, ain't it? All right; I'll go pretty middlin' quick; but I've been fool enough to tramp somewheres nigh ten mile behind you to-night for to get a show to say what's on my mind; wher'fore, I'll say it first and vamoose afte'wards."

Jeffard gave him leave, watching the narrowing margin between the star and the mountain-top.

"Well, b'iled down, it's just about this: I know what you're out yere for,--seen it in your eye back yonder on the street corner,--but I says to myself, 'Jim Garvin, you go kinder slow; it ain't none o' your business. When a man takes a mill-run o' hisself and finds out the claim ain't worth workin' no longer, w'y, it's his funeral, and none o' yourn.' And then again I says to myself, 'Maybe that there feller hain't got nary 'nother claim--leastwise, not as he knows of,' and so I follered you, all over the blame' town and out yere."

Jeffard made no reply, and the intruder went on.

"Course, you understand I ain't a-mixin' up any in your business, not if I know it. You just listen at what I'm goin' to say, and then if you want to go ahead, w'y, all right, do it; and I'll loan you my gun so 't you won't have to get yourself wet in cold water. Is that about right?"

"Go on," said Jeffard.

"Well, it's this-a-way; I'm off on a prospectin' tower to-morrow. Blowed in ever' last thing I had, and took a grub-stake, same as heretofore. Now the old man that puts up the grub-stake, he says, says he, 'Jim, you'll want a pardner. It's gettin' pretty late in the season, and you won't stand no kind of a chance goin' alone.' 'Right you are,' says I, and I'll pick up some feller on the range as I go in.' 'Good enough,' says he. 'I'll make this here order big enough to stake the two of you.' That's the whole lay-out, and you're the pardner, if you say the word. You don't know beans about me, and I don't know you from Adam's off ox, so that's a stand-off. What do you say?"

Jeffard did not answer until there was but a bare thread of sky between the star and the peak. Then he said: "Do you happen to have a coin of any kind about you?"

Garvin tossed a dollar across to him, and Jeffard spun it. Then he found that he had no match, and asked the miner to give him one. Garvin watched him curiously as he bent over the coin and struck the match.

"The luck's against me--it's heads," he announced gravely. "I'll go with you."

Garvin rose and stretched himself stiffly.

"You're a cool one," he commented. "What if it'd been tails?"

Jeffard got up and kicked the brick into the pond. "In that case I should have been obliged to ask you to lend me your pistol. Let's go back to town and get something to eat with that dollar. I haven't had anything since last night."

CHAPTER XI

AFTER toiling all night through black gorges and over unspeakable mountain passes, the narrow-gauge train from Denver, headed by two pygmy locomotives, came out into daylight, sunshine, and wider horizons at Alta Vista. In the sleeping-car three sections had been transformed by the drowsy porter into daytime smugness, and three persons--two of them in deference to the enthusiasm of the third--were up and dressed.

"Isn't it all perfectly indescribable?" Myra was saying, when the engineer of one of the pygmies sounded the whistle for the station. "Do you know, I couldn't go to sleep for hours last night, late as it was. I put up the window curtain and piled the pillows in the corner so I could look out. The sky was like a great inverted bowl lined with black velvet and spangled with diamonds, circling around us as we darted around the curves. And in the open places there was always a solemn procession of cliffs and peaks, marching with us sometimes, and then turning to slip past again when the bowl whirled the other way. Oh, but it was grand!"

"I'm glad it lays hold of you," said Connie, who was loyally jealous for the scenic renown of her native Colorado. "Now you know why I wouldn't let you go on any of those breathless little one-day excursions from Denver. They just take you up in a balloon, give you a glimpse while you gasp, and drop you without a parachute. The tourist people all make them, you know,--it's in the itinerary, with a coupon in the cute little morocco-bound book of tickets,--and they come back wild-eyed and desperate, and go without their suppers to scribble incoherent notes about the 'Cache la Plette' and 'Clear Poudre Canyon,' and other ridiculous things. It would be funny if it wasn't so exasperating."

Myra nodded. "I'm beginning to 'savez,' as Mr. Bartrow would say. By the way, isn't this the place where he was to meet us?--Why, yes; there he is now!" She waved her hand and struggled with the window-latch as the train drew up to the platform.

He was with them in a moment, carrying a towel-covered basket, and a tin coffee-pot which he waved gingerly by way of salutation.

"The top o' the morning to you all," he said, beaming genially. "I was afraid you wouldn't be up, and then my hot coffee would be cold coffee, and I'd get myself disliked." Then to the drowsy porter: "John, you scoundrel, get us a table before I break you in two and throw you out of the window."

The table was promptly forthcoming, and Myra made room in the narrow seat for Bartrow.

"Excuse me," he begged, laughing, "I'd like to, but I can't. Somebody's got to stand up and do the swing-rack act with this coffee-pot. Just unload that basket, will you, Elliott, and I'll play head waiter while you set the table."

The breakfast was good, and there was a most astonishing variety. Moreover the coffee rose to a degree of excellence which more than atoned for the admixture of condensed milk in lieu of cream, and for the slight resinous taste imparted by the new tin cups. Bartrow apologized for the cups.

"You see, I left the mine rather middling early this morning, and packed things in a hurry. When I was making the coffee over Jim Bryant's stove here at Alta Vista, it struck me all at once that I'd forgotten the cups. The train was in sight, and Jim had only one, and that hadn't been washed for a month of Sundays. Maybe you think I wasn't stampeded for about a minute."

Connie laughed. "I suppose you went out and robbed somebody."

"That's what I did; made a break for the store, and found it locked up, of course. I had to smash a window to get what I wanted."

"Why, you lawless man!" protested Myra, trying to make room on the narrow table for the contents of the inexhaustible basket. "Where in the world did you get such a variety of things?"

"Canned goods," Connie cut in maliciously; "all canned goods, put out in dishes so you won't be reminded of the tinny taste. Everybody lives on canned goods in the mountains."

"Connie, you make me tired," Bartrow retorted, bracing himself as the train whisked around a sharp curve. "Just dig a little deeper and get out that platter of trout; they've never seen the inside of a can."

"Never mind what Connie says; she isn't responsible," said Myra. "The breakfast is just as good as it can be. Besides, you know you promised us that we should live just as you do if we'd visit the Little Myriad. I wish you'd put that coffee-pot on the floor and sit down with us."

Bartrow tried it, and found it possible; after which the talk became general and cheerful over the resinous coffee cups and the lurching dishes. In a lull Elliott asked how the Little Myriad was going on.

"Good enough for anybody," rejoined Bartrow, with enthusiasm alert. "Lead opens out better every day, and we're in only about seventy-five feet."

"No pay-dirt yet, of course," said the older man.

"Well, hardly; not yet. I'm figuring on a hundred and fifty feet of development work at the very least before we begin to take out pay."

"Mr. Bartrow, don't you remember that another thing you promised was that you wouldn't talk mineral-English before me without explaining it?" Myra broke in. "I want to know"--An unexpected plunge of the car made her grasp at the coffee cup, and Connie slipped deftly into the break.

"And it shall know, bless its inquisitive little soul! It shall be stuffed with information like a fat little pillow with feathers. But not here, cuzzy dear. Wait till we're on the ground, and then I'll go off out of hearing, and Dick may turn himself into a glossary, or an intelligence office, or a personal conductor, or anything else you'd like to have him."

Bartrow looked unspeakable things, and put down his knife and fork to say, "Connie, you're a--a"--

"Brute, Dickie; say it right out, and don't spare me on Myra's account. She rather enjoys it; she loves to hear people abuse me."

"Connie, you are perfectly incorrigible," said Myra severely. "With your poor people you are an angel of light, but with your friends"--

"I'm an angel of darkness. That's right, cuzzy dear; pile it on, I'm young and strong. Poppa, can't you think of something mean to say about me? Do try, please."

Bartrow grinned; and Elliott, who knew his daughter's vagaries and delighted in them, laughed outright. Constance made a face across the table at her cousin, and said, "Now talk mines, if you can."

"I shall," asserted Myra calmly. "Mr. Bartrow, how did you ever come to call your mine the 'Little Myriad'?"

If the bottom had suddenly dropped out of his coffee cup, Bartrow could not have been more disconcerted. Constance, who was in his secret, laughed gleefully, and clapped her hands.

"Tell her, Dick; tell her all about it. If you don't I shall."

Bartrow stammered and stumbled until Connie went into ecstasies of mischievous delight. After two or three helpless beginnings, he said, rather tamely, "I thought it was a pretty name."

"But it's so odd; a myriad is many, and a mine is only one."

"Oh, the meaning didn't have anything to do with it," rejoined Bartrow, going straight to his own discomfiture with refreshing candor. "It was the--the suggestion; the similarity; the--By Jove! we're there at last; this is the mine switch."

The exclamation was a heartfelt thanksgiving, and in the confusion of debarking the perilous topic was safely eluded. It was a sharp climb of some distance from the railway track to the mine, and Elliott developed unsuspected reserves of tact by leading the way with Miss Van Vetter, leaving Bartrow to follow with Constance. When they had lagged sufficiently behind the others, and were yet out of earshot of the men who were following with the luggage, Bartrow went back to the unexploded petard.

"Connie, you've just got to help me out now," he declared. "What shall I tell her if she tackles me again?"

"Tell her the truth."

"I don't dare to."

"Then tell her a fib. But no--on second thought I shouldn't do that, if I were you; you'd only make a mess of it. I'll tell you what to do: just fight shy of it till I can get her to myself. I promise you she'll never ask you about the Little Myriad's christening again as long as she lives."

"Thank you," said Bartrow, with the air of a reprieved criminal; and then dubiously: "See here, Connie, how are you going to do it? No monkey business, you know."

"Not a single, solitary monkey," she answered so soberly that Bartrow forgot his suspicions, and plunged into

another subject which was also near to his heart.

"About Jeffard; how did you come to think he had shot himself?"

"It was only one of those suppositions you think you have verified when you've only been playing blind-man's bluff with it. The similarity of names misled me at first."

"But afterward you merely wired that you were mistaken. Was that another supposition?"

"Oh, no; I saw him and talked with him."

"The mischief you did! What did he have to say for himself?"

"Not much that will bear repeating. I'm too sorry for him to want to talk about it, Dick."

Bartrow wondered, and kept his wonder to himself. What he said was in the nature of worldly wisdom.

"Jeffard'll come out all right in the end. He's as obstinate as a pig, but that's the only swinish thing about him. I'm afraid he'll have to go through the stamp-mill and get himself pulverized; but when it comes to the clean-up there'll be more good metal than tailings. Don't you think so?"

"How should I know?" queried Constance.

"I didn't ask you what you know; I asked what you thought about it."

"You forget that we've met only two or three times."

"I don't forget anything. But I know you can size a man up while the rest of us are trying to get acquainted with him. Don't you believe that Jeffard will come out all right in the end?"

She was silent for a minute or two, and when she answered there was a tremulous note in her voice which was new to Bartrow.

"I'm afraid he has made that and everything else impossible, Dick. I told you I had seen him and talked with him; that was the day after I telegraphed you about the suicide, nearly two months ago. From that day to this he has not been seen or heard of in Denver, so far as Tommie can find out."

"Pshaw! Then you think he has taken the short cut out of it, after all?"

"I don't know what to think," said Constance; and as they were at the top of the steep trail, the subject was dropped.

On the whole, Connie's apprehensions that her cousin's urban upbringing might make her a difficult guest for the young miner were apparently groundless. Miss Van Vetter rhapsodized over the scenery; waded cheerfully through the dripping tunnel of the Little Myriad to the very heading, in order to see with her own eyes the vein of mineral; thought Bartrow's three-room log cabin was good enough for any one; and ate the dishes of Wun Ling's preparing as though a Chinese cook were a necessary adjunct to every well regulated household. When the first day of exhilarating sight-seeing came to an end, and the two young women were together in their room, Connie bethought her of her promise to Bartrow.

"By the way, Myra, did you find out how the Little Myriad came by its name?" she asked.

"No; I forgot to ask Mr. Bartrow again."

"I can tell you, if you'd really like to know."

"Well?"

"He was going to call it the 'Myra,' and he asked me if I thought you'd object. I told him you would,--most emphatically. Then he said he would call it the 'Myriad,' because that was the only word he could think of that was anything like Myra."

Miss Van Vetter was arranging her hair before the small mirror at the other end of the room, and Constance waited long for her rejoinder. When it came it was rather irrelevant.

"I've heard of people who could read your thoughts better than you could think them," she said; and Connie was too sleepy to strike back.

CHAPTER XII

FOR a week after the arrival of his visitors, Bartrow had scant time and less inclination for troublement about such purely mundane affairs as the driving of tunnels and the incidental acquisition of wealth thereby. There were burro journeys to the top of the pass, and to the sheer cliff known to the prosaic frontiersmen as the devil's jumping-off-place; excursions afoot down the mountain to the cool depths of Chipeta Canyon, and to Silver Lake beyond the shrugged shoulder of Lost Creek Mountain; and finally there was a breath-cutting climb to the snow-patched summit of El Reposo, undertaken for the express purpose of enabling Myra Van Vetter to say that she had been where there was reason to presume that no human being had preceded her.

These things three of them did, leaving Stephen Elliott to his own devices, in accordance with the set terms upon which he had consented to father the *parti carre*. "Go on and climb your mountains and just leave me out," he would say, when the preparations were making for the day's jaunt. "I've had my share of it, off and on, while I was hunting for something I hadn't lost. Dick, here, hasn't any better sense than to humor you; but you'd tramp mighty little if I had to go along."

Whereupon he would plant his chair for the day upon the slab-floored porch of the cabin, tilt it to a comfortable angle against the wall, and while away the hours smoking a mellow pipe and reading the day-old Denver paper painstakingly, from the top of the title page to the bottom of the last want column.

Thus the crystalline autumn days winged their flight, and Bartrow squired the two young women hither and yon, and finally to the top of El Reposo, as recorded. This excursion was the climax, from a scenic point of view; and Myra, having long since exhausted her vocabulary of superlatives, was unusually silent.

"What's come over you? are you gorged with mountains?" queried Connie sympathetically, slipping her arm around her cousin's waist.

"It isn't that; it's just that I'm too full for utterance, I think; or perhaps I should say too empty of words to do it justice. How flippantly trivial everything human seems in the face of such a landscape! Here are we, three inconsequent atoms, standing brazenly in the face of great nature, and trying to gather some notion of the infinite into our finite little souls. It's sheer impertinence."

"They won't mind," rejoined Bartrow, with a comprehensive gesture, meant to include the mountains, singular and collective; "they're used to it--the impertinence, I mean. What you see is the face of nature, as you say, and man doesn't seem to be in it. Just the same, there is a small army of men scattered among these overgrown hills, each with an inquisitive pick and shovel, backed by hardihood enough to dare anything for the sake of adding something to the wealth of the world."

Myra turned her back on the prospect and searched Bartrow's eyes in a way to make him wonder what was wrong with his well-turned little speech.

"That is the first insincere thing I ever heard you say," she asserted. "As if you didn't know that not one of these men ever wastes a second thought upon the world or the people in it, or upon anything outside of his own little circle of ambitions and cravings!"

"You're quite right," admitted Bartrow, abashed and more than willing to stand corrected in any field entered by Miss Van Vetter; but Constance took up the cudgels on the other side.

"You make me exceedingly weary, you two," she said, with seraphic sweetness. "Neither of you knows what you are talking about half the time, and when you do, it isn't worth telling. Now listen to me while I show you how ridiculous you are,"--Bartrow sat down on a flat-topped boulder, and made a dumb show of stopping his ears,--"I contend that nearly every one of these poor prospectors you've been maligning is a perfect monument of unselfishness. He is working and starving and hoping and enduring for somebody else in nine cases out of ten. It's a wife, or a family, or an old father or mother, or the mortgage on the farm, or some other good thing."

Myra made a snowball and threw it at Connie the eloquent. "I think El Reposo is misnamed," she contended. "It ought to be called the Mount of Perversity. Mr. Bartrow, you are sitting upon the table, which is very undignified. Please move and let us see what Wun Ling has stowed away in the haversack."

They spread their luncheon on the flat-topped boulder, and fell upon it like the hungry wayfarers that they were, calling it a sky banquet, and drinking Wun Ling's health in a bottle of cold tea. With satiety came thoughts of the descent, and Myra pleaded piteously for a change of route.

"I shall never get down the way we came up in the wide, wide world,--not alive," she asserted. "With the view in prospect, I believe I could climb the Matterhorn; but getting down is quite another matter. Can't we go around some other way?"

Bartrow thought it possible; but since Miss Van Vetter had particularly desired to stand upon the summit of a hitherto unexplored peak, he was not sure.

"But we can try," said Myra. "At the worst we can come back and creep down the way we came up."

Bartrow glanced at his watch, and focused the field-glass on a diaphanous cloud slipping stealthily across the serrated summits of the main range away to the westward.

"Yes, we can do that, if we have time," he assented. "But I'm a little afraid of the weather. That cloud may miss us by twenty miles; and then again, it may take a straight shoot across the valley and make us very wet and uncomfortable."

Constance came to the rescue with a compromise.

"You go and prospect for a new trail, Dick, and we'll stay here. If you find one you can come back for us, and if you don't we'll be fresh for the scramble down the other way."

Bartrow said it was well, and immediately set about putting the suggestion into effect. When he was fairly out of sight over the curvature of El Reposo's mighty shoulder, Myra said:--

"He's good, isn't he?"

"He is a man among men, Myra; a man to tie to, as we say here in Colorado."

They were sitting together on the flat boulder, and Miss Van Vetter stole a side glance at her cousin's profile. "You have known him a long time, haven't you, Connie?"

"Almost ever since I can remember. I'm Colorado-born, you know, and he isn't; but he came across the plains in the days of the ox-teams, when he was a little fellow, and the first work he ever did was for poppa, when we lived on the ranch below Golden."

"He is a self-made man, isn't he?"

"Don't say that, Myra, please. I hate the word. God makes us, and circumstances or our own foolishness mar us. But Dick is self-educated, so far as he is educated at all. He was a homeless waif when he first saw the Rockies. His father died in the middle of the trip across the plains, and his mother lived only long enough to have her grave dug some two hundred miles farther west. The others took care of Dick and brought him along with them to Colorado because there wasn't anything else to do; and since, Dick has made his own way, doing any honest thing that came to his hand."

"He couldn't do the other kind," Myra averred. "But you spoke of his education as if he hadn't any. I suppose that was one of your 'exuberances,' as Uncle Stephen calls them. Mr. Bartrow is certainly anything but illiterate."

"No, he isn't that, though he has no education of the kind you effete people have in mind when you spell the word with a capital--the kind with a Greek-letter-badge and college-yell attachment. If you should tell him you had been to Bryn Mawr, he would probably take it to be some summer resort he hadn't heard of. But that isn't saying he is stupid. He could give the man with the yell a lot of information on a good many subjects. Poppa says he was always an earnest little lad; always reading everything he could get hold of--which wasn't very much in the early days, as you may imagine."

"Nevertheless, he seems to be getting on in the world," said Miss Van Vetter. "Your father says the Little Myriad is a promising mine."

There was more pathos than mirth in the smile which flitted across Connie's face.

"You're new among us yet, Myra. Everything with mineral in it is promising to us; we are cranks pure and simple, on that subject. The Little Myriad is promising, of course,--there isn't an unpromising mine in the State, for that matter,--but it's only a promise, as yet. If Dick should reach the end of his hundred and fifty feet of development without striking pay, he would be a ruined man."

"Why couldn't he keep on until he should strike it?"

"For the very simple reason that he is working on borrowed capital; and I happen to know that he has borrowed about all he can."

"But he believes in the success of the venture, absolutely."

"Of course he does; that is one of the conditions. It's merely a question of credit with him. If any one would lend, Dick would go on borrowing and digging until he struck pay-ore or came out on the other side of the mountain--and then he'd think he hadn't gone deep enough. That is the pathetic side of his character; he never knows when he's beaten."

"I should call it the heroic side."

"It is heroic, but it is pathetic, too. It is sure to bring him trouble, sooner or later, and Dick isn't one to take trouble lightly. He'll go on fighting and struggling long after the battle has become hopeless, and that makes the sting of defeat so much sharper. It makes me want to cry when I think what a terrible thing it would be for him if the Little Myriad should go back on its promise."

Miss Van Vetter took the field-glass and stood up to watch the storm cloud which was now spreading gradually and creeping slowly down the slopes of the divide. "You think a great deal of Mr. Bartrow, don't you, Connie?"

"Indeed I do; he comes next to poppa with me."

For so long a time as one might take in saying a little prayer at a needful crisis, Myra gave her undivided attention to the fleecy blur slipping down the side of the main range. Then the strain on her eyes filled them with tears, and she put the glass back into its case. Constance saw the tears.

"Why, Myra! you're crying. What is the matter?"

"I'm lonesome and homesick, and I long for the flesh-pots of Denver; but it was the glass that made me cry. Connie, dear, don't you think we'd better be going back to town?"

"Why, yes; if you are quite ready. But it will be a disappointment for Dick. He is counting on another week, at least."

"Yes, I know; and that is why I think we ought to go. We are keeping him from his work in the mine, and his time is precious."

"Rather more so than he gives us to understand, I fancy," Constance assented. "I suppose you are right, Myra,--we ought not to stay; but you'll have to tax your ingenuity to find an excuse that will hold water. Dick won't be satisfied with a P. P. C. card."

"Perhaps the chapter of accidents will help us. If it doesn't, you must make your father remember that he has urgent business in Denver which won't wait. Can't you manage it that way?"

"If I can't, I'll ring you in. Poppa would take passage for Honolulu to-morrow if he had an idea that you'd like to see the Kanakas ride surf-boards."

"I should much rather not appear in it," said Myra; and then, with truly feminine inconsistency, "I don't know why I say that. On the whole, perhaps you'd better say that it's my proposal. Then Mr. Bartrow will set it down to the vagaries of a flighty migrant, and he won't hold spite against his old friends."

Connie the wise began to wonder if there were unplumbed depths in her cousin,--depths which Bartrow's defenseless obviousness had stirred to his sparing; but she drove the thought out as unworthy. Myra had been kind to Dick, certainly, but she had never encouraged him. There might well be an accepted lover in the dim Philadelphia background for aught Myra had said or done to evince the contrary. In which case--Connie the wise became Connie the pitiful in the turning of a leaf--poor Dick! At that moment, as if the sympathetic thought had evoked him, Bartrow came in sight on the lower slope of the summit. He was breathing hard when he reached them.

"We can make it all right," he said, slinging the glass and the haversack, "but it'll add three or four miles. It's a roundabout way, and it will take us into the head of Little Myriad Gulch. If you're ready we'll get a quick move. That storm is heading straight for us, and we'll be in luck if we don't come in for a soaking."

El Reposo is a bald mountain, and its tonsure is fringed with a heavy forest growth which stops abruptly at timber-line. Halfway to the head of the gulch the new trail ended in a tangle of fallen trees,--the debris of an ancient snowslide,--and much valuable time was lost in skirting the obstacle. Bartrow glanced over his shoulder from time to time, and finally said, "There it comes, with a vengeance!"

The exclamation was ill-timed. Myra turned and stopped to watch the fleecy curtain of vapor shrouding the great bald summit they had just quitted. Bartrow sought to possess his soul in patience.

"Isn't it grand!" she said, with kindling enthusiasm.

"Yes; grand and wet. If you'll excuse me, Miss Myra, I think we'd better run for it."

They ran for it accordingly, Connie in the lead like the free-limbed daughter of the altitudes that she was, and Bartrow and Miss Van Vetter hand in hand like joyous children for whom self-consciousness is not. From the beginning of the wild race down the slopes the wetting seemed momentarily imminent; none the less, they managed to reach the gulch dryshod. Inasmuch as their course down the ravine was in a direction nearly opposite to the sweep of the wind, it soon took them beyond the storm zone, and they stopped to listen to the echoes of nature's battle reverberating from the crags of the higher levels. The writhing of the great firs in the grasp of the wind came to their ears like the clashing of miniature breakers on a tideless shore; and the booming of the thunder was minified by the rare atmosphere into a sound not unlike the distant firing of cannon. While they paused, Myra climbed to the top of a water-worn boulder in the bed of the ravine to get a better point of view, and from this elevation she could see the forest at the head of the gulch.

"Oh, Connie!" she cried, "climb up here, quick! It's a cyclone!"

Bartrow threw up his head like a startled animal. There was a steady roar in the air which was not of the thunder.

"Cyclone nothing!" he yelled. "It's a cloud-burst! Stay where you are, for your life, Miss Myra!"

Even as he spoke the roar deepened until the vibration of it shook the solid earth, and a dark mass of water, turbid and debris-laden, shot from the head of the gulch and swept down the ravine. Bartrow lived an anguished lifetime in an instant of hesitation. To save the woman he loved was to sacrifice Constance. To help Connie first was to take the desperate chance that Myra would be safe till he could reach her.

There was no time for the nice weighing of possibilities; and Richard Bartrow was a man of action before all else. Winding an arm about Constance, he dashed out of the ravine with her, getting back to Myra three seconds in advance of the boulder-laden flood. There was time enough, but none to spare. A tree gave him an anchorage on the bank above her; she sprang toward him at the word of command; and he plucked her up out of the reach of the foaming torrent which snapped at her and overturned the great rock upon which she had been standing.

After which narrow escape they sat together on the slope of safety and watched the subsiding flood, laughing over the "stampede," as Connie called it, with all the reckless hardihood of youth and good spirits.

"I wouldn't have missed seeing it for anything in the world," declared the enthusiast. "I had plenty of time to get out of the way, but I couldn't help waiting to see how it would look, coming over that last cliff up there."

"Dick didn't give me a chance to see anything," Connie complained. "He whisked me out of the way as if I'd been a naughty little girl caught playing with the fire."

Bartrow examined the field-glass to see if it had suffered in the scramble. It was unbroken, and he put it back into the case with a sigh of relief.

"If you two had smashed that glass between you, I don't know what I should have done," he said; whereat they all laughed again and took up the line of march for the mine.

That evening, after supper, the four of them were on the porch of the three-roomed cabin, enjoying the sunset. Constance had spoken to her father about the return to Denver, and Stephen Elliott was racking his brain for some excuse reasonable enough to satisfy Bartrow, when a man came up the trail from the direction of Alta Vista. It was Bryant, the station agent; and he was the bearer of a telegram addressed to Constance. She read it and gave it to Bartrow. The operator had taken it literally, and it was a small study in phonetics.

"Shees gaun an got inter trubbel. P. Grims swipt her masheen. Wot shel I do.

"T. REAGAN."

Bartrow smiled and handed the message back. "That's Tommie, I take it. What's it about?"

"It's a young woman I've been trying to help. They are persecuting her again, and I'll have to go back as quickly as I can."

"That's bad," said Bartrow; but Connie's father looked greatly relieved, and, filling his pipe, began to burn incense to the kindly god of chance.

After a time, Bartrow asked, "When?"

Connie's gaze was on the sunset, but her thoughts were miles away in a humble cottage in West Denver where she had thought Margaret would be safely hidden from the spoiler.

"I think we'd better go now--to-night. You can flag the train at the mine switch, can't you?"

"Yes."

"And you can get ready, can't you, Myra?"

"Certainly; it won't take me long to pack. If you'll excuse me I'll go and do it now, and get it off my mind."

When Myra had gone in, Bartrow took the message and read it again. "This is no woman's job," he objected. "Let me go down with you and straighten it out."

"No, you mustn't, Dick; you have lost a clear week as it is."

She rose and went to the end of the porch, whither he presently followed her. "You'll need a man," he insisted.

"I shall have poppa."

"Yes, but he's no good--only to pay the bills."

"No matter; I shall get along all right."

"That's straight, is it?"

"Yes, I mean it."

"All right; you're the doctor. But you must wire me if you need me."

An hour later the visitors had said good-by to Bartrow and the Little Myriad, and were on their way down the canyon in the miniature sleeping-car. Myra pleaded weariness and had her berth made down early. Nevertheless, she lay awake far into the night gazing out at the rotating heavens and the silent procession of peaks and precipices. For a background the shifting scene held two irrelevant pictures; one, freshly etched, reproducing the little drama of the cloud-burst; the other a memory of something she had read,--a story in which a man, two women, an overturned boat, and a storm-lashed lake figured as the persons and properties.

"He knew which he loved--which to save first--when the crux came," she said softly to her pillow, "and the other girl was fortunate not to have drowned." And at that moment a certain well-to-do gentleman of middle age in a far-away city on the Atlantic seaboard was nearer the goal of his wishes than he had ever been before.

In the mean time, Bartrow had an inspiration which was importunate enough to send him afoot to Alta Vista in the wake of the swinging passenger train. It found voice in a mandatory telegram to Lansdale, telling him to call at once upon Miss Constance Elliott, to present the message as his credential, and to place himself at her service in any required capacity, from man-at-arms to attorney-at-law.



CHAPTER XIII

In his westward sweep over the Titanic playground of farther Colorado, the sun looks down into a narrow valley through which tumbles a brawling stream whose waters, snow-born within rifle-shot, go to swell the canyoned flood of the Gunnison River. Fir-clad mountains, sombre green to timber-line and fallow dun or dazzling white above it, according to the season, stand like a cordon of mighty sentinels around and about; and the foot of civilized man treading the sward of the park-like valley must first have measured many weary miles of the mountain wilderness.

Notwithstanding its apparent inaccessibility, and its remoteness from any hoof-worn trail, the valley had once been inhabited. The evidences were a rude log cabin, with its slab door hanging by a single leathern hinge, buttressing a weathered cliff on the western bank of the stream; and, in the opposing mountain slope, a timbered opening bearded with a gray dump of debris, marking the entrance to a prospect tunnel.

Cabin and tunnel were both the handiwork of James Garvin. On one of his many prospecting tours he had penetrated to the shut-in valley; and finding a promise of mineral deposits in the slopes of the sentinel mountains, had gone into permanent camp and driven the prospect tunnel into the rocky hillside. When he had done something more than the development work necessary to hold the claim, two things conspired to drive him forth of the valley. His provisions ran low; and the indications in the tunnel, which had pointed to a silver-bearing lode of graphic tellurium, changed suddenly at a "dike" in the strata, and disappeared altogether.

Garvin was a stubborn man, and the toxin of the prospector's fever was in his blood. Wherefore he put himself upon siege rations and delved against time. When he had baked his last skillet of panbread and fired his last charge of dynamite in the heading, the dike was still unpenetrated. After that, there was nothing for it but retreat; and he reluctantly broke camp and left the valley, meaning to return when he could.

Two years elapsed and the opportunity still tarried; but Garvin kept the shut-in valley in mind, and it was thitherward he turned his face when Stephen Elliott's liberal "grub-stake," and the hastily formed partnership with Jeffard, provided the means and the help necessary to sink a shaft.

It was in the afternoon of a cloudless August day that Jeffard had his first glimpse of the park-like valley lying in the lap of the sentinel mountains. The air was crisp and thin-edged with the keen breath of the altitudes, but the untempered heat of the sun beat pitilessly upon the heads of the two men picking their laborious way over the rock-ribbed shoulder of the least precipitous mountain.

"Well, pardner, we've riz the last o' the hills," quoth Garvin, stepping aside to let the burro, with its jangling burden of camp utensils and provisions, precede him. "How d'you stack up by this time?"

Jeffard's tongue clave to the roof of his mouth. Frantic plunges into the nether depths are not conducive to good health, moral or physical, and nature was exacting the inevitable penalty. For three days he had been fighting a losing battle with an augmenting army of ills, and but for the rough heartening of his companion he would have fallen by the wayside more than once during the breath-cutting march over the mountain passes. Wherefore his answer to Garvin's question was the babblement of despair.

"I'm a dead man, Garvin. You'll only have me to bury if you persist in dragging me any farther. I'm done, I tell you."

Garvin stroked his stubby chin and hid his concern under a ferocious scowl.

"No, you ain't done, not by a long shot. You needn't to think I'm goin' to let you play off on me that-a-way--with the promised land cuddlin' down yonder in that gulch a-waitin' for us. Not much, Mary Ann. You're goin' to twist the crank o' that there win'lass a-many a time afore you get shut o' me."

The burro wagged one ear and sat upon its haunches preparatory to a perilous slide down a steep place in the trail. Garvin saved the pack by darting forward and anchoring both beast and burden by main strength. While the big man was wrestling with the burro, Jeffard stumbled and fell, rose wavering to his knees and fell again, this time with his teeth set to stifle a groan. Garvin threw the pack-animal with dexterous twitch of its foreleg, and hopped it with a turn of the lariat before going back to Jeffard.

"Now then, up you come," he said, trying to stand Jeffard upon his feet; but the sick man collapsed inertly and sank down again.

"Let me alone," he enjoined, in a sudden transport of feeble truculence. "I told you I was done, and I am. Can't you go about your business and leave a man to die in peace?"

"Oh, you be damned," retorted Garvin cheerfully. "All you need is a little more sand. Get up and mog along now, 'fore I run shy o' patience and thump the everlastin' daylight out o' you." And he stooped again and slipped his arm under Jeffard's shoulders.

The sick man's head rocked from side to side. "Don't," he groaned, this time in gentler protest. "I'd do it if I could--if only for your sake. But it isn't in me; I've been dying on my feet for the last three hours. I couldn't drag myself another step if the gates of Heaven stood open down yonder and all hell were yapping at my heels. Go on and leave me to fight it out. You can come back to-morrow and cover up what the buzzards have left."

Garvin straightened up and drew the back of his hand across his eyes.

"Listen at him!" he broke out, in a fine frenzy of simulated rage. "Just listen at the fool idjit talk, will you? And me standin' over him a-pleadin' like a suckin' dove! By crucifer! if it wasn't for throwin' away good ammynition, I'd plug him one just for his impidence--blame my skin if I wouldn't!" And being frugal of his cartridges, Garvin flung himself upon the prostrate burro, dragged it to its feet, cast the jangling burden, pack-saddle and all, and lifted Jeffard astride of the diminutive mount.

"There you are," he said, with gruff tenderness. "Now then, just lop your head on my shoulder and lay back ag'inst my arm, and play you was a-coastin' down the hill back o' the old schoolhouse on a greazed streak o' lightnin', with your big brother a-holdin' you on. We'll make it pretty middlin' quick, now, if the canary don't peg out." And thus they made entrance into the shut-in valley, and won across it to the log cabin whose door hung slantwise by the single hinge.

Then and there began a grim fight for the life of a man, with an untutored son of the solitudes, lacking everything but the will to do, pitted against a fierce attack of mountain fever which was aided and abetted by the devitalizing effects of Jeffard's hard apprenticeship to evil. In the end the indomitable will of the nurse, rather than any conscious effort on the part of the patient, won the battle. Garvin cursed his luck and swore pathetically as day after day of the short mountain summer came and went unmarked by any pick-blow on the slopes of the mountains of promise; but his care of the sick man was unremitting, and he was brutally tender and wrathfully soft-hearted by turns until Jeffard was well beyond the danger line.

It was a lambent evening in the final week of August when Garvin carried the fever-wasted convalescent to the door of the cabin and propped him in a rustic chair builded for the occasion.

"How's that?" he demanded, standing back to get the general effect of man and chair. "Ain't I a jack-leg carpenter, all right? Now you just brace up and swaller all the outdoors you can hold while I smoke me a pipe."

He sat down on the doorstep and filled and lighted his pipe. After a few deep-drawn whiffs, he said, "Don't tire you none to be a-settin' up, does it?"

"No." Jeffard turned slowly and sniffed the pungent fragrance of the burning tobacco with a vague return of the old craving. "Have you another pipe?" he queried. "I believe I'd enjoy a whiff or two with you."

"Now just listen at that, will you?" Garvin growled, masking his joy under a transparent affectation of disgust. "Me takin' care of him like he was a new-borned baby, and him a-settin' there, cool as a blizzard, askin' for a pipe! If I wasn't a bloomin' angel, just waitin' for my wings to sprout, I'd tell him to go to blazes, that's about what I'd do."

None the less, he went in and found a clean corncob, filling it and giving it to Jeffard with a lighted match. The convalescent smoked tentatively for a few minutes, pausing longer between the whiffs until the fire and the tobacco-hunger died out together. After which he said what was in his mind.

"Garvin, old man, you must begin work to-morrow," he began. "I can take care of myself now, and in a few days I hope I'll be able to take hold with you. You've lost too much time tinkering with me. I'm not worth it."

"We'll find out about that when we get you on to the crank o' that win'lass," said Garvin sententiously. "Man's a good deal like a horse,--vallyble accordin' to location. They tell me that back in God's country, where I was raised, horses ain't worth their winter keep since the 'lectric cars come in; but out yere I've seen the time when a no-account, gristly little bronco, three parts wire and five parts pure cussedness, 'ud a-been worth his weight in bullion."

Jeffard picked the application out of the parable, and smiled.

"You've got your bronco," he asserted. "When you're a little better acquainted with me you'll find your definition isn't far wrong. I used to think I was a halfway decent sort of fellow, Garvin, but I believe the last few months have flailed all the whole wheat out of me, leaving nothing but the musty chaff."

"Oh, you be hanged!" laughed Garvin, with the emphasis heartening. "You're off your feed a few lines yet and your blood needs thickenin', that's all. I'll risk but what you'll assay up to grade in the mill-run."

Silence came and sat between them for a little space, holding its own until Jeffard's eye lighted upon the debris-bearded tunnel-opening in the opposite hillside.

"What is that?" he asked, pointing the query with an emaciated finger.

"That's my old back number that I was tellin' you about on the way in," Garvin explained. "I thought I'd struck a lead o' tellurides up there, sure, but it petered out on me."

"When was that?" Jeffard's recollection of all things connected with the fever-haunted jomada across the ranges was misty and fragmentary.

"Two year ago this summer," rejoined the miner; and filling his pipe afresh he retold the story of his earlier visit to the valley.

"It's a dead horse," he added, by way of conclusion. "I ought to knowed better. I'm old enough at the business to savvy tellurides when I see 'em, and that lead never did look right from the start."

"Did you ever locate it?" asked Jeffard.

"Not much! I never got any furdur along that-a-way than to stake it off and make a map of it." Garvin found a pack of thumbled and grimy papers in his pocket and worked his way through it till he came upon the map. "You're an engineer," he said: "how's that for a jack-leg entry map?"

Jeffard examined the rude sketch and pronounced it good enough; after which he folded the paper absently and put it in his pocket. Garvin did not notice his failure to return it,—if, indeed, he thought or cared anything further about it,—and went on talking of his own unwisdom in driving a tunnel on a lode which did not "look right."

"We'll know better, this trip," he asserted, as somewhat of a salve to the former hurt. "We'll go higher up the gulch and sink a shaft; that's about what we'll do."

And this, in the fullness of time, was what they did. After a few days, Jeffard was able to inch his way by easy stages to the new location; and by the time Garvin had dug and blasted himself into a square pit windlass-deep, the convalescent was strong enough to take his place at the hoist.

From the very first, Jeffard was totally unable to share Garvin's enthusiastic faith in the possibilities of the new cast for fortune. Ignorant of the first principles of practical metal-digging, he was, none the less, a fairly good laboratory metallurgist; while Garvin, on the other hand, knew naught of man's, but much of nature's, book. Hence there arose many discussions over the possibilities; Jeffard contending that the silver-bearing lodes of the valley were not rich enough to bear pack-train transportation to the nearest railway point; and Garvin clinging tenaciously to the prospectors' theory that a "true-fissure" vein must of necessity prove a very Golconda once you had gone deep enough into its storehouse.

When all was said, the man of the laboratory won a barren victory. At thirty feet the lode in the shaft had dwindled to a few knife-blade seams, and the last shot fired in the bottom of the excavation put an end to the work of exploitation by letting in a flood of water. Since they had no means of draining the shaft so suddenly transformed into a well, Garvin gave over, perforce, but proposed trying their luck elsewhere in the valley before seeking a new field. Jeffard acquiesced, with the suggestion that they save time by prospecting in different directions; and this they did, Garvin taking the upper half of the valley and Jeffard the lower. At the end of a week, Jeffard gave up in disgust; and when his companion begged for yet one other day, was minded to stay in camp and invite his soul in idleness until the persevering one should be convinced.

As a matter of course, Garvin's day multiplied itself by three, and Jeffard wore out the interval as best he might, tramping the hillsides in the vicinity of the cabin to kill time, and smoking uncounted pipes on the doorstep in the cool of the day while waiting for Garvin's return.

It was in the pipe-smoking interregnum of the third day that the abandoned tunnel in the opposite hillside beckoned to him. Oddly enough, he thought, Garvin had never referred to it since the retelling of its history in the reminiscent pauses of their first outdoor evening together. Jeffard's eye measured the dump appraisively. It was a monument to the heroic perseverance of the solitary prospector.

"That hole must be thirty or forty feet into the hill," he mused. "And to think of his worrying it out alone!" Here idle curiosity nudged him with its blunt elbow, and he rose and knocked the ashes from his pipe. "I believe I'll go up and

have a look at it. It'll kill another half-hour or so, and they're beginning to die rather hard."

He crossed the stream on Garvin's ancient foot-log, and clambered leisurely to the toe of the dump. The snows of two winters had washed the detritus free of soil, and Jeffard bent, hand on knee, to look for specimens of the ore-bearing rock.

"Gangue-rock, most of it, with a sprinkling of decomposed quartz along at the last," he said reflectively. "The quartz was the dike he struck, I suppose. He was wise to give it up. There's no silver in that stuff."

He picked up a bit of the snuff-colored rock and crumbled it in his hand. It was quite friable, like weathered sandstone, but when the fragment was crushed the particles still clung together as if matted with invisible threads. Jeffard was too new to the business of metal-hunting to suspect the tremendous significance of the small phenomenon, but he was sufficiently curious to gather a double handful of the fragments of quartz, meaning to ask Garvin if he had noticed the peculiarity. And when he had climbed to the tunnel and explored it to its rock-littered heading by the light of a sliver splintered from one of the pitchy logs of the timbering, he sauntered back to the cabin beneath the western cliff and made a fire over which to prepare supper against Garvin's return.



CHAPTER XIV

GARVIN came into camp late, and Jeffard needed not to ask the result of the day's quest. He had cooked the simple supper, and they ate it together in silence--the big man too weary and dejected to talk, and Jeffard holding his peace in deference to Garvin's mood. Over the pipes on the doorstep Jeffard permitted himself a single query.

"No go?"

"Nary," was the laconic rejoinder.

Jeffard was the least demonstrative of men, but the occasion seemed to ask for something more than sympathetic silence. So he said: "It's hard luck; harder for you than for me, I imagine. Somehow, I haven't been able to catch the inspiration of the mineral-hunt; but you have, and you've worked hard and earned a better send-off."

"Huh! far as earnin' goes, I reckon it's a stand-off 'twixt the two of us. You've certainly done your share o' the pullin' and haulin', if you have been sort o' like what the boys call a 'hoodoo.'"

Jeffard blew a cloud of smoke toward the gray rock-beard hanging ghostly beneath the black mouth of the excavation in the opposite hillside, and was far from taking offense. "Meaning that I haven't been enthusiastic enough to fill the bill?" he asked.

"I guess that's about it. And it always seemed sort o' cur'ous to me. Money'd do you a mighty sight more good than it would me."

Jeffard smoked his pipe out, debating with himself whether it was worth while to try to explain his indifference to his companion. He did try, finally, though more for the sake of putting the fact into words than in any hope of making it understandable to Garvin.

"I'm afraid it isn't in me to care very much about anything," he said, at the end of the reflective excursion. "Six months ago I could have come out here with you and given you points on enthusiasm; but since then I've lived two or three lifetimes. I'm a very old man, Garvin. One day, not so very long ago, if you measure by weeks and months, I was young and strong and hopeful, like other men; but instead of burning the candle decently at the proper end, I made a bonfire of it. The fire has gone out now, and I haven't any other candle."

The big prospector was good-naturedly incredulous. "You've had the fever, and you're rattled, yet; that's all that's the matter with you. You've been flat down on your luck, like one or two of the rest of us; but that ain't any reason why you can't get up ag'in, is it?"

Jeffard despaired of making it clear to any simple-hearted son of the wilderness, but he must needs try again.

"That is your view of the case, and it would be that of others who knew the circumstances as well as you do. But it doesn't fit the individual. David said he would wash his hands in innocency, and perhaps he could, and did--though I doubt it. I can't. When you picked me up that night on the shore of the pond, I'd been wandering around in the bottomless pit and had lost my way. I knew then I shouldn't find it again, and I haven't. I seem to have strayed into a region somewhere beyond the place where the actual brimstone chokes you; but it's a barren desert where nothing seems quite the same as it used to--where nothing is the same, as a matter of fact. Do I make it plain?"

"You bet you don't," responded Garvin, out of the depths of cheerful density. "You've been a mile or two out o' my reach for the last half-hour 'r so. Ther' ain't no use a-cryin' over spilt milk, is what I say; and when I go kerflummix, why, I just cuss a few lines and get up and mog along, same as heretofore."

Jeffard laughed, but there was no mirth in him.

"I envy you; you are a lucky man to be able to do it. I wish in my soul I could."

"What's the reason you can't?"

"That is precisely what I haven't been able to make you understand. But the fact remains. The Henry Jeffard my mother knew is dead and buried. In his place has arisen a man who is acquainted with evil, and is skeptical about most other things. Garvin, if you knew me as well as I know myself, you'd run me out of this valley with a gun before you slept. I owe you as heavy a debt of gratitude as any one man ever owed another, and yet if your welfare stood between the beginning and the end of some devil's service in which I might be commissioned, you wouldn't be safe to sleep in the same cabin with me."

"Oh, you be damned," said the big man, relapsing into a deeper depth of incredulity. "You've got a devil 'r two, all right, maybe, but they're the blue kind, and they'll soak out in the washin'. Fact o' the matter is, our cussed luck in this yere hole in the ground has struck in on you worse'n it has on me. You'll be all right when we get some place else and strike it rich."

Jeffard refilled his pipe and gave over trying to define himself in set terms. When next he broke silence it was to speak of the impending migration.

"I suppose we pull out in the morning?" he said.

"Might as well. We've played the string out up yere. Besides, summer's gone, and a month of fall, and the grub's runnin' shy."

"Where next?" inquired Jeffard.

"I dunno, hardly. 'Tain't worth while to strike furdur in, this late in the season. We've got to be makin' tracks along back t'wards the valley afore the snow comes, and that'll be pretty quick now. What d' you say to tryin' some o' the gulches o' the Mosquito?"

"Anywhere you say. I'm with you--if you care to take me after what I've tried to tell you. But you'd much better go alone. You had it right a while ago; you have yoked yourself to a Jonah."

"Jonah nothin'!" growled the soft-hearted giant. "Nex' time I set out to devil you, I'll drill a hole aforehand and put in a pinch o' dannymite along with the joke. Then when I tech it off, you'll know."

The moon was riding high in the black arch of the sky, and the gray dump on the opposite mountain stood out in bold relief. Jeffard rose and leaned against the doorpost.

"Garvin, you have never yet told me who staked us for this trip," he said, broaching a subject which had more than once asked for speech.

The miner laughed. "You never asked. It's the same old man that staked me when I was yere the first time."

"When you dug that hole up yonder in the hill?"

"Um--hm."

"Who is he?"

Garvin hesitated. "I had a fool notion I wouldn't tell you till we'd struck somethin' worth while," he said finally. "If so be we've got to go back with our fingers in our mouths, I put it up that maybe you'd feel easier in your mind if you didn't know. You're so cussed thin-skinned about some things that a feller has to watch out for you continnyus."

Jeffard dug the kindly intention out of the upbraiding, and forebore to press the question. After all, what did it matter? Whatever befell, he was under no obligations to any one save Garvin. And in the itemizing of that debt, an obligation which made him restive every time he thought of it, he lost sight of the question he had intended asking about the peculiarity of the snuff-colored rock in the abandoned tunnel.

A little later, Garvin got up with a mighty yawn, and said: "If we're goin' to get out o' here afore noon to-morrer, I reckon we'd better be huntin' us a little sleep."

"Turn in if you like; I'm not sleepy yet," said Jeffard; and when Garvin was gone in, he fell to pacing up and down before the cabin door with his hands behind him and the cold pipe between his teeth.

To what good end had he been preserved by Garvin's interference on that night of despair two months before? Had the reprieve opened up any practicable way out of the cynical labyrinth into which he had wandered? Had his immense obligation to the prospector quickened any fibre of the dead sense of human responsibility, or lighted any fire of generous love for his kind?

He shook his head. To none of these questions could he honestly append an affirmative. In the desolate wreck he had made of his life no good thing had survived save his love for Constance Elliott. That, indeed, was hopeless on the side of fruition; but he clung to it as the one clue of promise, hoping, and yet not daring to hope, that it might one day lead him out of the wilderness of indifference. While he dwelt upon it, pacing back and forth in the moonlight, he recalled his picture of her standing in the dust-filtered afternoon sunlight, with the dim corridor for a background.

"God keep you, my darling. I may not look upon your face again, but the memory of your loving kindness to one soul-sick castaway will live while he lives."

He said it reverently, turning his face toward the far-away city beyond the foot-hills; and there was no subtle sense of divination to tell him that, at an unmapped side-track on the farther slope of the southernmost sentinel mountain, Bartrow was at that moment handing Constance Elliott up the steps of a diminutive sleeping-car which was presently to go lurching and swaying on its way down the mountain in the wake of a pygmy locomotive. Nor could he know that, a few hours earlier, the far-seeing gray eyes, out of whose depths he had once drawn courage and inspiration and the will to do good, had rested for a moment on the shut-in valley.

For the southward sentinel mountain was known to the dwellers on its farther slopes as El Reposo.



CHAPTER XV

ROBERT LANSDALE, literary starveling and doomed victim of an incurable malady, was yet sufficiently unchastened to read Bartrow's telegram with the nerves of reluctance sharp set. For what he persuaded himself were good and defensible reasons, he had lived the life of an urban hermit in Denver, arguing that a poverty-smitten crumb-gatherer with one foot in the grave might properly refuse to be other than an onlooker in any scene of the human comedy.

The prompting was not altogether unselfish. In common with other craftsmen of his guild, Lansdale was blessed, or banned, with a moiety of the seer's gift. For him, as for all who can discern the masks and trappings and the sham stage-properties, the world-comedy had become pitifully tragic; and he was by nature compassionate and sympathetic. Wherefore he spared himself the personal point of view, cultivating an aloofness which his few friends were prone to miscall cynicism and exclusiveness.

Lansdale knew Miss Elliott by repute, and he shrewdly suspected that she knew all Bartrow could tell her about a certain literary pretender who had once been rude enough to send apologies to a hostess who had not invited him. None the less Bartrow was too good a friend to be ignored in the day of his asking; and Lansdale presented himself at the door of the house in Colfax Avenue at an unfashionably early hour, meaning to begin by making the tender of his services as nearly a matter of business as might be.

It was Connie herself who met him at the door and would hear no more than his name until he was established in her father's easy-chair before the cheerful fire in the library. Her welcome was hospitably cordial; and Lansdale, who had fondly imagined embarrassment to be one of the foibles most deeply buried under the debris of the disillusioning years, found himself struggling with an attack of tongue-tied abashment which is like to be the penalty exacted of any hermit who refuses to mix and mingle with his kind.

"I came to see you at the request of a friend of yours, and of mine, Miss Elliott," he began formally, fumbling in his pocket for the telegram. "I have a message from Mr. Richard Bartrow which--will--explain"--

The search and the sentence raveled out together in the discovery that the telegram which was to have been his introduction had been left on the writing-table in his room. Connie saw consternation in his face and made haste to help him.

"From Mr. Bartrow? We have just returned from a visit to his mine up in Chaffee County. Did he forget something that he wanted to tell us, at the last moment?"

"Really, I--I can't say," stammered Lansdale, to whom the loss of the telegram was the dragging of the last anchor of equanimity. "It appears that I was thoughtless enough to leave the telegram in my room. Will you excuse me until I can go back and fetch it?"

"Is it necessary?" Connie queried. "Can't you tell me what he says?"

Lansdale pulled himself together and gave her the gist of Bartrow's mandate. Miss Elliott's laugh made him forget his embarrassment.

"That is just like Dick," she said. "He offered to come down with us last night, but I wouldn't let him. You know Mr. Bartrow quite well, do you not?"

"Very well, indeed."

"Then you know how anxious he always is to help his friends."

"No one has better cause to know; he is one of the finest fellows in the world," Lansdale rejoined warmly.

"Thank you, for Dick's sake," said Connie; "now we shall get on nicely. But to go back a little: a young woman whom I have been trying to help is in some trouble, and Dick thought he might be needed. It was out of the goodness of his heart. I really don't need any help--at least, not more than my father's check-book can answer for."

"Are you quite sure? You must remember that I am Richard Bartrow's substitute, and make use of me accordingly. May I know the circumstances?"

Constance related them, telling him Margaret Gannon's story as only a sister of mercy could tell it; without extenuation or censure, and also without embarrassment. Lansdale listened absorbedly, with the literary instinct dominant. It was Margaret Gannon's story, but Constance Elliott was the heroine; a heroine worthy the pen of a master craftsman, he thought, while the creative part of him was busy with the pulling and hauling and scene-shifting which

the discovery of a Heaven-born central figure sets in motion. But in the midst of it the man got the better of the craftsman. He foresaw with sudden clarity of insight that Miss Elliott would presently be of the inner circle of those out of whom the most hardened votary of the pen cannot make copy; those whose personality is sacred because it is no longer a thing apart to be dispassionately analyzed.

When she made an end, he sat looking at her so intently and so long that she grew nervous. The light in his eyes made her feel as if she were focused under the object glass of a microscope. He saw the enthusiasm die out of her face and give place to discomposure, and made eager apologies.

"Forgive me, Miss Elliott; I didn't mean to be rude. But I have never looked upon your like before,—a woman in whom the quality of mercy is not strained; whose charity is compassionate enough to reach out to the unfortunate of her own sex."

Connie was too simple-hearted to be self-conscious under commendation.

"That is because your opportunities have been unkind, I fancy. A few years ago your criticism would have been very just; but nowadays much of the rescue work is done by women, as it should be."

"Much of the organized work, yes. But your own story proves that it has not become individualized."

"That may well be the fault of the advocate in Margaret's case," returned Connie, whose charity was not circumscribed. "If any one of the many good women I have tried to enlist in this young woman's cause had been the one to discover her, I should doubtless have the same story to tell, and quite possibly with a better sequel. But now you understand why I don't need help. Tommie—he's my newsboy henchman, you know—has been here this morning to make his report. It seems that when Margaret was taken sick she was in debt to this man Grim for costumes, or railway fare, or something, and he has taken her sewing-machine to satisfy the claim."

The hectic flush in Lansdale's thin cheek began to define itself, with a little pulse throbbing in the centre of it.

"He is an iniquitous scoundrel, and he ought to be prosecuted," he declared. "Don't you see?—but of course you don't; you are too charitable to suspect his real object, which is to drive the young woman back into the service of his master, the devil. He had no more legal right to take her sewing-machine than he would have to attach the tools of a mechanic. Is there any law in Colorado?"

"Plenty of it," Connie rejoined; adding, with unconscious sarcasm, "but I think it is chiefly concerned with disputes about mining claims."

"Let us hope there is a statute or two over and above, for the protection of ordinary mortals," said Lansdale, rising and finding his hat. "I presume you meant to buy Margaret another sewing-machine. You mustn't encourage buccaneering in any such way. Let me go and try my powers of persuasion on Mr. Peter Grim."

But Connie was not unmindful of what Bartrow had told them about Lansdale's ill health, and she promptly disapproved.

"No, indeed, you mustn't, Mr. Lansdale; you mustn't think of doing any such thing. You don't know the man. He is a 'hold-over' desperado from the stage-line days. Even Dick admits that he is a person to be feared and avoided. And, besides, you're not strong, you know."

Lansdale smiled down upon her from his gaunt height, and his heart warmed to her in a way which was not to be accounted for by the simple rule of the humanities.

"Dick told you that, too, did he? I am sorry."

"Why?"

"Because it involves your sympathy, and sympathy is much too precious to be wasted upon such flotsam as I. But I am quite robust enough to see justice done in this young woman's case. You must promise me not to move in it until you hear from me."

Connie promised and let him go. But in the stronger light of the hall she saw how really ill he looked, and was remorsefully repentant, after her kind.

Lansdale left the house in Colfax Avenue with an unanalyzed sense of levitation, which made him feel as though he were walking upon air; but when he had accounted for the phenomenon he came to earth again with disheartening celerity. What had a man in whose daily walk death was a visible presence to do with the tumult of gladsome suggestion evoked by a few words of sympathy from a compassionate young woman with a winsome face and

innocent eyes? Nothing; clearly, nothing whatever. Lansdale set his teeth upon the word, and drove the suggestion forth with sudden bitterness. His part in the little drama growing out of Miss Elliott's deed of mercy was at best but that of a supernumerary. When he should have made his entrance and exit, he must go the way of other supernumeraries, and be presently forgotten of the real actors.

So ran the wise conclusion; but the event leagued itself with unwisdom, and the prudent forecasting gave place to the apparent necessities. The preliminary interview with Grim was wholly abortive. The man of vice not only refused point blank to make restitution, but evinced a readiness to take the matter into the courts which was most disconcerting to Margaret Gannon's moneyless advocate. Thereupon ensued other visits to the house in Colfax Avenue, and a growing and confidential intimacy with Constance, and the enlisting of Stephen Elliott in the cause of justice, and many other things not prefigured in Lansdale's itinerary.

And at the end of it all it was Stephen Elliott's check-book, and not an appeal to the majesty of the law, which rescued Margaret Gannon's sewing-machine; and the man of vice pocketed the amount of his extortionate claim, and gave a receipt in full therefor, biding his time, and bidding an obsequious Son of Ahriman--the same whom Jeffard had smitten aforetime--keep an eye on Margaret Gannon against the day when she should be sufficiently unbefriended to warrant a recasting of the net.

And when these things had come to pass, Robert Lansdale was of all men the most miserable. From much dabbling in the trickling rill of fictional sentiment, he had come to disbelieve the existence of any deep river of passion; but now he found himself upon the brink of such a river and was forbidden to plunge therein. Nay, more; he must turn away from it, parched and thirsty as any wayworn pilgrim of the world-desert, without so much as lifting a palmful of its healing waters to his lips.

He postponed the turning away from day to day, weakly promising himself that each visit to the house in Colfax Avenue should be the last, and as weakly yielding when a day or two of abstinence had enhanced his soul-hunger until it became a restless agony, mocking his most strenuous effort to drown it in a sea of work.

Failing himself utterly, he fell to watching Connie's face for some token of the hopelessness of his passion, telling himself that he should find strength to stay away when he should read his sentence in the calm gray eyes. But Connie's eyes were as yet no more than frankly sympathetic. And because he was far from home, and seemingly friendless, and fighting the last grim battle with an incurable malady, she made him welcome and yet more welcome, until finally, the optimistic insanity of the consumptive came upon him, assuring him that he should live and not die, and pointing him hopefully down a dim vista of years,--a shining way wherein they two might walk hand in hand till they should come to the gate of the House Beautiful whose chatelaine is Fame.

CHAPTER XVI

THE line of retreat from the valley, called by Jeffard "of dry bones," to the possible land of promise in the Mosquito, lay through Leadville; not the teeming, ebullient, pandemoniac mining-camp of the early carbonate era, but its less crowded, less effervescent, though no less strenuous successor of the present.

On the march across the sky-pitched mountains it had been agreed between them that there should be one bivouac in the city of the bleak altitudes. That is to say, Garvin proposed it, and Jeffard assented, though not without a premonition that the halt would be fatal to the proposed Mosquito sequel to the campaign in the Saguache. He knew at least one of Garvin's weaknesses, and that it was akin to his own. There were the beast of burden and the dispensable moiety of the camping outfit to sell, and provision to buy; and Jeffard weighed his companion in the balances of his own shortcomings. He was well assured that he could not trust himself with money in his hand in any such city of chanceful opportunity as the great carbonate camp; and arraiging Garvin at the bar of the same tribunal, he judged him before the fact.

It was a measure of the apathetic indifference which possessed Jeffard that the premonition gave him scant concern. He marveled inwardly when the fact of indifference defined itself. Aside from any promptings of common human gratitude evolving themselves into friendly solicitude for the man who had twice saved his life,--promptings which he found dead because he looked to find them dead,--there was this: If his companion should stumble and spill the scanty residue in the common purse the wolf-pack of famine and distress would be at their heels in a single sweep of the clock-hands. And yet the fact remained.

Jeffard was cogitating vaguely this curious manifestation of mental and moral inertia when the city of the altitudes came into view over the crest of the final ascent in the toilsome journey. The smoke from the smelters was trailing lazily toward the distant Mosquito, and a shifting cumulus of steam marked the snail-like advance of a railway train up the steep grade from Malta. California Gulch and the older town were hidden behind the mountain of approach; but the upper town and its western environs lay stark in the hazeless atmosphere, with the snow-splotched background of the nearer range, uptilted and immense, dwarfing the houses into hutch-like insignificance. Dreary as is this first view of the Mecca of wealth-seekers, it has quickened the pulse and brightened the eye of many a wayworn pilgrim of the mountain desert; but Jeffard's thought was in his question to Garvin.

"Is it as near as it looks? or is it as far away as this cursed no-atmosphere removes everything?"

"It's a good ten mile 'r so, yet. If we get a move on, we'll make it by sundown, maybe."

They tramped on in silence, the singing silence of the crystalline heights, measuring mile after mile at the heels of the patient burro, and reaching the scattering outposts of the western suburb while yet the sun hung hesitant above the peaks of the main range. The nearer aspect of the great mining-camp was inexpressibly depressive to Jeffard. The weathered buildings, frankly utilitarian and correspondingly unbeautiful; the harsh sterility of the rocky soil; the ruthless subordination of all things to the sordid purposes of money-getting; these were the stage-settings of a scene which moved him curiously, like the fumes of a mingled cup, intoxicating, but soul-nauseating, withal. The nausea was a consequent of the changed point of view, and he knew it; but it was no whit less grievous. Wherefore he groped in the pool of indifference until he found a small stone of protest.

"Let us do what we have to do and get away from here quickly, Garvin," he said, flinging the stone with what precision there was in him.

They had turned into the principal street, and the burro became reluctant. Garvin smote the beast from behind, and took a turn of the halter around its jaw.

"Goin' to gig back for the crowd, ain't you?" he growled, apostrophizing the jack; and then to Jeffard: "Makes you sort o' town-sick, I reckon. I know the feel of it; used to catch it, reg'lar, ever' time I'd get in from the range. It'll wear off after a day 'r so; but, as you say, the quick way to do it up is to light out ag'in, suddint."

"The sooner the better," said Jeffard. "The atmosphere of the place is maddening."

Garvin took the word literally and laughed. "'T ain't got no atmosphere to speak of,--that's what's the matter with it; too blame' high up for any use."

They were in the thick of the street traffic by this time, and it required their united malisons joined to what of energy and determination the long day's march had left them to keep the ass from planting itself monument-wise in the middle of the street.

"Dad burn a canary, anyhow!" grumbled the man of the wilderness, when they were resting a moment in front of a shakly building on the corner of a cross street. "For ornerary, simon-pure, b'iled-down, soul-killin'"--His vocabulary of objurgatory expletives ran short, and he wrought out the remainder of the malediction with a dumb show of violence.

Jeffard smiled in spite of his mood, which was anything but farcical, and pointed to the haversack of specimens dangling from the loosened pack.

"We're about to lose the samples," he said.

Garvin regained his wonted good-humor at a plunge.

"That'd be too blame' bad, wouldn't it, now; they're so blazin' precious! S'pose you lug 'em acrost yonder to that there assay-shop whilst I toll the canary down to the corral. When you get shut o' the rocks, come on round to the boardin'-house,--'Miner's Rest,'--a block funder along and two to your right. I'll meet you there bime-by, if there's anything left o' me after I get through with this dad-burned, lop-eared totin'-machine."

Jeffard shouldered the bag of samples, but before he could reply the opportunity fled clamorous. The lop-eared one, finding itself free for the moment, gave heed to a foolish bee buzzing in its atomic brain, and went racing down the cross street, with the big miner in hot pursuit.

"Exit James Garvin," quoth Jeffard, moved to smile again; and he crossed the avenue to the shakly building with the sign of the assayer besprent upon the windows.

When he tried the door and found it locked, and the littered room beyond it empty, he was minded to go on to the rendezvous while daylight served. But when he reflected that Garvin would be sure to await an assayer's verdict on the samples, and so prolong their stay in the city of banality, he decided to conclude the business affair first. So he went up and down and around and about, and found all the assay offices closed for the day save one, whose occupant, a round-bodied little German, with the face of a cherub, martialized by the huge mustachios of a cuirassier, was still at his bench. Jeffard guessed at the little man's nationality, and made a shrewd bid for celerity.

"*Guten abend, mein Herr,*" he said, unslinging his haversack.

The cherubic face of the expatriated one responded quickly to the greeting in the loved mother-tongue.

"*Wie geht's, wie geht's, mein guter Herr,*" he rejoined; and then in broken English: "I haf not dot Cherman before heard spoken in dis Gott-forsaken blaces. You haf some sambles *gebracht?*"

"*Ja, mein Herr:*"

"*Gut!* I vill of dem de tests maig. *Nicht wahr?*"

"*Gefalligst, mein lieber Herr;*" and quickly,--"we must go on our way again to-morrow."

"So qvick? *Ach! das ist nicht sehr gut.* You vill der poor olt assay-meister maig to vork on der nide. But because you haf der goot Cherman in your moud I vill it do. Vat you haf?"

Jeffard unwrapped the samples one by one, and the assayer examined them with many dubious head-shakings. The amateur made haste to anticipate the preliminary verdict.

"I know they're valueless," he admitted, "but I have a partner who will require your certificate before he will be convinced. Can you let us know to-morrow?"

"Because you haf der Cherman, yes. But it vill be no goot; der silwer iss not dere"--including the various specimens in a comprehensive gesture.

Jeffard turned to go, slinging the lightened haversack over his shoulder. At the door he bethought him of the curious fragment of quartz picked up on the dump of the abandoned tunnel. It was in his pocket, and he rummaged till he found it.

"Can you tell me anything about this?" he asked. "It seems to be a decomposed quartzite, matted on a base of some sort,--a metal, I should say."

The little German snatched the bit of quartz, and ogled it eagerly through his eye-glass.

"*Mein Gott im Himmel!*" he cried; and the eye-glass fell to the floor and rolled under the bench. "Iss it possible dot you know him not? Dot iss golt, *mein lieber freund,*--vire golt, reech, reech! Vere you got him? Haf you got some more *von dis?*"

Jeffard took it in vaguely, and tried to remember what he had done with the handful of similar fragments gathered at the same time. It came to him presently. He had emptied his pocket into the haversack on the morning of the departure from the valley what time Garvin was seeking the strayed burro.

He unslung the canvas bag and poured the handful of gravel on the bench. The assayer, trembling now with repressed excitement, examined the snuff-colored quartz, bit by bit, with a guttural ejaculation for each. "*Donnerwetter!* He gifs me feerst der vorthless stoness to maig of dem de assay, und den he vill ask me von leedle qvestion about dis--dis maknificend bonansa! *Ach! mein freund!* haf you got *viel* of dis precious quartz?"

"Why, yes; there's a good bit of it, I believe," replied Jeffard, still unawake to the magnitude of the discovery.

"Und you can find der blaces again? Dink about it now--dink hardt!"

Jeffard smiled. "Don't get excited, *mein Herr*. I know the place very well, indeed; I left it only three days since."

"*Gut; sehr gut!* Now go you; go und leef me to *mein* vork. Come you back in der *morgen*, und I vill tell you dot you are reech, reech! Go, *mein freund*, mit der goot Cherman in your moud--und Gott go mit you."

Jeffard felt his way down the dark stair, and so on out into the lighted street, still only in the middle ground between realization and the bare knowledge of the fact. He was conscious of some vague recurrent effort to surround the incredible thing; and conscious, too, that it grew and spread with each succeeding attempt to measure it until no mere human arms could girdle it.

Not yet did it occur to him to place himself at the nodus of discovery and possession. The miraculous thing was for him quite a thing apart; and when he had advanced far enough into the open country of realization to look a little about him, his thought was wholly for Garvin and the effect upon him of this sudden projection into the infinite. He tried to imagine the simple-hearted prospector as a man of affluence, and laughed aloud at the grotesque figure conjured up by the thought. What would Garvin do with his money? Squander it royally, like a loyal son of fortune, and think the world well lost, Jeffard decided.

The hissing gasoline torch of a street fakir flared gustily in the keen night wind sweeping down from the Mosquito, and the scintillant arc-stars at the corners began to take on frosty aureoles of prismatic hues. The crowds on the resonant plank sidewalks streamed boisterous and masterful, as if the plangent spirit of time and place were abroad. Jeffard came to earth again in the rude jostling of the throng. While he speculated, Garvin--Garvin the inexpectant--was doubtless awaiting him at the place appointed. He must hasten thither to be the bearer of the good news to the unspoiled one.

Looking about him to get his bearings, he found himself in front of the deserted assay office on the spot where he had parted from Garvin. "One square down and two to the right," he said, repeating Garvin's directions; and he set out to trudge them doggedly, lagging a little from honest leg-weariness. In the last half of the third square there was a screened doorway, and the click of celluloid counters came to his ears from the brilliantly lighted room beyond. At the sound the embers of the fire kindled months before glowed afresh and made his heart hot.

"Ah, you're there yet, are you?" he said, speaking to the stirring passion as if it were a sentient entity within him. "Well, you'll have to lie down again; there's no meat on the bone."

At the designated corner he found the rendezvous. It was a hostelry of the baser sort, with a bar-room dominant, and eating and sleeping conveniences--or inconveniences--subsidiary. The clatter of knives and forks on ironstone china came from the ill-smelling dining-room in the rear, and the bar-room held but one occupant. It was Garvin; he was sitting at one of the card-tables with his head in his arms. He looked up when Jeffard entered, and his smile was of fatigue.

"Hello, there; thought you'd gone and got lost in the shuffle. Get shut of 'em?"

Jeffard nodded.

"No good, I reckon?"

"No; nothing that we've found this summer. But you're a rich man, just the same, Garvin."

"Yes; I've cashed in on the outfit, and I've got twenty dollars in my inside pocket. Let's go in and chew before them fellers eat it all up."

"Don't be in a hurry; the kind of supper we'll get here can wait. I said you are a rich man, and I meant it. You remember the old hole up in the hillside above the camp,--the one you struck a 'dike' in two years ago?"

"Reckon I ain't likely to forget it."

"Well, that 'dike' was decomposed quartz carrying free gold. I was curious enough to put a handful of the stuff into my pocket and bring it out. The assayer's at work on it now, and he says it'll run high--up into the hundreds, I imagine. Is there much of it?"

The effect of the announcement on the unspoiled one was like that of an electric shock. He staggered to his feet, went white under the bronze, and flung his arms about Jeffard.

"Hooray!" he shouted; "that old hole--that same derned old hole 'at I've cussed out more'n a million times! Damn my fool soul, but I knew you was a Mascot--knew it right from the jump! Come on--let's irrigate it right now, 'fore it's a minute older!"

It was out of the depth of pure good-fellowship that Jeffard went to the bar with the fortune-daft miner. Not all the vicissitudes of the breathless rush down the inclined plane had been sufficient to slay the epicure in him; and the untidy bar reeked malodorous. But the occasion was its own excuse.

Garvin beat upon the bar with his fist, and the roar of his summons drowned the clatter of knives and forks in the adjacent dining-room. The bartender came out, wiping his lips on the back of his hand.

"What'll it be, gents?"

"The best you've got ain't good enough," said Garvin, with unwitting sarcasm. "Trot her out--three of a kind. It's on me, and the house is in it."

The man spun two glasses across the bar, and set out a black bottle of dubious aspect. Knowing his own stock in trade, he drew himself a glass of Apollinaris water.

Jeffard sniffed at the black bottle and christened his glass sparingly. The bouquet of the liquor was an entire round of dissipation with the subsequent headache thrown in. Garvin tilted the bottle with trembling hand, and filled his glass to the brim. The object-lesson was not thrown away upon the epicure.

"Here's to the derned old hole with a cold million in it," said the miner, naming the toast and draining his glass in the same breath. And then: "Come again, barkeep; drink water yourself, if you want to, but the red likker's good enough for us. What do ye say, pardner? We're in it at last, plum up to the neck, and all on account o' that derned old hole 'at I've cussed out a mil-- Here's lookin' at ye."

Jeffard merely moistened his lips the second time, and the object-lesson exemplified itself. Garvin had brimmed his glass again, and the contents of the black bottle were adulterant poisons. Wherefore he cut in quickly when Garvin would have ordered again.

"That'll do, old man; a little at a time and often, if you must, but not on an empty stomach. Let's get the money before we spend it."

The latter part of the warning had special significance for the bartender, who scowled ominously.

"Lemme see the color o' yer money," he commanded. "If youse fellies are runnin' futures on me"--

Now Garvin had been living the life of an anchorite for many weeks, and the fumes of the fiery liquor were already mounting to his brain. For which cause the bartender's insinuation was as spark to tow.

"Futures?" he yelled, throwing down a ten-dollar bill with a mighty buffet on the bar; "them's the kind o' futures we're drinkin' on right now! Why, you thick-lipped, mealy-mouthed white nigger, you, I'll come down here some day and buy the floor out from in under your feet; see? Come on, pardner; let's mog along out o' here 'fore I'm tempted to mop up his greasy floor with this here"--

There was hot wrath in the bartender's eyes, and Jeffard hustled the abusive one out of the place lest a worse thing should follow. On the sidewalk he remembered what Garvin had already forgotten, and went back for the change out of the ten-dollar bill, dropping it into his pocket and rejoining his companion before the latter had missed him. Thereupon ensued a war of words. The newly belted knight of fortune was for making a night of it; and when Jeffard would by no means consent to this, Garvin insisted upon going to the best hotel in the city, where they might live at large as prospective millionaires should.

Jeffard accepted the alternative, and constituted himself bearward in ordinary to the half-crazed son of the wilderness. He saw difficulties ahead, and the event proved that he did not overestimate them. What a half-intoxicated man, bent upon becoming wholly intoxicated, may do to make thorny the path of a self-constituted guardian Garvin did

that night. At the hotel he scandalized the not too curious clerk, and became the centre of an appreciative group in the rotunda what time Jeffard was pleading the mitigating circumstances with the hesitant deputy proprietor. In the midst of the plea, when Jeffard had consented to assume all responsibility for his companion's vagaries, Garvin broke cover in the direction of the bar-room, followed by a tail of thirsty ones.

"You say you know him?" said the clerk tentatively.

"Know him? Why, yes; he is my partner. We are just in from the range, and he has struck it rich. It's a little too much for him just now, but he'll quiet down after a bit. He is one of the best fellows alive, when he's sober; and this is the first time I've ever seen him in liquor. Two drinks of bad whiskey did it."

"Two drinks and a surfeit of good luck," laughed the clerk. "Well, we'll take him; but you must keep him out of the way. He'll be crazy drunk in less than an hour. Been to supper?"

"No."

"Better have it sent to your room. He isn't fit to go to the dining-room."

"All right; have a bell-boy ready, and I'll knock him down and drag him out, if I can."

That was easier said than done. Jeffard found the foolish one in the bar-room, drinking *ad libitum*, and holding forth to a circle of interested hearers. Garvin had evidently been recounting the history of the abandoned claim, and one of the listeners, a hawk-faced man, with shifty black eyes, was endeavoring to draw him aside. He succeeded just as Jeffard thrust his way into the circle, and the self-elected bearwarden caught the whispered question and its answer.

"You say you located her two years ago?" queried the hawk-faced one.

"No; that's the joke o' the whole shootin'-match,--thess like I was a-tellin' ye." Garvin's speech ran back to its native Tennessee idiom at the bidding of intoxication. "She ain't nev' been located *yit*; and if it hadn't 'a' been for that derved little sharp-eyed pardner o' mine"--

The questioner turned quickly to the bar.

"Drinks all round, gentlemen--on me." Then to Garvin in the cautious undertone: "You said she was over in Stray Horse Valley, didn't you?"

Garvin fell into the trap headlong. "Not much I didn't! She's a-snugglin' down under one o' the bigges' peaks in the Saguache, right whar she can listen to the purlin' o' the big creek that heads in"--

There was no time for diplomatic interference. Jeffard locked his arm about Garvin's head, and dragged the big man bodily out of the circle.

"You fool!" he hissed. "Will you pitch it into the hands of the first man that asks for it? Come along out of this!"

Garvin stood dazed, and a murmur of disapproval ran through the group of thirsters. The hand of the hawk-faced one stole by imperceptible degrees toward his hip pocket. Jeffard stopped it with a look.

"You have had fun enough with my partner for one evening, gentlemen," he said sternly. "Come on, Jim; let's go to supper."

And the thirsters saw them no more.

CHAPTER XVII

It was midnight and worse before the lately belted knight of fortune had outworn the hilarious and entered upon the somnolent stage of the little journey insensate, and when the thing could be done, Jeffard put him to bed with a paean of thanksgiving which was none the less heartfelt for being unvocalized.

Having thus set his hand to Garvin's plough, there was no alternative but to turn the furrow to the end; wherefore, to guard against surprises, he hid the boots of the bottle-mad one, barricaded the door with his own bed, and lay down to doze with eyelids ajar. At least that was the alert determination; but the event proved that he was weary enough to sleep soundly and late, and it was seven o'clock, and the breakfast caller was hammering on the door, when he opened his eyes on the new day. Naturally, his first thought was for his companion, and the sight of the empty bed in the farther corner of the room brought him broad awake and afoot at the same saltatory moment. The son of fortune was gone, and an open door into the adjoining room accounted for the manner of his going.

Five minutes later, picture an anxious brother-keeper making pointed inquiries of the day-clerk below stairs. Instant question and answer fly back and forth shuttle-wise, one may suppose, weaving suspicion into a firm fabric of fact. Two men whose names, or whose latest aliases, were Howard and Lantermann, had occupied the room next to Jeffard's,--quite chancefully, the clerk thinks. They had left at an early hour; their call was for--one moment, and he (the clerk) will ascertain the exact time.

Whereupon one may fancy an exasperated bearwarden cursing exactnesses and beating with impatient fist upon the counter for the major fact. The fact, extorted at length, is simple and conclusive. The two men had come down some time between five and six o'clock, with a third as a middle link in a chain of locked arms. One of the two had paid the bill, and they had all departed; by way of the bar-room and the side entrance, as the clerk remembers.

Whereat Jeffard is moved to swear strange oaths; is swearing them, in point of fact, when the omnibus from an early train shunts its cargo of arrivals into the main entrance. Among the incomers is a big fellow with a drooping mustache and square-set shoulders, who forthwith drops his handbag and pounces upon Jeffard with greetings boisterous.

"Well, I'll be shot!--or words to that effect" (hand-wringings and shoulder-clappings). "Now where on top of God's green earth did you tumble from? Begin away back yonder and give an account of yourself; or, hold on,--let me write my name in the book and then you can tell me while we eat. By Jove, old man! I'm foolishly glad to see you!"

Jeffard cut in quickly between the large-hearted protest and the signing of the register.

"Just a second, Bartrow; let the breakfast wait, and listen to me. I'm in no end of a tangle, and you're the man of all others to help me out if any one can. Do you happen to know a fellow named Garvin?"

"Don't I? 'Tennessee Jim, P. P.,'--that stands for perennial prospector, you know. Sure. He's of the salt of the earth; rock salt, but full flavored. I know him like a book, though I hadn't seen him for a dog's-age until--but go on."

Jeffard did go on, making the occasion one of the few which seemed to justify the setting aside of indirection.

"We were partners; we have been out together all summer. He has struck it rich, and has gone clean daft in the lilt of it. I can't get him sober long enough to do what may be necessary to secure the claim. The sharks are after him hot foot, and if they can succeed in soaking the data out of him, they will jump the claim before he can get it located and recorded."

Bartrow laughed. "That's just like Jim: ordinarily, he doesn't drink as much whiskey in a year as most men do in a week. But if that's your only grief you can come to breakfast with me and take your time about it. Later on, when we've smoked a few lines and brought up the arrears of gossip, we'll hold a council of war and see what you're to do about the potential bonanza."

"But I can't do anything; it's Garvin's, I tell you."

"Well, you are partners in it, aren't you?"

Jeffard had another fight with an ingrained reserve which was always blocking the way to directness and prompting him to leave the major fact unstated.

"We are not partners in this particular claim. It's an old discovery of Garvin's. He drove the tunnel on it two years ago and then abandoned it. He was looking for tellurides and opened a vein of free-gold quartz without knowing what he had found."

"Then it's nobody's claim, as it stands; or rather I should say it's anybody's. You--or rather Garvin--will have to begin at the beginning, just as if it were a new deal; go back and post a notice on the ground and then come out and record it. And if it's Garvin's claim, as you say, he's got to do this in person. Nobody can do it for him. You can't turn a wheel till you get hold of Jim, and that's what makes me say what I 'does.' Let's go in and eat."

"But, Dick; you don't understand"--

"Yes, I do; and I happen to know a thing or two about this deal that you don't. You've got the whole forenoon before you; you are as safe as a house up to twelve o'clock. Come on."

"I say you don't understand. You called it a 'potential bonanza' just now, meaning that it wouldn't make so very much difference if it were never recorded. But it's a bonanza in fact. If Rittenberger knows what he is talking about, it is the biggest strike of the year, by long odds. I don't know much about such things, but it seems to me it ought to be secured at once and at all hazards."

"Rittenberger, you say?--the little Dutchman? You can bank on what he tells you, every time. I didn't know you'd been to an assayer. What is the figure?"

"I don't know that. I left the sample with him last night, and was to call this morning for the certificate. But the little man bubbled over at the mere sight of it."

"Good for old Jim! So much the better. Nevertheless, as I say, you've an easy half-hour in which to square yourself with me over the ham and eggs and what-not, and plenty of time to do what there is to be done afterward. You can't do anything but wait."

"Yes, I can; I can find Garvin and make sure of him. Don't you see"--

"I see that I'll have to tell you all I know--and that's something you never do for anybody--before you'll be reasonable. Listen, then: I saw your chump of a partner less than an hour ago. He was with two of his old cronies, and all three of them were pretty well in the push, for this early in the morning. They boarded the train I came up on, and that is why I say you're safe till noon. There is no train from the west till twelve-seven. I know Jim pretty well, and at his foolishness he never quite loses his grip. He had it in mind that he ought to fight shy of something or somebody, and he's given you the slip, dodged the enemy, and gone off on a three-handed spree all in a bunch. There now, does that clear up the mystery?"

Jeffard had caught at the counter-rail and was gradually petrifying. Here was the worst that could have befallen, and Bartrow had suspected nothing more than a drunken man's frolic.

"Gone?--with two men, you say? Can you describe them?"

"Roughly, yes; they were Jim's kind--miners or prospectors. One of them was tall and thin and black, and the other was rather thick-set and red. The red one was the drunkest of the three."

"Dressed like miners?" Jeffard had to fight for the "s's." His tongue was thick and his lips dry.

"Sure."

"That settles it, Dick, definitely. Last night those two fellows were dressed like men about town and wore diamonds. They've soaked their information out of Garvin, and they are on their way to locate that claim."

It was Bartrow's turn to gasp and stammer. "What?--locate the--Caesar's ghost, man, you're daft! They wouldn't take Garvin with them!"

"They would do just that. In the first place, with the most accurate description of the locality that Garvin, drunk, could give them, there would be the uncertainty of finding it without a guide. They know that they have left a sane man behind them who can find the way back to the claim; and their only chance was to take Garvin along, keeping him drunk enough to be unsuspecting, and not too drunk to pilot them. Once on the ground ahead of me, and with Garvin in their power, they can do the worst."

Bartrow came alive to the probabilities in the catching of a breath. "Which will be to kill Garvin safely out of the way, post the claim, and snap their fingers at the world. Good Lord!--and I let 'em knock him down and drag him out under my very eyes! I'd ought to be shot."

"It's not your fault, Dick; it's mine. I saw what was in the wind last night, and stuck to Garvin till I got him to bed. I was dog-tired,--we'd been tramping all day,--and I thought he was safe to sleep the clock around. I hid his boots, dragged my bed across the door, and went to sleep."

"You couldn't have done less--or more. What happened?"

"This. Those two fellows had the room next to us, and there was a door between. They slipped him out this morning before I was awake."

"Of course; all cut out and shaped up beforehand. But, thank the Lord, there's a ghost of a chance yet. Where is the claim?"

"It is three days' march a little to the south of west, on the headwaters of a stream which flows into the Gunnison River."

"And the nearest railroad point?"

"Is Aspen. If I remember correctly, Garvin said it was about twenty miles across the range."

"Good. That accounts for the beginning of the race; they'll go to Aspen and take horses from there. But I don't understand why they took the long line. There are two railroads to Aspen, and one of them is an hour and twenty minutes longer than the other. That's your chance, and the only one,--to beat 'em to the end of the railroad run. How are you fixed?"

"For money, you mean? I have the wreck of a ten-dollar note and a hotel bill to pay."

Bartrow spun around on his heel and shot a sudden question at the hotel clerk, the answer to which was inaudible to Jeffard. But Bartrow's rejoinder was explanatory.

"Rooms over the bank, you say? That's lucky." This to the clerk; and then to Jeffard: "Come along with me; this is no time to stick at trifles. You've got to have money, suddenly, and plenty of it."

But Jeffard hung back.

"What are you going to do, Dick?"

"Stake you and let you try for a special engine over the short line. Those fellows took the long way around, as I say,--why, I don't know, because both trains leave at the same time. The running time the way they have gone is five hours and forty-five minutes. By the other line it's only four hours and twenty-five minutes. Savez?"

"Yes, but"--

"Weed out the 'buts' and come along. We're due to rout a man out of bed and make him open a bank vault. I can't put my hand into my pocket for you, as I'd like to; but I know a banker, and my credit's good."

They found the cashier of the Carbonate City National in the midst of his toilet. He was an Eastern man of conservative habit, but he was sufficiently Occidentalized to grasp the main points in Bartrow's terse narrative, and to rise to the inexorable demands of the occasion.

"You know the rule, Mr. Bartrow,--two good names; and I don't know your friend. But this seems to be an eighteen-carat emergency. Take that key and go down the back way into the bank. You'll find blank notes on the public desk. Make out your paper for what Mr. Jeffard will need, and I'll be with you in half a minute."

They found the way and the blank, which latter Bartrow hastily filled out, indorsed, and handed to Jeffard for signature. It was for five hundred dollars, and the proletariat's hand shook when he dipped the pen.

"It's too much," he protested; "I can't stand it, Dick. It is like putting a whetted sword into the hands of a madman."

That was his first reference to the past and its smirched record, and Bartrow promptly toppled it into the abyss of generalities.

"Same old hair-splitter, aren't you? What's the matter with you now?"

"You know--better than any one. I am not to be trusted with any such sum of money."

"Call it Garvin's, then. I don't know how you feel toward Jim, but I've always found him a man to tie to."

A woman would have said that Jeffard turned aside to hide an upflash of emotion, though a clot on the pen was the excuse. But it was the better part of him that made answer.

"I owe him my life--twice, Dick. By all the known hypotheses of honor and gratitude and common decency I ought to be true to him now, in this his day of helplessness. But when one has eaten and drunk and slept with infamy"--

The cashier's step was on the stair, and Bartrow cut in swiftly.

"Jeffard, you make me weary!--and, incidentally, you're killing precious time. Can't you see that trust isn't a matter of much or little? If you can't, why just name the amount for which you'd be tempted to drop Garvin, and we'll cut under it so as to be on the safe side."

"But I sha'n't need a fifth of this," Jeffard objected, wavering.

"You are liable to need more. You must remember that ten minutes hence you'll be trying to subsidize a railroad company. Sign that note and quit quibbling about it."

The thing was done, but when the money had changed hands, Jeffard quibbled again.

"If the worst comes, you can't afford to pay that note, Bartrow; and my probability hangs on a hundred hazards. What if I fail?"

The cashier had unlocked the street door for them, and Bartrow ran the splitter of hairs out to the sidewalk.

"You're not going to fail if I can ever succeed in getting you in motion. Good Lord, man! can't you wake up and get a grip of the situation? It isn't the mere saving or losing of the bonanza; it's sheer life or death to Jim Garvin--and you say you owe him. Here,--this cab is as good as any. Midland office, my man; half time, double fare. Don't spare the leather."

At eight-ten to the minute they were negotiating with the superintendent's chief clerk for a special engine to Aspen. Whereupon, as is foreordained in such crises, difficulties multiplied themselves, while the office clock's decorous pendulum ticked off the precious margin of time. Bartrow fought this battle, fought it single-handed and won; but that was because his weapon was invincible. The preliminary passage at arms vocalized itself thus:--

The Clerk, mindful of his superior's moods, and reflectively dubitant: "I'm afraid I haven't the authority. You will have to wait and see the superintendent. He'll be down at nine."

Bartrow: "Make it a dollar a mile."

The Clerk: "Can't be done; or, at least, I can't do it. We're short of motive power. There isn't an engine fit for the run at this end of the division."

Bartrow: "Say a hundred and fifty for the trip."

The Clerk: "I'm afraid we couldn't make it, anyhow. We'd have to send a caller after a crew, and"--

Bartrow, sticking to his single text like a phonograph set to repeat: "Call it a hundred and seventy-five."

The Clerk, in a desperate aside: "Heavens! I wish the old man would come!"--and aloud--"Say, I don't believe we could better the passenger schedule, even with a light engine. It's fast--four hours and twenty-five"--

Bartrow: "Make it two hundred."

Jeffard counted out the money while the office operator was calling the engine-dispatcher; and at eight-twenty they were pacing the station platform, waiting for the ordered special. Bartrow looked at his watch.

"If you get away from here at eight-thirty, you'll have three hours and thirty-five minutes for the run, which is just fifty minutes better than the regular schedule. It'll be nip and tuck, but if your engineer is any good he'll make it. Do you know what to do when you reach Aspen?"

"Why, yes; I'll meet Garvin when his train arrives, cut him out of the tangle with the sharks, get him on a horse and ride for life across the range."

"That's the scheme. But what if the other fellows object?"

Jeffard straightened himself unconsciously. "I'm not uncertain on that side; I can fight for it, if that is what you mean."

Bartrow looked him up and down with a smile which was grimly approbative. "Your summer's done you a whole lot of good, Jeffard. You look like a grown man."

"As I didn't when you last saw me. But I'm afraid I am neither better nor worse, Dick,--morally."

"Nonsense! You can't help being one or the other. And that reminds me: you haven't accounted for yourself yet. Can you do it in the hollow of a minute?"

"Just about. Garvin picked me out of the gutter and took me with him on this prospecting trip. That's all."

"But you ought to have left word with somebody. It was rough on your friends to drop out as if you'd dodged the undertaker."

"Who was there to care?"

"Well, I cared, for one; and then there is Lansdale, and--and"--

"I know," said Jeffard humbly. He was hungry for news, but he went fasting on the thinnest paring of inquiry. "Does she remember me yet?"

Bartrow nodded. "She's not of the forgetting kind. I never go to Denver that she doesn't ask me if I've heard of you. But that's Connie Elliott, every day in the week. She's got a heartful of her own just now, too, I take it, but that doesn't make any difference. She's everybody's sister, just the same."

"A--a heartful of her own, you say? I don't quite understand." Jeffard was staring intently down the empty railway yard, and the glistening lines of steel were blurred for him.

It was a situation for a bit of merciful diplomacy, but Bartrow the tactless blundered on remorselessly.

"Why, yes,--with Lansdale, you know. I don't know just how far it has gone, but if I were going to put money on it, I'd say she would let her life be shortened year for year if his could be spun out in proportion."

Jeffard brought himself up with a savage turn. Who was he that he should be privileged as those who are slain in any honorable cause?

"Lansdale is no better, then?"

"I don't know. Sometimes he thinks he is. But I guess it's written in the book; and I'm sorry--for his sake and hers. There comes your automobile."

A big engine was clanking up through the yard, but Jeffard did not turn to look at it. He was wringing Bartrow's hand, and trying vainly to think of some message to send to the woman he loved. And at the end of it, it went unsaid. One of the clerks was waiting with the train-order when the engine steamed up; and Jeffard was fain to clamber to his place in the cab, full to the lips with tender embassies, which would by no means array themselves in words.

Bartrow waited till he could fling his God-speed up to the cab window. It took the form of a parting injunction, and neither of them suspected how much it would involve.

"If you need backing in Aspen, look up Mark Denby. He's a good friend of mine; an all-around business man, and a guardian angel to fellows with holes in the ground and no ready money. Hunt him up. I'll wire your introduction and have it there ahead of you. Off you go--good luck to you!"

And at the word the big engine lifted its voice with a shout and a bell-clang, and shook itself free for the race.

CHAPTER XVIII

FROM Leadville to the point in the sky-line of the Continental Divide where the southern shoulder of Mount Massive dips to Hagerman's Pass, the railway grade climbs with the old Glenwood trail; and when Malta was left behind and the ascent fairly begun, Jeffard had fleeting glimpses of the road over which he and Garvin and the patient burro had toiled eastward the day before. From outer curves and promontories doubled at storming speed the hoof-beaten trail flicked into view and disappeared; and at times the brief vistas framed a reminiscent picture of two foot-weary pilgrims plodding doggedly in the wake of a pack-laden ass.

It was impossible to conceive that these phantoms belonged to to-day's yesterday. The crowding events of a few hours had already pushed them into a far-away past; their entities were lost in the kaleidoscopic whirl which had transformed the two men no less than their prefigurings. What had the foolish witling raving yonder on his way to despoilment and death with the two plunderers in common with the self-contained son of the wilderness, who had but yesterday been his brother's keeper in a world of disheartenment? And this other; steam-hurrying on his way to the same goal, with set jaw and tight lips and resolute purpose in his eyes; by how much or little could he be identified with the undeterminate one, whose leaden-footed trudgings the storming locomotive was taking in reverse?

Through some such cycle the wheel of reflection rolled around to its starting point in things present, and Jeffard awoke to the moving realities of steep grades and breath-cutting curves, yawning abysses and hurtling cliffs, flitting backward to the cacophony *obbligato* of the exhaust and the clangorous cries of racking machinery. The engineer braced on his box was a muscular giant, with the jaw of a prizefighter, and steel-gray eyes that had long since looked death out of countenance. Jeffard took his measure in an appraisive glance. "If your engineer is good for anything," Bartrow had said; and the glance slew the conditional doubt. What a fearless driver of fast locomotives might do toward reversing the fate of the besotted one would be done.

In the mean time the race was to the judicious rather than to the swift. The interminable succession of grades and curves clogged the wheels, and the great engine snorted and wallowed on its upward way, slowing down at times until the throbbing puffs of the escaping steam seemed to beat no more than leisurely minuet-time. But the climbing miles to the summit of the pass were measured doggedly, if not with speed. No trifling advantage of tangent or "let-up" was passed without fresh spurtings of the throttle; and when the engine swept around the long curve which is the approach to the telegraph station at the summit tunnel, the engineer glanced at his watch and nodded across to his passenger.

"We're goin' to make it," he said, in answer to Jeffard's shouted inquiry. "It'll be a close call, but the old Ninety-seven's a bird."

At the station the operator tossed a telegram through the cab window. It was from Bartrow, and its major purpose was to give the figures of the assay, which he had obtained from the little German. They were sufficiently significant, and Bartrow's added urgings were unnecessary. "I'm standing over the train dispatcher here with a club," he wired. "Don't make any economical mistake at your end of the string."

The engineer had finished oiling around and had clambered back to his box. The water supply was replenished, and the fireman was uprearing the tank-spout. Jeffard crossed the footboard and thrust a little roll of bank notes between the fingers of the brawny hand on the throttle lever. The engineer smoothed the bills on his knee and wagged his head as one doubtful.

"That's pretty well up to a month's pay."

"Well, you are going to earn it."

"Better keep it till I do," said the stalwart one, offering it back.

"No; I'm not afraid to pay you in advance. You are going to do your best, and I am not trying to bribe you. It's yours, whether we make it or not."

The big man thrust the bills into his pocket and opened the throttle. "You go over there and sit down and hold your hair on," he commanded. "I'm goin' to break the record when we get out into daylight on the other side o' the mountain."

Jeffard was still groping for hand and foot holds on the fireman's seat when the locomotive rolled out of the western portal of the summit tunnel and the record-breaking began. Of the brain-benumbing rush down the gorges of the Frying Pan on a flying locomotive, one recalls but a confused memory; a phantasmagoric jumble of cliffs and chasms, backward-flitting forests and gyrating mountain peaks, trestles and culverts roaring beneath the drumming wheels, the

shrieks of the whistle and the intermittent stridor of escaping steam in the iron throat of the safety-valve; a goblin dance of matter in motion to a war blast of chaotic uproar. One sets the teeth to endure, and comes back to the cosmic point of view with a deep-drawn sigh of relief when the goblin dance is over, and the engine halts at the junction where the Aspen branch leaves the main line and crosses the Frying Pan to begin the ascent of the Roaring Fork.

From this point the competing railways parallel each other, and at the junction the trains on either line are within whistle call. To the engineer's question the telegraph operator nodded an affirmative.

"Yep; she's just gone by. That's her whistlin' for Emma now. What's the rush?--backed to beat her into Aspen?"

The engineer nodded in his turn, and signed the order for the right of way on the branch. A minute later the junction station was also a memory, and Jeffard was straining his eyes for a glimpse of the passenger train on the other line. A short distance to the southward the rival lines meet and cross, exchanging river banks for the remainder of the run to Aspen. The passenger train was first at the crossing, and Jeffard had his glimpse as the engine slackened speed. Not to lose a rail-length in the hard-fought race, Jeffard's man ran close to the crossing to await his turn, and the light engine came to a stand within pistol shot of the train, which was slowly clanking over the crossing-frogs. Jeffard slipped from his seat and went over to the engineer's gangway. It would be worth something if he could make sure that Garvin was on the train.

The espial was rewarded and punished in swift sequence. The trucks of the smoking-car were jolting over the crossing, and Jeffard saw the head and shoulders of the insane one filling an open window. It was conspicuously evident that Garvin had drained the bottle to the frenzy mark. He was yelling like a lost soul, and shaking impotent fists at the halted engine. Jeffard's eye measured the distance to the moving car. It was but down one embankment and up the other.

"That's my man," he said quickly to the engineer. "Do you suppose I could make it across?"

"Dead easy," was the reply; and Jeffard swung down to the step of the engine to drop off. The impulse saved his life. As he quitted his hold a hairy arm bared to the elbow was thrust out of the window next to the yelling maniac. There was a glint of sun-rays on polished metal, and a pistol ball bit out the corner of the cab under the engineer's arm-rest. Jeffard desisted, and climbed to his place when the moving train gathered headway.

"Damn a crazy loon, anyway," said the engineer, much as one might pass the time of day. "They'd ought to have sense enough to take his gun away from him."

Jeffard explained in a sentence. "It wasn't the crazy one; it was one of the two cut-throats who are kidnaping him--the fellows I'm trying to beat."

"The fellers you're goin' to beat," corrected the engineer. "We'll head 'em off now if the Ninety-seven goes in on three legs. The gall o' the cusses!--why, they might ha' shot somebody!"

From the crossing in the lower valley neither line encounters any special obstacle to speed; and under equal conditions a locomotive race up the Roaring Fork might be an affair of seconds and rail lengths for the victor. But the light engine with regardless orders speedily distanced the passenger train with stops to make; and when the smokes of the mountain-girt town at the head of the valley came in sight, the big engineer pulled his watch and shouted triumphant:--

"Eleven-forty,--and their time's twelve-five. We'll be twenty minutes to the good in spite o'!"--

It is conceivable that he would have used a strong figure, but the depravity of things inanimate took the word out of his mouth. There was a tearing crash to the rear; a shock as if a huge projectile had overtaken them; and the flying locomotive came to earth like an eagle with a mangled wing. It was a broken axle under the tender; a tested steel shaft which had outlived the pounding race across the mountains only to fall apart in the last level mile of the home stretch. Jeffard clambered down with the enginemen, and saw defeat, crushing and definite, in the wreck under the tender. But the big engineer was a man for a crisis. One glance at the wreck sufficed, and the fireman got his orders in shot-like sentences.

"Up with you, Tom, and give her the water,--both injectors! Drop me the sledge, and get the pinch-bar under the head o' that couplin'-pin when I drive it up. Give her a scoop 'r two o' coal--'nough to run in with. By cripes! we'll beat 'em yet!"

The minced oath came from beneath the engine, and was punctuated by mighty upward blows of the sledge hammer on the coupling-pin, whose head was rising by half-inch impulses from its seat in the footplate. Jeffard saw and understood. The engineer meant to cut loose from the wreck and finish the run without the tender.

"Use me if you can," he offered. "What shall I do?"

"Climb up there and help Tom with that bar. If we can pull this pin we're in it yet."

Jeffard laid hold with the fireman, and together they pried at the reluctant pin. It yielded at length, but when the engineer had disconnected the water and air hose and mounted to his place in the cab, the roar of the oncoming passenger train was ajar in the air.

"You stay with the wreck, Tom, and flag it!" was the final command; and then to Jeffard, as the engine shot away from its disabled member: "How much time have you got to have?"

"I don't know. It depends upon how much those fellows have found out, and how drunk my partner is. At the worst, a minute or two will serve."

It was still to be had, but in the very yard a thrown switch intervened, and the small margin vanished. The passenger train was in, and Jeffard saw defeat again; but he dropped from the locomotive and ran up the yard, forgetting in the heat of it that he had elided two meals in the twenty-four hours. The final dash brought its reward. He took the first vehicle that offered and reached the principal hotel in time to see Garvin and his keepers descend from a carriage at the entrance.

"Yes, sir; in one moment. Those three fellows who came in just now? They've gone up to their room. Be with us over night?"

Thus the hotel clerk in answer to Jeffard's gasping inquiry. To whom the proletary, fighting desperately for some semblance of equanimity:--

"I--I'll be here indefinitely; no, I have no baggage; I'll pay in advance. Can you give me the room next to these men? The crazy one is my partner, and I'll be responsible for him."

The clerk hesitated, but Jeffard won his cause without knowing it by the necessary parade of bank-notes in the pecuniary affair.

"Certainly, sir; the boy will show you up. You won't trouble him? All right; Number Nineteen--second floor, third door to the right. Dinner is served, when you're ready."

If Jeffard had forgotten his directions the uproar in Number Eighteen would have guided him. Garvin's voice, uplifted in alternate malediction and maudlin bathos, jarred upon the air of the corridor. Jeffard paused. The long chase was ended and only a pine door intervened between pursuer and pursued. He laid a hand on the doorknob. His breath came hard, and the veins in his forehead were like knotted whipcords. While he paused some broken babblings from within wrought a swift change in him. The knotted veins relaxed and he laughed, not mirthfully but with a cynical upcurve of the lip. His hand slipped from the doorknob, and he stole away, cat-like, to let himself noiselessly into the adjoining room.

There was a door of communication between the two rooms, bolted on Jeffard's side, and with the knob removed. He went on his knees to the square hole through the lock, but the angle of vision included no more than a blank patch of the opposite wall. Then he laid his ear to the aperture. Out of the jangling discord beyond the door came fragmentary lucidities pieceable together into a strand of sequence. Garvin had told all he knew, or all he could remember, and the robbery paused at the trivial detail of the most feasible route over the mountains from Aspen. But to make sure, and possibly to provide against the contingency of having to eliminate Garvin, some rude map was needed; and this one of the plunderers was evidently trying to draw under instructions from the witling. At the mention of a map, Jeffard rummaged his pockets without taking his ear from the door. From one of them he drew a crumpled bit of paper, thumbled and crease-broken. It was Garvin's map of the claim and the trail, passed over for inspection in the hollow of a certain lambent evening months before and never returned.

Who shall say what was behind the inscrutable darkling of the eyes of him when he returned the paper to his pocket and bent to listen with four senses lending their acuteness to the fifth? Was it a softening memory of the loving-kindnesses of one James Garvin to a man soul-sick and body-wasted, snatched as a charred brand out of a fire of his own kindling? Or was it the stirring of a ruthless devil of self; a devil never more than dormant in any heart insurgent; a fell demon of the pit whose arousing waits only upon opportunity, whose power is to transform pity into remorseless ingratitude and ruth into relentless greed? There was room for the alternative.

"Here; take another nip o' this and pull yourself together,"--it was the voice of the hawk-faced one. "If you wasn't such a howlin' idiot you'd see that we're the only friends you've got. I keep a-tellin' you that that slick pardner o' yours was on that wild ingine, and if you don't sink a shaft on your wits he's a-goin' to do you up cold!"

The appeal brought blood as a blow. The crash of an overturned chair was followed by an explosion of cursings, the outcries of a soul in torment. And when the madman choked in the fullness of it, a voice said: "Pick up that chair, Pete, and pull him down. He'll be seein' things in a minute, and that'll settle the whole shootin'-match." There was a struggle short but violent, the jar of a forcible downsetting, and a sound as of one flinging his arms abroad upon the table. After which the tormented one became brokenly articulate. What he said is unrecordable. With maudlin oath and thick-tongued ravings he rehearsed his fancied wrongs and breathed forth promises of vengeance, calling down the wrath of the spheres upon one Henry Jeffard and his posterity to the third and fourth generation.

"That's all right; I'd kill him on sight, if I was you. But just now you're killin' time, instid. First you know, he'll be on his way across the range, and then where'll you be? You don't even know that he didn't locate that claim before you came out. Git down to business and tell us where that valley is, if you ever knowed. You said it was on a creek"--

Jeffard rose and went softly across the room to sit on the edge of the bed. The unfathomable light was still in his eyes, and his thought wrought itself into words.

"It's done; they'll wring it out of him, and then fling him aside like so much offal. I wonder if it is worth while to try to save it--for him. What good would it do him?--or, rather, what evil thing is there that it wouldn't make possible for him? What devil of curiosity led me to open this Pandora-box of responsibility? For I am responsible, first for the finding, and now for the keeping, and hereafter for what shall come of it. That is, if I save it--for him." He got upon his feet and tiptoed back to the door of communication, listening once more. The clamor had quieted down, and the scratching of a pen gnawed the silence. Then came the voice of the hawk-faced one.

"There she is; you sign your name right there and it'll be all right. It's the only way; you're too drunk to pull strings with that pardner o' yours, and we're goin' to stand by you, see? All we want is the authority."

Jeffard started back and made as if he would fling himself against the locked door. Then he thought better of it.

"That simplifies it," he mused, pacing up and down with noiseless steps. "He has signed away whatever right he had, and now it's my turn. If I pay the price I can checkmate them. But can I pay the price? Surely, if any man can; I, who have deliberately turned my back upon the world's approval for a much less thing. And in the end the money will atone."

A stir in the adjoining room admonished him that the time for action had come. He wheeled quickly and let himself into the corridor. A key was rattling in the lock of Number Eighteen as he passed, but he found the stair before the bolt was shot. In the lobby he stopped to ask a hurried question of a man who was opening his mail at the public writing-table. The question was answered curtly, but the man left his letters and went to the door to point the reply.

"I see it; thank you," said Jeffard; and went his way rapidly, with now and then a glance behind him as if to make sure that he was not followed.

In a few minutes he came back, walking slowly, with his head down and his hands in the pockets of the brown duck miner's coat. There was a knot of loungers in front of the hotel, gathered about the door and peering in; a group of curious ones, which grew by accretions from the by-passers. A disturbance of some sort was afoot in the lobby--two persuasive ones struggling peaceably with a drunken man, while the bystanders looked on with smiles pitying or cynical, each after his kind.

Jeffard pushed into the circle, and those who remarked him said that he seemed to see nothing but the struggling trio. Some of the onlookers were near enough to hear what he said to the two who were not drunk.

"The game is closed, gentlemen, and you are out of it. When you get on the ground you will find the claim located--in my name."

Two right hands made simultaneous backward dips, and two potential murderers apparently realized the folly of it at the same instant. But the drunken one spun around with his face ablaze, a fiercer madness than that of drink burning in his bloodshot eyes.

"You? You played the sneak an' located hit behind my back? In your name, d' ye say?--your name? Well, by God, you hain't got a name!"

A pistol cracked with the oath, and Jeffard put his hands to his head and pitched forward. The crowd fell back aghast, to surge inward again with a rush when the reaction came. Then a shout was raised at the door, and the haggard manslayer, cured now of all madness save that of fear, burst through the impressing throng and disappeared.

CHAPTER XIX

EVEN in a Colorado mining town a shooting affray at midday in the lobby of the principal hotel creates more or less of a sensation, and it was fully fifteen minutes before the buzz of public comment subsided sufficiently to suffer Mr. Mark Denby to go back to his letters and telegrams. He had made one in the circle of onlookers; had seen and heard, and, now that the wounded man had been carried to his room and cared for, and the hunt was up and afield for the would-be murderer, was willing to forget. But a traveling salesman at the opposite blotting-pad must needs keep the pool astir.

"Say, wasn't that the most cold-blooded thing you ever saw? 'Y gad! I've heard that these Western towns were fearfully tough, but I had no idea a man wouldn't be safe to sit down and write his house in the lobby of a decent hotel. 'Pon my word, I actually heard the 'zip' of that bullet!"

Denby looked across at the hinderer of oblivion, and remembered that the salesman had been well to the rear of the battery in action. Wherefore he said, with a touch of the gravest irony: "You'll get used to it, after a bit. Suppose you take a spin around the block in the open air; that will doubtless steady your nerves so you can write the house without a quiver."

"Think it would? I believe I'll try it; I can't hold a pen still to save my life. But say, I might happen to run up against that fellow, and he might recognize me and think I was after him."

"In which case he would in all probability draw and quarter you and take your scalp for a memento. On second thought, I don't know but you're safer where you are."

The mere suggestion was perspiratory, and the traveling man mopped his face. But there are occasions when one must talk or burst, and presently he began again.

"Say, I suppose they'll lynch that fellow if they catch him, won't they?"

The badgered one came to attention with a fine-lined frown of annoyance radiating fan-like above his eyes. He was of the stuff of which man-masters are made; a well-knit figure of a man, rather under than over the average of height and breadth, but so fairly proportioned as to give the impression of unmeasured strength in reserve,—the strength of steel under silk. His face was bronzed with the sun-stain of the altitudes, but it was as smooth as a child's, and beardless, with thin lips and masterful eyes of the sort that can look unmoved upon things unnamable.

"Lynch him? Oh, no; you do us an injustice," he said, and the tone was quite as level as the eye-volley. "We don't lynch people out here for shooting,—only for talking too much."

Whereat one may picture unacclimated loquacity gasping and silenced, with the owner of the "Chincapin" and other listed properties going on to read his letters and telegrams in peace. The process furthered itself in the sequence of well-ordered dispatch until a message, damp from the copying-press and dated at Leadville, came to the surface. It covered two of the yellow sheets in the spacious handwriting of the receiving operator, and Denby read it twice, and yet once again, before laying it aside. Whatever it was, it was not suffered to interrupt the orderly sequence of things; and Denby had read the last of the letters before he held up a summoning finger for a bell-boy.

"Go and ask the clerk the name of the man who was shot, will you?"

The information came in two words, and the querist gathered up his papers and sent the boy for his room key. At the stairhead he met the surgeon and stopped him to ask about the wounded man.

"How are you, Doctor? What is the verdict? Is there a fighting chance for him?"

"Oh, yes; much more than that. It isn't as bad as it might have been; the skull isn't fractured. But it was enough to knock him out under the circumstances. He had skipped two or three meals, he tells me, and was under a pretty tense strain of excitement."

"Then he is conscious?"

The physician laughed. "Very much so. He is sitting up to take my prescription,—which was a square meal. Whatever the strain was, it isn't off yet. He insists that he must mount and ride this afternoon if he has to be lashed in the saddle; has already ordered a horse, in fact. He is plucky."

"Then he is able to talk business, I suppose."

"Able, yes; but if you can get anything out of him, you'll do better than I could. He won't talk,--won't even tell what the row was about."

"Won't he?" The man of affairs crossed the corridor and tapped on the door of Number Nineteen. There was no response, and he turned the knob and entered. The shades were drawn and there was a cleanly odor of aseptics in the air of the darkened room. The wounded man was propped among pillows on the bed, with a well-furnished tea-tray on his knees. He gave prompt evidence of his ability to talk.

"Back again, are you? I told you I had nothing to say for publication, and I meant it." This wrathfully; then he discovered his mistake, but the tone of the careless apology was scarcely more conciliatory. "Oh--excuse me. I thought it was the reporter."

Bartrow's correspondent found a chair and introduced himself with charitable directness. "My name is Denby. I am here because Mr. Richard Bartrow wires me to look you up."

Jeffard delayed the knife and fork play long enough to say: "Denby?--oh, yes; I remember. Thank you," and there the interview bade fair to die of inanition. Jeffard went on with his dinner as one who eats to live; and Denby tilted his chair gently and studied his man as well as he might in the twilight of the drawn shades. After a time, he said:--

"Bartrow bespeaks my help for you. He says your affair may need expediting: does it?"

Jeffard's rejoinder was almost antagonistic. "How much do you know of the affair?"

"What the whole town knows by this time--added to what little Bartrow tells me in his wire. You or your partner have stumbled upon an abandoned claim which promises to be a bonanza. One of you--public rumor is a little uncertain as to which one--tried to euchre the other; and it seems that you have won in the race to the Recorder's office, and have come out of it alive. Is that the summary?"

He called it public rumor, but it was rather a shrewd guess. Jeffard did not hasten to confirm it. On the contrary, his reply was evasive.

"You may call it an hypothesis--a working hypothesis, if you choose. What then?"

The promoter was not of those who swerve from conclusions. "It follows that you are a stout fighter, and a man to be helped, or a very great rascal," he said coolly.

Again the knife and fork paused, and the wounded man's gaze was at least as steady as that of his conditional accuser. "It may simplify matters, Mr. Denby, if I say that I expect nothing from public rumor."

The mine-owner shrugged his shoulders as an unwilling arbiter who would fain wash his hands of the ethical entanglement if he could.

"It's your own affair, of course,--the public opinion part of it. But it may prove to be worth your while not to ignore the suffrages of those who make and unmake reputations."

"Why?"

"Because you will need capital,--honest capital,--and"--

He left the sentence in the air, and Jeffard brought it down with a cynical stonecast.

"And, under the circumstances, an honest capitalist might hesitate, you would say. Possibly; but capital, as I know it, is not so discriminating when the legal requirements are satisfied. There will be no question of ownership involved in the development of the 'Midas.'"

"Legal ownership, you mean?"

"Legal or otherwise. When the time for investment comes, I shall be abundantly able to assure the capitalist."

"To guarantee the investment: doubtless. But capital is not always as unscrupulous as you seem to think."

"No?"--the tilt of the negative was almost aggressive. "There are borrowers and borrowers, Mr. Denby. It's the man without collateral who is constrained to make a confidant of his banker."

The blue-gray eyes of the master of men looked their levellest, and the clean-shaven face was shrewdly inscrutable. "Pardon me, Mr. Jeffard, but there are men who couldn't borrow with the Orizaba behind them."

Jeffard parried the eye-thrust, and brushed the generalities aside in a sentence.

"All of which is beside the mark, and I have neither the strength nor the inclination to flail it out with you. As you say, I shall need capital--yours or another's. State the case--yours, or mine,--in so many words, if you please."

"Briefly, then: the equity in this affair lies between you and the man who tried to kill you. I mean by this that the bonanza is either yours or his. If it were a partnership discovery there would have been no chance for one of you to overreach the other. You'll hardly deny that there was a sharp fight for possession: you both advertised that fact pretty liberally."

Jeffard was listening with indifference, real or feigned, and he neither denied nor affirmed. "Go on."

"From the point of view of an unprejudiced observer the evidence is against your partner. He comes here drunk and abusive, in company with two men whose faces would condemn them anywhere, and squanders his lead in the race in a supplementary carouse. And a little later, when he finds that you have outclassed him, he shoots you down like a dog in a fit of drunken fury. To an impartial onlooker the inference is fairly obvious."

"And that is?"--

"That your partner is the scoundrel; that the discovery is yours, and that he and his accomplices were trying to rob you. I don't mind saying that this is my own inference, but I shall be glad to have it confirmed."

Jeffard looked up quickly. "Then Bartrow hasn't told you"--

"Bartrow's message was merely introductory; two pages of eulogy, in fact, as any friendly office of Dick's is bound to be. He doesn't go into details."

Jeffard put the tea-tray aside and with it the air of abstraction, and in a better light his interlocutor would not have failed to remark the swift change from dubiety to assurance.

"Will you bear with me, Mr. Denby, if I say that your methods are a little indirect? You say that the evidence is against James Garvin, and yet you give me to understand that it will be well if I can clear myself."

"Exactly; a word of assurance is sometimes worth many deductions."

"But if, for reasons of my own, I refuse to say the word?"

The promoter's shrug was barely perceptible. "I don't see why you should refuse."

Jeffard went silent at that, lying back with closed eyes and no more than a twitching of the lips to show that he was not asleep. After what seemed an interminable interval to the mine-owner, he said:--

"I do refuse, for the present. A few days later, when I have done what I have to do, there will be time enough to discuss ways and means--and ethics, if you still feel inclined that way. May I trouble you to run that window-shade up?" He was sitting on the edge of the bed and groping beneath it for his shoes.

The promoter admitted the light and ventured a question.

"What are you going to do?"

"Get on the ground with the least possible delay."

The shoes were found, but when the wounded one bent to lace them the room spun around and he would have fallen if Denby had not caught him.

"You're not fit," said the master of men, not unsympathetically. "You couldn't sit a horse if your life depended upon it."

"I must; therefore I can and will," Jeffard asserted, with fine determination. "Be good enough to ask the bell-boy to come in and lace my shoes."

The man with a mission to compel other men smiled. His fetish was indomitable resolution, for himself first, and afterward for those who deserved; and here was a man who, whatever his lacks and havings in the ethical field, was at least courageous. Having admitted so much, the promoter went down on one knee to lace the courageous one's shoes, dissuading him, meanwhile.

"You can't go to-day; the wound-fever will come on presently, and you'll be a sick man. Let it rest a while. Having put himself on the criminal side of the fence by trying to kill you, your partner will hardly dare to jump the claim in person; he will have to find a proxy, and that will ask for time,--more time than the sheriff-dodging will permit."

"His proxies are here, and they will act without instructions from him," said Jeffard, with his hands to his head and his teeth set to keep the words from shaping themselves into a groan.

"You mean the two who were with him?"

"Yes. So far as the present fight is concerned, the three are one; and two of them are still free to act."

"So?--that's different." Denby finished tying the second shoe and rose to begin measuring a sentinel's beat between the window and the door, pacing evenly with his brows knitted and his hands clasped behind him. "You know what to expect, then?"

"I know that I have been twice shot at within the past two hours, and that the moments are golden."

"But you are in no condition to go in and hold it alone! You'll have to meet force with force. You ought to have at least three or four good men with you."

"What I have to do presupposes a clear field," said Jeffard guardedly. "If it should come to blows, the discussion of--of ethics will be indefinitely postponed, I'm afraid."

"Humph! I suppose your reasons are as strong as your obstinacy. How far is it to your claim?"

"I don't know the exact distance; about twenty miles, I believe. But there is a mountain range intervening."

"You can't ride it in your present condition; it's a sheer physical impossibility."

"I shall ride it."

"What is the use of being an ass?" demanded the master of men, losing patience for once in a way. "Don't you see you can't stand alone?"

Jeffard struggled to his feet and wavered across the room to a chair. Denby laughed,--a quiet little chuckle of appreciation.

"I didn't mean literally; I meant in the business affair. You'll have to have help from the start. That means that you will have to trust some one. From what you say it is evident that there will be an immediate attempt made to jump the claim; an attempt which will be afoot and on the ground long before you can get there. Let us be reasonable and take hold of the live facts. I have a man here who is both capable and trustworthy. Let me send him in with a sufficient force to stand off the jumpers until you are able to hold your own."

Jeffard shook his head. "I can't do it, unreasonable as it may seem. I must go first and alone. That is another mystery, you will say, but I can't help it. If I win through it alive I shall be here again in a day or two, ready to talk business. More than that I can't say now."

Denby's thin lips came together in a straight line, with a click of the white teeth behind them. "As you please. I am not going about to prove to you that you would lose nothing by trusting me from the start. Can I do anything toward helping you off?"

"Yes; you can give me your shoulder down the stair and a lift into the saddle."

The little journey to the ground floor was made in silence. When they were passing the desk the clerk said: "Your horse is at the door, Mr. Jeffard. I was just about to send up word. Are you feeling better?"

"I am all right." He leaned heavily on the counter and paid his bill. "Did the liveryman leave any message?"

"No, only to say that he has stocked the saddle-bags as you directed."

The personally conducted journey went on to the sidewalk, and Denby heaved the wounded one into the saddle, steadying him therein till the vertigo loosed its hold.

"Anything else you can delegate?"

"No, thank you; nothing that I think of."

"You are still determined to go?"

"Quite determined."

"Well, you are a stubborn madman, and I rather like you for it; that's all I have to say. Good luck to you."

Jeffard gathered the reins and sat reflective what time the broncho sniffed the cool breeze pouring down from the higher slopes of the western range. When the horse would have set out, Jeffard restrained him yet another moment.

"You intimated a few minutes ago that I was afraid to trust you, Mr. Denby," he said, picking and choosing among the words as one who has a difficult course to steer. "I do trust you as far as I can trust any one at the present crisis, and I'll prove it." He drew a crumpled bit of paper from his pocket, and smoothed it upon the pommel of the saddle. "Here is a rough map of the claim and the trails by which it may be reached. If I'm not back in Aspen in three days, fit out your expedition and go in prepared to take and hold the property. The men you will find in possession will be robbers,--and murderers,--and you may have to fight for it; but that won't matter. In the right-hand tunnel wall, a few feet from the entrance, you will see a crevice where the dynamite was kept. In the bottom of that crevice you'll find my last will and testament, and I'm going to believe that you will carry out its provisions to the letter."

The promoter's smile was of grimness, with quarterings of approval.

"Which is to say that you'll be safely dead and buried. Barring your idiotic stubbornness, you are a man after my own heart, Mr. Jeffard, and I'll willingly be your executor. Are you armed?"

"No; I told you it would depend upon speed. I have no weapons."

"What! And you are going on a forlorn hope with an even chance of having to fight for your life? Wait a minute."

He ran back into the hotel, coming out again presently with a repeating rifle and a well-filled cartridge belt. "There is such a thing as cold nerve carried to the vanishing point in foolhardiness, Mr. Jeffard," he said. "Put this belt on while I sling the rifle under the saddle-flap. Can you shoot straight?"

"It is extremely doubtful. A little target practice as a boy"--

"Target practice!--and you may have to stand off a gang of desperadoes who can clip coins at a hundred yards! You'd better reconsider and give me time to organize a posse."

"No; thank you--for that and everything else. Good-by."

Denby stood on the curb and watched his man ride slowly up the street and take the turn toward the southern mountains. After which he went back to his place at the public writing-table in the lobby, picking up the hotel stenographer on the way. For a preoccupied half-hour he dictated steadily, and when the last letter was answered got up to pace out the transcribing interval. In the midst of it he drifted out to the sidewalk and stood staring absently up the street, as, an hour earlier, he had gazed after the lessening figure of the obstinate one. But this time there were two horsemen in the field of vision wending their way leisurely to the street-end. Denby, thinking pointedly of other things, saw them and saw them not; but when they, too, took the turn to the southward, he came alive to the probabilities in the heart of an instant.

"By all that's good!--they're after him, as sure as fate!" he muttered; and a little later he was quizzing the proprietor of a livery stable around the corner.

"Do you know those two fellows who have just left, Thompson?"

"You bet I don't; and I made 'em put up the collateral for the whole outfit before they got away."

"Where did you say they were going?"

"Didn't say, did I? But somewheres up Jackfoot Gulch was what they told me."

"H'm; that is east. And just now they are riding in another direction. You sold them the horses, you say?"

The man grinned. "Temp'rarily. I'll take 'em back at the same price, less the tariff, if I ever see 'em again. I ain't takin' no chances on stray strangers with any such lookin'-glass-bustin' faces as they've got. Not much, Mary Ann."

"It is well to be careful. Have you seen my man Donald since dinner?"

"Yes; he was here just now and said he'd be back again. Want him?"

Denby looked at his watch. "Yes. If he doesn't come back within five minutes, send some of the boys out to hunt him up. Tell him to outfit for himself and me for two days, and to be at the hotel at three, sharp. Give him the best horses you can lay your hands on."

"Always yours to command, Mr. Denby. Anything else?"

"That's all."

The promoter left the stable and walked quickly to the hotel. At the entrance he met an acquaintance and stopped to pass the time of day.

"How are you, Roberts?--By the way, you are just the man I wanted to see; saves me a trip to the Court House. Did a fellow named Jeffard, J-e-f-f-a-r-d, file a notice and affidavit on a claim called the 'Midas' just after dinner?"

"No. He came over to ask me if there was any way in which he could secure himself. It seems that he neglected to post a notice on the claim before coming out with his samples,--why, he didn't explain."

Denby nodded and went on, talking to himself. "So!--that's his little mystery, is it? The 'Midas' isn't located yet, and until he gets that notice posted and recorded, it's anybody's bonanza. I hope Donald can pick up the trail and follow it. If he can't, there'll be one plucky fellow less in the world, and two more thugs to be hanged, later on."



CHAPTER XX

A TOPOGRAPHICAL map of that portion of the Saguache known as the Elk Mountain Range--the spur which forms the watershed between the Gunnison and the Grand--will include a primeval valley gashing the range southeastward from Tourtelotte on the Ashcroft trail, and heading fifteen miles farther wildernessward in a windswept pass across the summit of the watershed. Its watercourse, a tumbling torrent fed by the melting snows in the higher gulches, is a tributary of the Roaring Fork; and a disused pack-trail, which once served a scattered pioneer corps of prospectors, climbs by tortuous stages to the windswept pass, now swerving from bank to bank of the stream, and now heading a lateral gulch or crossing the point of a barrier spur.

It is a crystalline afternoon in mid-autumn. Indian summer on the high plateaus of the continent's crest there is none, but instead, a breathing space of life-giving days, with the bouquet of fine old wine in the keen-edged air, and of frosty nights when the stars swing clear in illimitable space. Positive coloring, other than the sombre greens of pine and fir, is lacking. The season of bursting buds and quickening leaf tints is over, and what little deciduous vegetation the altitude permits is present only in twig tracteries and sun-cured range grass. In the heart of the valley the heights are heavily wooded, and the sombre greens wall out the world to the sky-line; but farther on bald slopes and ridges stretch away above the pines and firs, and the blue arch of the firmament springs clear from snow-capped abutments of fallow dun and weathered gray.

In the upper levels of the valley the disused trail leaves the stream and begins to climb by loops and zigzags to the pass. On the reverse curve of one of the loops--the last but one in the upward path--a solitary horseman sends his mount recklessly onward, heedless alike of stones of stumbling and the breath-cutting steepness of the way. His head is bandaged, and he rides loose in the saddle like a drunken man, swaying and reeling, but evermore urging the horse by word and blow and the drumming of unsprung heels. His feet are thrust far into the stirrups, and at every fresh vantage point he steadies himself by pommel and cantle to scan the backward windings of the trail. A man riding desperately for his life and against time, with a handicap of physical unfitness, one would say; but there would seem to be fierce determination in the unrelenting onpush, as if wounds and weariness were as yet no more than spurs to goad and whips to drive.

The reverse curve of the loop ends on the crest of the last of the barrier spurs, and at the crown of the ascent the forest thins to right and left, opening a longer backward vista. On the bare summit the rider turns once more in his saddle, and the rearward glance becomes a steady eye-sweep. In the bight of the loop which he has just traversed the trail swings clear of the gulch timber, and while he gazes two dark objects advancing abreast and alternately rising and falling to a distance-softened staccato of pounding hoofs cross the open space and double the loop. The wounded one measures his lead. For all his spurrings the distance is decreasing; and a hasty survey of the trail ahead is not reassuring. From the bald summit of the spur the bridle path winds around the head of another gulch, and the approach to the pass on the farther side is a snow-banked incline, above timber line, uncovered, and within easy rifle-shot of the hill of reconnaissance. What will befall is measurably certain. If he attempts to head the traversing ravine on the trail, his pursuers will reach the bald summit, wait, and pick him off at their leisure while he is scaling the opposite snowbank.

At the second glance a dubious alternative offers. The gorge in the direct line may not prove impassable; there is a slender chance that one may push straight across and up the opposing slope to the pass before the guns of the enemy can be brought into position. Wherefore he sends the horse at a reckless gallop down the descent to the gorge, making shift to cling with knee and heel while he disengages a rifle from its sling under the saddle-flap, and fills its magazine with cartridges from a belt at his waist.

At the bottom of the ravine the alternative vanishes; becomes a thing in-existent, in fact. The gorge in its lower length is a canyoned slit, a barrier to be passed only by creatures with wings. To return is to meet his pursuers on the bald summit of the spur; to hesitate is equally hazardous. The horse obeys the sudden wrenching of the rein, spins as on a pivot, and darts away up the canyon brink. Fortunately, the timber is sparse, and, luckily again, a practicable crossing is found well within the longer detour traced by the trail. For the second time that day it is a race to the swift; and, as before, an accident comes between. Horse and man are across the ravine, are clear of the stunted firs, are mounting the final snow-banked incline to the pass with no more than a trooper's dash between them and safety, when the sure-footed beast slips on the packed snow of the trail, and horse and man roll together to the bottom of the declivity.

A few hours earlier this man had been the football of circumstances, tossed hither and yon as the buffetings of chance might impel him. But the pregnant hours have wrought a curious change in him, for better or worse, and before the breath-cutting plunge is checked he is free of the struggling horse and is kicking it to its feet to mount and ride again, charging the steep uprising with plying lash and digging heels and shouts of encouragement. Ten seconds later

the trail is regained and the summit of the pass cuts the sky-line above him. Ten other flying leaps and a resolute man may hold an army at bay. But in the midst of them comes a clatter of hoofs on the rocky headland across the gulch, and a nerve-melting instant wherein the hoof-beats cease and the bleak heights give back a muffled echo in the rarefied air. The hunted one bends to the saddle-horn at the crack of the rifle, and the bullet sings high. A second is better aimed, and at the shrill hiss of it the snorting horse flattens its ears and lunges at the ascent with flagging powers fear-revived. A scrambling bound or two and the final height is gained, but in the pivoting instant between danger and safety a third bullet scores the horse's back and embeds itself in the cantle of the saddle with a benumbing shock to the rider.

But by this the fugitive is fair Berserk-mad, and those who would stay him must shoot to kill. Once out of range beyond the crest of the pass, he drags the trembling horse to its haunches and whips down from the saddle, the wine of battle singing in his veins and red wrath answering for physical fitness. A hasty glance to make sure that the broncho's wound is not disabling, and he is back at the summit of the pass, sheltering himself behind a rock and sending shot after shot across the ravine at his assailants. The fusillade is harmless; wounds, mad gallops, and red wrath being easily subversive of accuracy in target practice; but it has the effect of sending the enemy to the rear in discreet haste, with the dropping shots beating quick time for the double quartette of trampling hoofs as the twain gallop out of range behind the bald headland.

For a resolute half-hour, while the undertow of the ebbing minutes steadily undermines the props and shores set up by Berserk wrath, the solitary rifleman lies watchful and vigilant. Thrice in that interval have the attackers rallied; once in a desperate charge to gain the cover of the timber on the canyon's brink, and twice in equally desperate efforts to turn the rifleman's position by following the looping of the trail. Notwithstanding the bad marksmanship of the garrison the position has proved--still proves--impregnable; and the end of the half-hour leaguer finds the intrenched one secure in his position, with the enemy in permanent check, and only his own waning strength to warn him that the pass cannot be held indefinitely.

But this warning is imperative, as is that other of the fast westering sun; and when a movement on the opposite height gives him one more chance to announce volley-wise that the pass is still manned, he retreats swiftly, remounts after more than one exhaustive effort, and canters down the farther windings of the trail into a valley shut in on all sides by snow-coifed sentinel mountains, and with a brawling stream plunging through its midst; into this valley and down the length of it to a narrowing of the stream path, where a rude cabin, with its door hanging awry, looks across from the heel of the western cliff to the gray dump of a tunnel-opening in the opposite mountain side.

The sun has already set for the lower slopes of the shut-in valley, and the frosty breath of the snow-capped sentinel peaks is in the air. At the door of the cabin the winner in the desperate race slides from the saddle. His knees are quaking, and because of them he stumbles and falls over the log doorstone, cursing his helplessness in the jolt of it. But there remains much to be done, and the sunset glories are changing from crimson and dusky gold on the snow-caps to royal purple in the shadow of the western cliff.

With many slippings and stumblings he crosses the foot-log and climbs to the level of the tunnel-opening opposite, constraining the unwilling horse to follow. With a stone for a hammer he tacks a square of paper on one of the struts of the timbered entrance; and after another struggle feebly fierce the horse is dragged into the low-browed cavern and tethered out of harm's way. By the leaden-footed step of the man one would say that the last reserves of determination have been called in and are far spent; but he will not desist. With four stakes taken from the heap of wooden treenails used in the tunnel timbering he drags himself from corner to corner of the claim, pacing its boundaries and marking the points of intersection with dogged exactness. When the final stake is driven he can no longer stand upright, and is fain to win back to the tunnel on hands and knees with groans and futile tooth-gnashings.

But the aftermath of the task still waits; shall wait until he has barricaded the tunnel's mouth with an up-piling of timbers, fragments of rock, odds and ends movable, with a counterscarp of loose earth to make it bullet-proof--the last scraped up with bleeding hands from the debris at the head of the dump.

This done, he drags himself over the barricade, finds the saddle-bags again, and strikes a light. The candle flame is but a yellow puncture in the thick gloom of the tunnel, but it serves his purpose, which is to scrawl a few words on a blank page of an engineer's note-book,--sole reminder of the thrifty forecast of saner days beyond the descent into the nether depths. An imprecation bubbles up to punctuate the signature; a pointless cursing, which is no more than a verbal mask for a groan extorted by the agony of the effort to guide the pencil point. The malison strings itself out into broken sentences of justification; mere ravings, as pointless as the curse. "Finders are keepers,--that's the law of the strong. 'He that hath clean hands shall be stronger and stronger.' I found it and gave it back, and he drowned it in a bottle.... Now it is mine; and to-morrow I'll be dead. But she'll know that I haven't--that I haven't--quite--forgotten."

To pain-blurred eyes the candle flame has faded to a nebulous point in the darkness, but still the light suffices. He has neither envelope nor sealing-wax, but he makes shift to seal the book with a wrapping of twine and a bit of pitch

scraped from the nearest strut in the timbering. After which he seeks and finds the crevice in which Garvin kept his explosives; and when the note-book is safely hidden, drops exhausted behind the breastwork, with the rifle at his shoulder, beginning his vigil what time the first silvery flight of moon-arrows is pouring upon cliff-face and cabin opposite.



CHAPTER XXI

It is a fact no less deprecable than true that events in orderly sequence do not always lend themselves to the purposes of a chronicler who would be glad to prick in his climaxes with a pen borrowed of the dramatist. With some little labor, and the help of not a few coincidences which may fairly be called fortuitous, the march of events in the life of Henry Jeffard has led up to a point at which the fictional unities pause, confidently anticipative of a climax which shall reecho the heroic struggle of the Spartan few at Thermopylae, or the daring-do of the Pontine Horatius. But the facts are inexorable and altogether disappointing. With prologue and stage-setting for a Sophoclean tragedy, the piece halts; hangs in the wind at the critical juncture like a misstaying ship; becomes, in point of fact, a mere modern comedy-drama with a touch of travesty in it; and the unities, fictional and dramatic, shriek and expire.

This humiliating failure of the dramatic possibilities turns upon an inconsequent pivot-pin in the human mechanism, namely, the lack of courage in the last resort in men of low degree. To kidnap a drunken man or to pistol an unarmed one is one thing; to force a sky-pitched Gibraltar defended by a resolute fellow-being with a modern high-power repeating rifle and an itching trigger-finger is quite another. This was the conservative point of view of the aliased ones; and after the final futile attempt to gain the trail and the cover of the timber, the twain held a council of war, vilified their luck, and sounded a retreat.

Thus it came about that Denby and his man, riding tantivy to the rescue, met the raiders two miles down the trail Aspenward; and having this eye-assurance that the foray had failed, the promoter was minded to go back to town to await Jeffard's return. But, having the eye-assurance, he was not unwilling to add another. Bartrow's telegram had named the figure of the assay; the incredible number of dollars and cents to the ton to be sweated out of the bonanza drift. Now assays are assays, but investment is shy of them, demanding mill-runs, and conservative estimates based on averages; and pondering these things the rescuer reverted to his normal character of capitalist in ordinary to moneyless bonanzists, and determined to go on and see for himself. Accordingly, Jeffard's unexpected reinforcements pressed forward while the enemy was in full tide of retreat; and a short half-hour later the squadron of retrieval came near to paying the penalty of an unheralded approach, since it was upon the promoter and his henchman that Jeffard poured his final volley.

So much for the tragi-comedy of the sky-pitched Gibraltar, which made a travesty of Jeffard's heart-breaking efforts to fortify himself in the old tunnel. And as for the apparent determination to die open-eyed and militant behind the barricade, the unromantic truth again steps in to give the *coup de grace* to the disappointed unities. There is a limit to human endurance, and the hardiest soldier may find it on a field as yet no more than half won. Fastings and fierce hurryings, wounds, physical and spiritual, and ruthless determination may ride roughshod over Nature's turnpike; but Nature will demand her toll. For this cause Jeffard saw no more than the first flight of moon-arrows glancing from the face of the western cliff. Long before the Selenean archers were fairly warmed to their work he had fallen asleep, with his cheek on the carved grip of the borrowed rifle; a lost man to all intents and purposes, if the fictional unities had not been put to flight by the commonplace fact.

Behold him, then, awakening what time the volleying sun has changed places with the moon-archers. The barricaded tunnel has a dim twilight of its own, but out and abroad the day is come, and the keen air is tinnient with the fine treble of the mountain morning. The slanting sun-fire spatters the gray cliff opposite, and a spiral of blue smoke is curling peacefully above the chimney of the cabin. And in the shallows of the stream a man, who is neither desperado black or red, is bathing the legs of a horse. Under such conditions one may imagine a recreant sentry rubbing his eyes to make sure, and presently climbing the barricade to slide down the dump into parley range, question-charged.

Denby unbent, smiling. "Didn't I say that you were an inconsiderate madman? You had to sleep or die."

"But when did you get here?"

"About the time the proxies would have arrived, if you hadn't succeeded in discouraging them. It was late; much later than it would have been if you hadn't given us such an emphatic stand-off at the summit. Come across and have some breakfast with us."

Jeffard found the foot-log and made shift to walk it.

"Did I fire at you? I thought it was another charge coming. They had been trying to rush me."

"So I inferred. We camped down out of range and gave you plenty of time. You may be no marksman, but"--He finished the sentence in dumb show by taking off his hat and pointing to a bullet score in the crown of it. "A few inches lower and you would have spoiled your first chance of capitalizing the Midas. How do you feel this morning?"

"A bit unresponsive, but better than I have a right to expect. What became of the two raiders?"

"We met them riding a steeplechase toward town. You discouraged them, as I said. From Donald's count of the bullet-splashes on that bald summit you must have gotten in your work pretty lively."

Jeffard lowered the hammer of the rifle and emptied the magazine. "It's a good weapon," he said. "I believe I could learn to shoot with it, after a while. Will you sell it?"

"Not to any one. But I'll make you a present of it. Let's go in and see what Donald has found in his saddle-bags. It's a fine breakfast morning."

So they went into the cabin and sat at meat on either side of a rough table of Garvin's contriving, and were served by a solemn-faced Scot, whose skill as a camp cook was commensurate with his ability to hold his tongue. Notwithstanding the presumable urgencies the breakfast talk was not of business. Jeffard would have had it so, but Denby forbade.

"Not yet," he objected. "Not until you have caught up with yourself. After breakfast Donald will sling you a blanket hammock under the trees, and you shall sleep the clock around. Then you'll feel fit, and we can talk futures if you please."

If there were a prompting of suspicion in the glance with which Jeffard met this proposal it remained in abeyance. With every embrasure gunned and manned the fortress of this life must always be pregnable on the human side; in the last resort one must trust something to the chance of loyalty in the garrison. Wherefore Jeffard accepted the promoter's pipe and the blanket hammock, and fell asleep while Donald was pulling down the barricade at the tunnel's mouth preparatory to liberating the neighing horse stabled in the heading.

It was evening, just such another as that one three months ago, in the heart of which two men had sat at the cabin door looking a little into each other's past, when Jeffard opened his eyes. The three horses, saddled, but with loose cinches, were cropping the sun-cured grass on the level which served as a dooryard for the cabin; and an appetizing smell of frying bacon was abroad in the air. Jeffard sat up yawning, and the promoter rose from the doorstep and rapped the ashes from his pipe.

"Feel better?" he queried.

"I feel like a new man. I hadn't realized that I was so nearly spent."

"That is why I prescribed the blanket. Another day would have finished you."

Jeffard slid out of the hammock and went to plunge his face and hands in the stream; after which they ate again as men who postpone the lesser to the greater; with Donald the taciturn serving them, and hunger waiving speech and ceremony.

It was yet no more than twilight when the meal was finished; and Denby found a candle and matches in the henchman's saddlebags.

"If you are ready, we'll go up to the tunnel and have another look at the lead before we go," he said. "I have been examining it to-day, and I'll make you a proposition on the ground, if you like."

Jeffard pieced out the inference with the recollection of the saddled horses.

"Do we go back to-night?"

"Yes; if you are good for it. It has been a pretty warm day for the season, and we are like to have more of them. There is a good bit of snow on the trail, and if it softens we shall be shut in. That's one reason, and another is this: if we make a deal and mean to get any machinery in here before snow flies and the range is blocked, we've got to be about it."

Jeffard nodded acquiescence, and they fared forth to cross the foot-log and toil up the shelving slope of the gray dump. It was a stiff climb for a whole man, and at the summit Jeffard sat down with his hands to his head and his teeth agrind.

"By Jove! but that sets it in motion again in good shape!" he groaned. "Sit down here and let's talk it out in the open. I don't care to burrow."

Denby pocketed his candle, and they sat together on the brink of the dump, with their backs to the opening; and thus it chanced that neither of them saw a shadowy figure skulking among the firs beside the tunnel's mouth. When

they began to talk the figure edged nearer, flitting ghostlike from tree to tree, and finally crouching under the penthouse of the tunnel timbering.

The crimson and mauve had faded out of the western sky when the two at the dump-head rose, and Jeffard said: "Your alternative is fair enough. It's accepted, without conditions other than this--that you will advance me a few hundred dollars for my own purposes some time within thirty days."

"You needn't make that a condition; I should be glad to tide you over in any event. But I am sorry you won't let me buy in. As I have said, there is enough here for both of us."

The aftermath of the getting up was a sharp agony, and Jeffard had his hands to his head again. When he answered it was to say:--

"I sha'n't sell. There are reasons, and you may take this for the lack of a better. A while back, when a single meal in the day was sometimes beyond me, I used to say that if the tide should ever turn I'd let the money go on piling up and up until there was no possibility of hunger in an eternity of futures. You say the tide has turned."

"It has, for a fact; and I don't know that I blame you. If it were mine I should probably try to keep it whole."

Jeffard went on as one who follows out his own train of thought regardless of answers relevant or impertinent. "I said that, and I don't know that I have changed my mind. But before we strike hands on the bargain it may be as well to go back to the question which you were good enough to leave in abeyance yesterday."

"The question of ethics?"

"Yes."

"I am going to take something for granted, if you don't choose to be frank with me."

"It will be safer to take nothing for granted."

"But the claim is yours?"

"Legally, yes; there will be no litigation."

"But honestly, as man to man." Denby put his hands on the wounded man's shoulders, and turned him about so that the fading light in the west fell upon his face. "My dear fellow, I've known you but a day, but your face isn't the face of a scoundrel. I can't believe that the man who made the magnificent fight that you did would make it to overreach his partner."

Jeffard turned aside, with a backward step that freed him from the friendly hands. Twice he tried to speak, and at the third attempt the words came but haltingly.

"It will be better in the end--better for all concerned--if you--if you do believe it. Believe it, and cause it to be believed, if you choose. I have counted the cost, and am ready to take the consequences."

Denby thrust his hands into his pockets and began to tramp, three paces and a turn, across and across the narrow embankment. A little light was beginning to sift in between the man and his mystery, but it was not of the sun.

"Mr. Jeffard, I'd like to ask a question. You needn't answer it if you don't want to. Do you know who drove this tunnel?"

"I do."

"Was it the man who raced you from Leadville to Aspen, and who shot you when you tried to bluff him by making him believe that you had already located the claim in your own name?"

"It was."

"Then, to put it plainly, you are the aggressor, after all. You have really jumped your partner's claim."

The promoter stopped and faced his man, and the skulker at the tunnel's mouth crept nearer, as a listener who may not miss a word.

"That is what men will say, I suppose; and I shall not contradict them. He has forfeited his right." Jeffard said it with eyes downcast, but there was no incertitude in the words.

"Forfeited his right? How? By shooting at you in a very natural fit of frenzied rage? I can't believe that you realize

the enormity of this thing, Mr. Jeffard. You are new to the West. It is true that the law can't touch you, but public opinion, the sentiment of a mining region, will brand you as the basest of thieves."

"That is the public's privilege. I shall not attempt to defend myself--to you, or to any one. The consequences are mine to suffer or to ignore."

"You can't ignore them. Your best friends will turn upon you, and mining-camp justice will not only acquit the man who tried to kill you--it will fight for him and condemn you."

"But yesterday you said it would have given me the benefit of the doubt and lynched him. I can fight my own battle."

"Yes, I did say so; and, lacking your own evidence against yourself, it will condemn him yet. Had you thought of that?"

"Mr. Denby, I have answered your questions because you had a right to ask them. To the public I shall neither deny nor affirm."

"Then you'll have the choice of posing as a scoundrel on the one hand, or of consenting to the death or imprisonment of a measurably innocent man on the other. I don't envy you."

"It is my own affair, as you were good enough to say yesterday. Do you wish to withdraw your proposal?"

Denby took time to think about it, pacing out his decision what time the moon was beginning to silver the western snow-caps.

"No; as I have made it and you have accepted it, the proposal is merely a matter of service to be rendered and paid for; I furnish the capital to work the mine for a year for a certain portion of the output. But if you had taken me up on the original proposition, I should beg to be excused. Under the circumstances, I shouldn't care to be a joint owner with you."

"You couldn't be," said Jeffard briefly; "you, nor any one else."

"Well, we are agreed as to that. Shall we go now? Donald is waiting, and the moon will be up by the time we strike the trail."

"One moment; I have left something in the tunnel."

Jeffard turned back toward the timbered archway, and the promoter went with him. In the act a shadowy figure darted into the mouth of gloom and was seen by Denby.

"What was that?"

"I didn't see anything."

Denby stumbled over the remains of the barricade. "That must have been what I saw," he said. "But at the moment I could have sworn it was a man dodging into the tunnel."

A few feet from the entrance Jeffard felt along the wall for the crevice, found it, and presently thrust the note-book into Denby's hands.

"You may remember that I told you I should leave my will here against a contingency which seemed altogether probable. In view of what has since passed between us, I sha'n't hold you to your promise to act as my executor; but if anything happens to me I shall be glad if you will send that book under seal to Dick Bartrow. You will do that much for me, won't you?"

"Yes."

"That is all; now I am at your service."

A few minutes later the cabin and the bit of dry sward in front of it were deserted, and the whispering firs had swallowed up the last faint echoes of minishing hoof-beats. Not until the silence was unbroken did the shadowy figure venture out of its hiding in the tunnel to stumble blindly down the dump, across the foot-log, and so to the cabin door. Here it went down on hands and knees to quarter the ground like a hungry animal in search of food. Unhappily, the simile is no simile. It was James Garvin, who, for the better part of two days, had not tasted food. And when finally the patient search was rewarded by the retrieval of a few scraps of bacon and pan-bread, the broken meats of Donald's supper-table, the starving fugitive fell upon them with a beastlike growl of triumph. But in the midst of the scanty feast

he dropped the bread and meat to cover his face with his hands, rocking back and forth in his misery and sobbing like a child.

"Oh, my Gawd!--ef I hadn't hearn it out'n his own mouth ... and me a-lovin' him thess like he'd been blood-kin to me! Oh, my Gawd!"



CHAPTER XXII

It was rather late in the autumn, too late to admit of a rush of prospectors to the shut-in valley, when the fame of the new gold-bearing district in the Elk Mountains began to be noised about. As bonanza fame is like to be, the earlier bruitings of it were as nebulous as the later and more detailed accounts were fabulous. Some garbled story of the fight for possession found its way into the newspapers; and since this had its starting-point in the resentment of the Aspen newsgatherer who had been so curtly sent to the right-about by Jeffard, it became the basis of an accusation, which was scathing and fearless, or covert and retractable, in just proportion to the obsequiousness of the journalistic accusers.

In its most favorable rendering this story was an ugly one; but here again chance, in the form of reportorial inaccuracy, was kind to Jeffard. From his boyhood people had been stumbling over his name; and with ample facilities for verifying the spelling of it the reporters began, continued, and ended by making it "Jeffers," "Jeffreys," and in one instance even "Jefferson." Hence, with Bartrow as the single exception, no one who knew Jeffard identified him with the man who had figured as the putative villain-hero in the fight for possession.

Bartrow read the account of the race, the shooting affray, and the subsequent details of the capitalizing of the Midas, with Denby as its promoter and Jeffard as sole owner, with judgment suspended. It was not in him to condemn any man unheard; and Jeffard had put himself safely out of reach of queryings, friendly or otherwise, by burying himself for the winter with the development force which the promoter had hurried across the range before the snows isolated the shut-in valley. Later, when he had to pay the note in the Leadville bank, Bartrow had a twinge of dismay; but again invincible fairness came to the rescue, and he lifted the dishonored paper at a time when he could ill afford to, promising himself that this, too, should be held in solution; should not even be precipitated in confidence with any one.

This promise he kept until Constance Elliott plumbed the depths of him, as she was prone to do when he gave evidence of having anything to conceal. The occasion was the midwinter ball of the First Families of Colorado; and having more than one score to settle with the young miner, who had lately been conspicuous only by his absence, Connie had arbitrarily revised Bartrow's programme,—which contemplated a monopoly of all the dances Miss Van Vetter would give him.

"Well, catalogue 'em—what have I done?" demanded the unabashed one, when she had marched him into that particular alcove of the great hotel dining-room which did temporary duty as a conservatory.

"Several things." Stephen Elliott's daughter was in the mood called pertness in disagreeable young women. "Have you quite forgotten that I stand *in loco parentis* to the giddy and irresponsible young person whose card you have covered with your scrawly autographs?"

The idea was immensely entertaining to the young miner, who laughed so heartily that a sentimental couple billing and cooing behind the fan-palms took wing immediately. "You? you chaperoning Myr—Miss Van Vetter? That's a good one!"

"It's a bad one, where you are concerned. What do you mean by such an inconsistent breach of the proprieties?"

"Inconsistent? I'm afraid I don't quite catch on."

"Yes, inconsistent. You bury yourself for months on end in that powder-smelly old tunnel of yours, and about the time we've comfortably forgotten you, you straggle in with a dress-coat on your arm and proceed to monopolize one of us. What do you take us for?"

It was on the tip of Bartrow's tongue to retort that he would very much like to take Miss Van Vetter for better or worse, but he had not the courage of his convictions. So he kept well in the middle of the road, and made the smoke-blackened tunnel his excuse for the inconsistency.

"It isn't 'months,' Connie; or at least it's only two of them. You know I'd be glad enough to chase myself into Denver every other day if I could. But it is coming down to brass tacks with us in the Little Myriad, and I've just got to keep my eye on the gun."

Whereupon pertness, or the Constance Elliott transmutation of it, vanished, and she made him sit down.

"Tell me all about the Little Myriad, Dick. Is it going to keep its promise?"

The Little Myriad's owner sought and found a handkerchief, using it mopwise. Curious questions touching the

prospects of his venture on Topeka Mountain were beginning to have a perspiratory effect upon him.

"I wish I could know for sure, Connie. Sometimes I think it will; and some other times I should think it means to go back on me,--if I dared to."

"Isn't the lead still well-defined?" Constance dropped into the mining technicalities with the easy familiarity of one born in the metalliferous West.

"It is now; but two months ago, or thereabouts, it pinched out entirely. That is why I hibernated."

"Was the last mill-run encouraging?"

"N-no, I can't say that it was. The ore--what little there is of it--seems to grade rather lower as we go in. But it's a true fissure, and it must begin to go the other way when we get deep enough."

For a half-score of fan-sweeps Connie was silent. Then: "Is the purse growing light, Dickie? Because if it is, poppa's is still comfortably fat."

Bartrow laughed in a way to indicate that the strain was lessened for the moment. "I believe you and your father would give away the last dollar you have in the world. But it hasn't come to a fresh loan with me yet."

"When it does, you know where to float it."

"When it does, I sha'n't rob my best friends. If I have to borrow more money for development, I'm afraid the loan will be classed as 'extra hazardous.' But you said there were several things. What else have I done?"

"The next is something you haven't done. You haven't written a line to Mr. Lansdale in all these weeks,--not even to thank him for taking your foolish telegram about the Margaret Gannon crisis seriously. And he tells me he has written you twice."

"I'm a miserable sinner, and letter writing isn't in me. Is Lansdale here? I'll go and square myself in the most abject formula you can suggest."

"He isn't here. He is out at Bennett on a ranch."

"On a ranch in midwinter? Who on top of earth told him to do that?"

"One of the doctors. I wanted to dissuade him, but I hadn't the heart to try. He is so anxious to live."

"Naturally." Bartrow eyed his companion in a way which was meant to be a measure of the things he knew and would by no means tell, but Constance was opening and shutting her fan with inthought paramount, and saw it not. Whereat Bartrow was brutal enough to say: "Is he going to make a go of it?"

"Oh, I hope so, Dick! It is such a pathetic struggle. And he is like all the others who are best worth keeping alive: he won't let any one help him. Just fancy him working for his board on a dreary prairie ranch! The monotony of it is enough to kill him."

"I should say so. Lamb ranch, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Then I can imagine the hilarity of it. Up at all sorts of hours and in all weathers feeding and watering. That isn't what he needs. A wagon trip in summer, with good company, lots of outdoors, and nothing to do but eat and sleep, would be more like it. If he pulls through to spring, and the Myriad will let up on me for a month or two, I don't know but I shall be tempted to make him try it."

"Oh, Dick! would you?" There was a quick upflash of wistful emotion in the calm gray eyes. Bartrow set it down to a fresh growth in perspicacity on his own part that he was able to interpret it--or thought he was. But the little upflash went out like a taper in the dark with the added afterthought. "It's no use, Dick. The Myriad won't let you."

"Perhaps it will; though I'm bound to admit that it doesn't look that way at present. Now, if Jef--"

From what has gone before it will be understood that any mention of Jeffard for good or ill was the one thing which Bartrow had promised himself to avoid at all hazards; wherefore he broke the name in the midst, coughed, dragged out his watch,--in short, did what manlike untactfulness may do to create a diversion, and at the end of it found the unafraid eyes fixed upon him with mandatory orders in them.

"Go on," she said calmly. "If Mr. Jeffard"--

"Really, Connie, I must break it off short; my time's up. Don't you hear the orchestra? Miss Van Vetter will"--

But Connie was not to be turned aside by any consideration for Bartrow's engagements or her own; nor yet by the inflow into the alcove-conservatory of sundry other fanning couples lately freed from the hop-and-slide of the two-step. Nor yet again by the appearance of young Mr. Theodore Calmaine, who came up behind Bartrow and was straightway transfixed and driven forth with pantomimic cut and thrust.

"Myra will have no difficulty in finding a partner. Don't be foolish, Dick. I have known all along that you have learned something about Mr. Jeffard which you wouldn't tell me. You may remember that you have persistently ignored my questions in your answers to my letters,--and I paid you back by telling you little or nothing about Myra. Now what were you going to say?"

"I was going to say that if Jeffard were like what he used to be, he would do for Lansdale what I shall probably not be able to do."

"What do you know about Mr. Jeffard?"

"What all the world knows--and a little more. Of course you have read what the newspapers had to say?"

"I have never seen a mention of his name."

"Why, you must have; they were full of it a month or two ago, and will be again as soon as the range opens and we find out what the big bonanza has been doing through the winter. You don't mean to say that you didn't read about the free-gold strike in the Elk Mountains, and the locomotive race, and the shooting scrape in the hotel at Aspen, and all that?"

The steady eyes were veiled and Connie's breath came in nervous little gasps. Any man save downright Richard Bartrow would have made a swift diversion, were it only to an open window or back to the ballroom. But he sat stocklike and silent, letting her win through the speechlessness of it to the faltered reply.

"I--I saw it; yes. But the name of that man was--was not Jeffard."

"No, it was Jeffers, or anything that came handy in the newspaper accounts. But that was a reporter's mistake."

"Dick,"--the steadfast eyes were transfixing him again,--"are you quite sure of that?"

"I ought to be. I was the man who helped him out at the pinch and got him started on the locomotive chase."

"You helped him?--then all those things they said about him were true?"

It was Bartrow's turn to hesitate. "I--I'm trying not to believe that, Connie."

"But you know the facts; or at least, more of them than the newspapers told. Did the claim really belong to him, or to James Garvin?"

Bartrow crossed his legs, uncrossed them, and again had recourse to his watch.

"I wish you'd leave the whole business up in the air, Connie, the way I'm trying to. It doesn't seem quite fair, somehow, to condemn him behind his back."

"But the facts," she insisted. "You know them, don't you?"

"Yes; and they're against him." Bartrow confessed it in sheer desperation. "The claim was Garvin's; Jeffard not only admitted it, but he started out on the chase with the declared determination of standing between Garvin and those two blacklegs who were trying to plunder him. That's all; that's as far as my facts go. Beyond that you--and the newspapers--know as much as I do."

"Not quite all, Dick. You say you helped him; that means that you lent him money, or borrowed it for him. Did he ever pay it back?"

Bartrow got upon his feet at that and glowered down upon her with mingled chagrin and awe in gaze and answer.

"Say, Connie, you come precious near to being uncanny at times, don't you know it? That was the one thing I didn't mean to tell any one. Yes, I borrowed for him; and no, he didn't pay it back. That's all--all of the all. If you put me in a stamp-mill you couldn't pound out anything else. Now, for pity's sake, let me get back to Miss Van Vetter before I fall in with the notion that I'm too transparent to be visible to the naked eye."

She rose and took his arm.

"You're good, Dickie," she said softly; "much too good for this world. I'm sorry for you, because it earns you so many buffetings."

"And you think I'm in for another on Jeffard's account."

"I am sure you are--now. The last time I saw him he wore a mask; a horrible mask of willful degradation and cynicism and self-loathing; but I saw behind it."

They were making a slow circuit of the ballroom in search of Connie's cousin, and the throng and the music isolated them.

"What did you see?"

"I saw the making of a strong man; strong for good or for evil; a man who could compel the world-attitudes that most of us have to sue for, or who would be strong enough on the evil side to flout and ignore them. I thought then that he was at the parting of the ways, but it seems I was mistaken,--that the real balancing moment came with what poppa calls the 'high-mountain bribe,'--Satan's offer of the kingdoms of this world and the glory of them."

Now, a thronged ballroom is scarcely a fit place for heart-to-heart outreachings; but there be loyal hearts who are not constrained by their encompassments, and Bartrow was of that brotherhood. They had attained a corner where one might swing a short-sword without fear of beheading the nearest of the dancers or out-sitters, and he faced about and took both of Connie's hands in his.

"Do you know, little sister, I'm awfully glad you're able to talk that way about him. There was a time when I began to be afraid--for your sake first, and afterward for"--

It is conceivable that the frankest of young women may have some reserves of time and place, if not of subjects, and before honest Dick could finish, Constance had freed herself and was reproaching young Calmaine for not seeking her out for the dance in process,--which was his.

Teddy's apology had in it the flavor of long acquaintance and the insolence thereof. "You're a cool one," he said, when they had left Bartrow behind. "As if I didn't stand for five good minutes at the door of that conservatory place, with you eye-pistoling and daggering me to make me go away!"

Thinking about it afterward, Bartrow wondered a little that Connie seemed bent on ignoring him through the remainder of the functional hours, large and small, but so it was. And when finally he was constrained to put Miss Van Vetter in the carriage, Connie's good-night and good-by were of the briefest. Miss Van Vetter, too, was silent on the homeward drive, and this Connie remarked, charging it openly to Dick's account when they were before the fire in Myra's room contemplating the necessity of going to bed.

"No, Mr. Bartrow was all that the most exacting person could demand,--and more," said Miss Van Vetter, going to the mirror to begin the relaxing process. "It was something he told me."

"About Mr. Jeffard?"

"Yes; how did you know?"

"I didn't know--I guessed."

"Isn't it dreadful!"

"No. Some of the other things he did might have been that; but this is unspeakable."

Myra turned her back upon the mirror and came to stand behind Connie's chair with her arms about her cousin's neck.

"Connie, dear, do you know that one time I was almost afraid that you,--but now I am glad,--glad that your point of view is--is quite extrinsic, you know."

Connie's gaze was upon the fire in the grate, fresh-stirred and glowing, a circumstance which may have accounted for the sudden trembling of the eyelids and the upwelling of tears in the steadfast eyes. And as for the nervous little quaver in her voice, there was fatigue to answer for that.

"I--I'm so glad you all take that for granted," she said. "I don't know what I should do if you didn't."

And a little later Myra went to bed and to sleep, wondering if, after all, there were not secret places in the heart of her transparent kinswoman which evaded the search-warrant of cousinly disinterest.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE obsequious waiter had cleared the table and brought in the dessert, and was hovering in the middle distance with two cigars in a whiskey glass. The persiflant young people at the other end of the table rose and went away, leaving a grateful silence behind them; and the clerical gentleman at Lansdale's right folded his napkin in absent-minded deference to home habit, and slipped sidewise out of his chair as if reluctant to mar the new-born hush.

Bartrow was down from the mine on the ostensible business of restocking the commissariat department of the Little Myriad,—a business which, prior to Miss Van Vetter's Denver year, had transacted itself indifferently well by letter,—and Lansdale was dining with him at the hotel by hospitable appointment. There were months between this and their last meeting, an entire winter, in point of fact; but it is one of the compensations of man-to-man friendships that they ignore absences and bridge intervals smoothly, uncoupling and recoupling again with small jar of accountings for the incidents of the lacuna.

Because of the persiflant young people, the fire of query and rejoinder had been the merest shelling of the woods on either side; but with the advent of quiet Bartrow said: "Your winter on the lamb-ranch didn't do you much good, did it?"

"Think not?" Lansdale looked up quickly, with a pathetic plea for heartening in the deep-set eyes of him. "I was hoping you'd say it had. I feel stronger—at times."

Bartrow saw the plea and the pathos of it, and added one more to the innumerable contemnments of his own maladroitness. He was quite sure of his postulate, however,—as sure as he was of the unnecessary cruelty of setting it in words. Lansdale was visibly failing. The clean-shaven face was thin to gauntness, and the dark eyes were unnaturally bright and wistful. Bartrow bribed the ubiquitous waiter to remove himself, making the incident an excuse for changing the subject.

"Never saw or heard anything more of Jeffard, did you?" he said, pitching the conversational quoit toward a known peg of common interest, and taking it for granted that Lansdale, like Connie, had not read the proletary's name into the newspaper misspellings.

"Not a thing. And I have often wondered what happened."

"Then Connie hasn't told you?"

"Miss Elliott? No; I didn't know she knew him."

"She met him a time or two; which is another way of saying that she knows him better than we do. She's a whole assay outfit when it comes to sizing people up."

"What was her opinion of Jeffard?" Lansdale was curious to know if it confirmed his own.

"Oh, she thinks he is a grand rascal, of course,—as everybody does."

"Naturally," said Lansdale, having in mind the proletary's later reincarnations as vagrant and starveling. "You didn't see much of him after he got fairly into the toboggan and on the steeper grades, did you?"

"Here in Denver?—no. But what I did see was enough to show that he was pretty badly tiger-bitten. You told me afterward that he took the post-graduate course in his particular specialty."

"He did; sunk his shaft, as you mining folk would say, straight on down to the chaotic substrata; pawned himself piecemeal to feed the animals, and went hungry between times by way of contrast."

"Poor devil!" said Bartrow, speaking in the past tense.

"Yes, in all conscience; but not so much for what he suffered as for what he was."

The distinction was a little abstruse for a man whose nayword was obviousness, but for the better part of a year Bartrow had been borrowing of Miss Van Vetter; among other things some transplantings of subtlety.

"That's where we come apart," he objected, with amiable obstinacy. "You think the root of the thing is in the man,—has been in him all along, and only waiting for a chance to sprout. Now I don't. I think it's in the atmosphere; in the—the—"

"Environment?" suggested Lansdale.

"Yes, I guess that's the word; something outside of the man; something that he didn't make, and isn't altogether to blame for, and can't always control."

The man with a moiety of the seer's gift suffered his eyebrows to arch query-wise. "Doesn't that ask for a remodeling of the accepted theory of good and evil?"

"No, you don't!" laughed Bartrow. "You are not going to pull me in over my head, if I know it. But I'll wrestle with you from now till midnight on my own ground. You take the best fellow in the world, brought up on good wholesome bread and meat and the like, and stop his rations for awhile. Then, when he is hungry enough, you give him a rag to chew, and he'll proceed to chew it,--not necessarily because he likes the taste of the rag, or because he was born with the rag-chewing appetite, but simply for the reason that you have put it in his mouth, and, being hungry, he's got to chew something. Jeffard is a case in point."

"Let us leave Jeffard and the personal point of view out of the question and stand it upon its own feet," rejoined Lansdale, warming to the fray. "Doubtless Jeffard's problem is divisible by the common human factor, whatever that may be, but your theory makes it too easy for the evil-doer. Consequently I can't admit it,--not even in Jeffard's case."

"I could make you admit it," retorted Bartrow, with generous warmth, forgetting the dishonored note in the Leadville bank, and remembering only the year ago partnership in brother-keeping. "You can size people up ten times to my once,--you ought to; it's right in your line,--but I know Jeffard worlds better than you do, and I could tell you things about him that would make you weep. Since he did those things I've had a rattling good chance to change my mind about him, but I'm not going to do it till I have to. I'm going to keep on believing that away down deep under this devil's-drift of--what was it you called it?--environment, there's a streak of good clean ore. It may take the stamp-mill or the smelter to get it out, but it's there all the same. He may fall down on you and me and all of his friends at any one of a dozen pinches,--he has fallen down on me, and pretty middling hard, too,--but there will come a pinch sometime that will pull him up short, and then you'll see what is in the lower levels of him,--what was there all the time, waiting for somebody to sink a shaft deep enough to tap it."

Lansdale took the cigar Bartrow was proffering and clipped the end of it, reflectively deliberate. He was silent so long that Bartrow said: "Well? you don't believe it, eh?"

"I wouldn't say that," Lansdale rejoined abstractedly; "anyway, not of Jeffard. Perhaps you are right. He has given me the same impression at times, but he was always saying or doing something immediately afterward to obliterate it. But I was wondering why you prophesy so confidently about a man who, for aught we know, took himself out of the world the better part of a year ago."

"Suicided?--not much! He's alive all right; very much alive and very much on top, as far as money is concerned. You don't read the papers, I take it?"

Lansdale's smile was of weariness. "Being at present a reporter on one of them I read them as little as may be. What should I have read that I didn't?"

"To begin back a piece, you should have read last fall about the big free-gold strike in the Elk Mountains, and an exciting little scrap between two men to get the first location on it."

"I remember that."

"Well, one of the men--the successful one--was Jeffard; our Jeffard. Your newspaper accomplices didn't spell his name right,--won't spell it right yet,--but it's Henry Jeffard, and yesterday's 'Coloradoan' says he's on his way to Denver to play leading man in the bonanza show."

Lansdale went silent what time it took to splice out the past with the present. After which he said: "I understand now why Miss Elliott condemns him, but not quite clearly why you defend him. As I remember it, the man who got possession of the Midas posed as a highwayman of the sort that the law can't punish. What has he to say for himself?"

Bartrow shook his head. "I don't know. I haven't seen him since one day last fall; the day of the locomotive chase."

"Did you know then that he was going to steal his partner's mine?"

"No. I thought then that he was going to do the other thing. And I'll not believe yet that he hasn't done the other thing. It's the finish I'm betting on. He may have flown the track at all the turns,--at this last turn as well as the others,--but when it comes to the home stretch, you watch him put his shoulder into the collar and remember what I said. I hope we'll both be there to see."

"So be it," Lansdale acquiesced. "It isn't in me to smash any man's ideal. And if anything could make me have faith in my kind, I think your belief in the inherent virtue of the race would work the miracle."

Bartrow laughed again, and pushed back his chair.

"It does you a whole lot of good to play at being a cold-blooded man-hater, doesn't it? But it's no go. Your practice doesn't gee with your preaching. Let's go out on the porch and smoke, if it won't be too cool for you."

They left the dining-room together and strolled out through the crowded lobby, lighting their cigars at the news-stand in passing. There was a convention of some sort in progress, and a sprinkling of the delegates, with red silk badges displayed, was scattered among the chairs on the veranda. Bartrow found two chairs a little apart from the decorated ones, faced them, and tilted his own against the railing. When his cigar was well alight he bethought him of a neglected duty.

"By the way, old man, I've never had the grace to say 'much obliged' for your neatness and dispatch in carrying out my wire order. I suppose you've forgotten it months ago, but I haven't. It was good of you. Connie wrote me about it at the time, and she said a whole lot of pretty things about the way you climbed into the breach."

"Did she?" Lansdale's habitual reserve fell away from him like a cast garment, and if Bartrow had been less oblivious to face readings he might have seen that which would have made his heart ache. But he saw nothing and went on, following his own lead.

"Yes; she said you took hold like a good fellow, and hung on like a dog to a root,—that is, she didn't say that, of course, but that was the sense of it. I'm obliged, a whole lot."

"You needn't be. The obligation is on my side. It was a pleasure to try to help Miss Elliott, even if I wasn't able to accomplish anything worth mentioning."

"Yes. She's good people; there's no discount on that. But say, you didn't size up Pete Grim any better than you had to. A good stiff bluff is about the only thing he can appreciate."

"If you had heard me talk to him you would have admitted that I was trying to bluff him the best I knew how," said Lansdale.

Bartrow laughed unfeelingly. "Tried to scare him with a lawsuit, didn't you? What do you suppose a man like Grim cares for the law? Why, bless your innocent soul, he can buy all the law he needs six days in the week and get it gratis on the seventh. But you might have fetched him down with a gun."

Lansdale tried to imagine himself attempting such a thing and failed. "I'm afraid I couldn't have done that—successfully. It asks for a little practice, doesn't it? and from what I have learned of Mr. Peter Grim in my small dealings with him, I fancy he wouldn't make a very tractable lay-figure for a beginner to experiment on. But we worried the thing through after a fashion, and recovered the young woman's sewing-machine finally."

"Bought Grim off, didn't you?"

"That was what it amounted to. Miss Elliott's father came to the rescue."

"There's a man for you!" declared Bartrow. "Built from the ground up, and white all the way through. And Connie's just like him. She's first cousin to the angels when she isn't making game of you. But I suppose you don't need to have anybody sing her praises to you at this late day."

"No; that is why I say the obligation is on my side. I am indebted to your 'wire order' for more things than I could well catalogue."

Bartrow rocked gently on the hinder legs of his chair, assuring himself that one of the things needed not to be listed. After which he became diplomatically abstruse on his own account. Two of the decorated ones came by, promenading arm in arm, and he waited until they were out of hearing.

"Found them good people to know, didn't you? *Bueno!* You used to hibernate a heap too much." Then, with labored indifference: "What do you think of Miss Van Vetter?"

Lansdale laughed.

"Whatever you would like to have me think, my dear boy. Shall I say that she is the quintessence of all the virtuous graces and the graceful virtues?—a paragon of para--"

"Oh, come off!" growled the abstruse one. "You've been taking lessons of Connie. You know what I mean. Do I--"

that is--er--do you think I stand a ghost of a show there? Honest, now."

"My dear Richard, if I could look into the heart of a young woman and read what is therein written, I could pass poverty in the street with a nod contemptuous. I'd be a made man."

"Oh, you be hanged, will you? You're a wild ass of the lamb-ranches, and wisdom has shook you," Bartrow rejoined, relapsing into vituperation. "Why can't you quit braying for a minute or so and be serious? It's a serious world, for the bigger part."

"Do you find it so? with a Miss Van Vetter for an eye-piece to your telescope? I am astonished."

Bartrow pulled his hat over his eyes and enveloped himself in a cloud of smoke. "When you're ready to fold up your ears and be human people again, just let me know, will you?" This from the midst of the smoke-cloud.

"Don't sulk, my Achilles; you shall have your Briseis,--if you can get her," laughed Lansdale. "Miss Van Vetter hasn't made a confidant of me, but I'll tell you a lot of encouraging little fibs, if that will help you."

Bartrow fanned an opening in the tobacco-nimbus. "What do you think about it?"

"I think I should find out for myself, if I were you," said Lansdale, with becoming gravity.

"I don't believe you would."

"Why?"

"Miss Van Vetter is rich."

"And Mr. Richard Bartrow is only potentially so. That is a most excellent reason, but I shouldn't let it overweigh common sense. From what Miss Elliott has said I infer that her cousin's fortune is not large enough to overawe the owner of a promising mine."

Bartrow's chair righted itself with a crash.

"That's the devil of it, Lansdale; that's just what scares me out. I've been pecking away in the Myriad for a year and a half now, and we're in something over four hundred feet--in rock, not ore. If we don't strike pay in the immediate hence I'm a ruined community. I've borrowed right and left, and piled up debt enough to keep me in a cold sweat for the next ten years. That's the chilly fact, and I leave it to you if I hadn't better take the night train and skip out for Topeka Mountain without going near Steve Elliott's."

The red-badges were passing again, and Lansdale took time to consider it. The appeal threw a new side-light on the character of the young miner, and Lansdale made mental apologies for having misjudged him. When he replied it was out of the heart of sincerity.

"It's a hard thing to say, but if you have stated the case impartially, I don't know but you would better do just that, Dick. From what I have seen of Miss Van Vetter, I should hazard a guess that the success or failure of the Little Myriad wouldn't move her a hair's-breadth, but that isn't what you have to consider."

"No." Bartrow said it from the teeth outward, looking at his watch. "It's tough, but I guess you're right. I can just about make it if I get a quick move. Will you go down to the train with me?"

Lansdale assented, and they walked the few squares to the Union Depot in silence. The narrow-gauge train was coupled and ready to leave, and Bartrow tossed his handbag to the porter of the sleeping-car.

"You're a cold-blooded beggar, do you know it?" he said, turning upon Lansdale with as near an approach to petulance as his invincible good-nature would sanction. "Here I've lost a whole day and ridden a hundred and fifty miles just to get a sight of her, and now you won't let me have it."

Lansdale laughed and promptly evaded the responsibility. "Don't lay it on my shoulders; I have sins enough of my own to answer for. It's a little hard, as you say, but it is your own suggestion."

"Is it? I don't know about that. It has been with me for a good while, but it never knocked me quite out until I began to wonder what you'd do in my place. That settled it. And you're not out of it by a large majority. What are you going to tell them up at Elliott's?--about me, I mean."

"Why should I tell them anything?"

"Because you can't help yourself. Elliott knows I'm in town,--knows we were going to eat together. I met him on the

way up to dinner."

"Oh, I'll tell them anything you say."

"Thanks. Fix it up to suit yourself,--wired to come back on first train, or something of that sort. Anything'll do; anything but the truth."

Lansdale's smile was inscrutable. He was thinking how impossible it would be for the most accomplished dissembler to tell aught but the truth with Constance Elliott's calm gray eyes upon him.

"I am afraid I shall make a mess of it."

"If you do, I'll come back and murder you. It's bad enough as it is. I've got a few days to go on, and I don't want them to know that the jig is definitely up until it can't be helped."

"Then you'd better write a note and do your own lying," said Lansdale. "I can spin fetching little fictions on paper and sign my name to them, but I'm no good at the other kind."

The engine-bell clanged, putting the alternative out of the question.

"That lets me out," Bartrow said. "You go up there and square it right for me; savez? And say, Lansdale, old man; don't work yourself too hard. In spite of the lamb-ranch, you look thinner than usual, and that's needless. Good-by."

Bartrow wrung his friend's hand from the steps of the Pullman, and Lansdale laughed quite cheerfully.

"Don't you waste any sympathy on me," he said. "I'm going to disappoint you all and get well. Good-night; and success to the Little Myriad."



CHAPTER XXIV

LANSDALE stood watching the two red eyes on the rear platform of the sleeping-car until the curve on the farther side of the viaduct blotted them out; after which he fell in with the tide of humanity ebbing cityward through the great arch of the station, and set out to do Bartrow's errand at the house in Colfax Avenue.

On the way he found time to admire Bartrow's manliness. The little deed of self-effacement promised a much keener sense of the eternal fitness of things than he had expected to come upon, in the young miner, or in any son of the untempered wilderness. Not that the wilderness was more mercenary than the less strenuous world of an older civilization--rather the contrary; but if it gave generously it was also prone to take freely. Lansdale wrought out the antithesis as a small concession to his own point of view, and was glad to set Bartrow's self-abnegation over against it. Assuredly he would do what a friendly man might toward making good the excuses of the magnanimous one.

It was Miss Van Vetter who met him at the door, and he thought he surprised a shadow of disappointment in her eyes when she welcomed him. But it was Constance who said, "Come in, Mr. Lansdale. Where is Dick?"

She was holding the portiere aside for him, and he made sure of his ingress before replying. Being of two minds whether to deny all previous knowledge of such a person as Richard Bartrow, or to commit himself recklessly to the hazards of equivocal explanations, he steered a middle course.

"Am I my brother's keeper?" he demanded, dropping into the easy-chair which had come to be called his by right of frequent occupancy.

"Oh, I hope you haven't murdered him!" said Connie, with a show of trepidation. "That's a terribly suggestive quotation."

"So it is. But are not my hands clean?" He held them up for inspection. "How are you both this evening?"

Connie's eyes danced. "Mr. Lansdale, do you happen to know anything about the habits of the ostrich?"

Lansdale acknowledged defeat, extending his hands in mock desperation. "Put the thumbikins on if you must," he said, "but don't screw them down too hard. I couldn't tell anything but the truth if I should try."

"What have you done with Dick?"

"I have murdered him, as you suggested, and put his remains in a trunk and shipped them East."

Miss Van Vetter looked horrified, but whether at his flippancy or at the hideous possibility, Lansdale could not determine.

"But, really," Connie persisted, with a look in her eyes which would have exorcised any demon of brazenness; "you dined with him, you know."

"So I did; but he had to go back to his mine on the night train. I saw him off, and he made me promise to come here and--and"--

"Square it?" Connie suggested.

"That is precisely the word,--his word. And you will both bear me witness that I have done it, won't you?"

Miss Van Vetter was cutting the leaves of a magazine, and she looked up to say: "That is one of the explanations which doesn't explain, isn't it?"

Lansdale collapsed in the depths of the chair. "I'm a poor unfort'net as don't know nothink," he quoted. "Tell me what you'd like to have me say and I'll say it."

"Why did Mr. Bartrow have to go back so unexpectedly?" asked Myra. "He told Uncle Stephen he would be in Denver two or three days."

Lansdale was not under bonds to keep the truthful peace at the behest of any eyes save those of Constance Elliott; wherefore he drew upon his imagination promptly, and, as it chanced, rather unfortunately.

"He had a telegram from his foreman about a--a strike, I think he called it."

"A strike in the Little Myriad!" This from both of the young women in chorus. Then Connie thankfully: "Oh, I'm so glad!" and Myra vindictively: "I hope he'll never give in to them!"

Lansdale collapsed again. "What have I done!" he exclaimed.

Constance set her cousin right, or tried to.

"It isn't a strike of the men; it's pay-ore--isn't it, Mr. Lansdale?"

"Now how should I know?" protested the amateur apologist. "A strike is a strike, isn't it? But I don't believe it was the good kind. He wasn't at all enthusiastic about it."

"That will do," said Connie. "Poor Dick!" And Miss Van Vetter, who was not of the stony-hearted, rose and went to the piano that she might not advertise her emotion.

Lansdale picked himself up out of the ruins of his attempt to do Bartrow a good turn, and hoped the worst was over. It was for the time; but later in the evening, when Myra had gone to the library for a book they had been talking about, Connie returned to the unfinished inquisition.

"You know more than you have told us about Dick's trouble," she said gravely. "Is it very serious?"

"Yes, rather." Lansdale made a sudden resolve to cleave to the facts in the case, telling as few of them as he might.

"It wasn't a strike at all, was it?"

"No; that was a little figure of speech. It is rather the lack of a strike--of the kind you meant."

"Poor boy! I don't wonder that it made him want to run away. He has worked so hard and so long, and his faith in the Little Myriad has been unbounded. What will he do?"

"I don't know that. In fact, I think he is not quite at the brink of things yet. But he is afraid it is coming to that."

"How did he talk? Is he very much discouraged? But of course he isn't; nothing discourages him."

Lansdale was looking into the compelling eyes and he forgot his role,--forgot that he had been giving Constance to understand that the prospective failure of the mine was the only cloud in Bartrow's sky.

"I'm sorry I can't confirm that." He spoke hurriedly, hearing the rustle of Miss Van Vetter's skirts in the hall. "He decided rather suddenly,--to go back, you know. He intended coming here with me this evening. I don't think he had ever considered all the possibilities and consequences; and we were talking it over. Then he decided not to come. He is the soul of honor."

Constance nodded intelligence, and made the proper diversion when her cousin came in with the book. But Miss Van Vetter had overheard the final sentence, and she put it away for future reference.

Lansdale said good-night a little later, and they both went to the door with him. When he was gone Myra drew Connie into the library and made her sit down where the light from the shaded chandelier fell full upon her.

"Connie, dear," she began, fixing her cousin with an inquisitorial eye, "who is 'the soul of honor'?"

"It isn't nice to overhear things," said Connie pertly.

"I might retort that it isn't nice to have confidences with a gentleman the moment your cousin's back is turned, but I sha'n't. Will you tell me what I want to know?"

"We were talking about Dick."

Myra's hands were clasped over her knee, and one daintily shod foot was tapping a tattoo on the rug. "Was it anything that I ought not to know?"

Connie's pertness vanished, and the steadfast gray eyes brightened with quick upwellings of sympathy. "No, dear; it will doubtless be in everybody's mouth before many days. You remember what I told you once about Dick's prospects?--that day we were on top of El Reposo?"

"Yes."

"Well, I think the Little Myriad isn't going to keep its promise; Dick thinks so."

Myra sat quietly under it for a little while, and then got up to go to the window. When she spoke she did not turn her head.

"He will be ruined, you said. What will you do, Connie?"

"I? What can I do? Poppa would lend him more money, but he wouldn't take it,--not from us."

Silence while the bronze-figured clock on the mantel measured a full minute. Then:--

"There is one way you can make him take it."

"How?"

Myra gave a quick glance over her shoulder, as if to make sure that her cousin was still sitting under the chandelier.

"He believes--and so does your father--that it is only a question of time and more money. He couldn't refuse to take his wife's money."

Miss Van Vetter heard a little gasp, which, to her strained sense, seemed to be more than half a sob, and the arc-light swinging from its wire across the avenue was blurred for her. Then Connie's voice, soft and low-pitched in the silence of the book-lined room, came to her as from a great distance.

"You are quite mistaken, Myra, dear; mistaken and--and very blind. Dick is my good brother,--the only one I ever had; not my father's son, but yet my brother. There has been no thought of anything else between us. Besides"--

Myra heard light footfalls and the rustle of drapery, and stole another quick glance over her shoulder. The big pivot-chair under the chandelier was empty. The door into the hall was ajar, and Connie's face, piquant with suppressed rapture, was framed in the aperture.

"Besides, you good, dense, impracticable cuzzy, dear,--are you listening?--Dick is head over ears in love with--you."

The door slammed softly on the final word, and there was a quick patter of flying feet on the stairs. Myra kept her place at the window; but when the arc-light had parted with its blurring aureole she drew the big pivot-chair to the desk and sat down to write.

What she had in mind seemed not to say itself readily, and there was quite a pyramid of waste paper in the basket before she had finished her two letters. She left them on the hall table when she went up to her room, and Connie found them in the morning on her way to the breakfast-room to pour her father's coffee.

"I wish I might read them," she said, with the mischievous light dancing in her eyes. "It's deliciously suspicious; a letter to Dick, and one to her man of business, all in a breath, and right on the heels of my little bomb-shell. If she ever tries to discipline me again,--well, she'd better not, that's all."



CHAPTER XXV

Two days after his return to the mine on Topeka Mountain, Bartrow received a letter. It came up from Alta Vista by the hands of one of the workmen who had been down to the camp blacksmith shop with the day's gathering of dulled tools, and was considerably the worse for handling when it reached its destination. Connie's monogram was on the flap of the envelope, but the address was not in Connie's handwriting. So much Bartrow remarked while he was questioning the tool-carrier.

"Took you a good while, didn't it? Was Pat sober to-day?"

"Naw; swimmin' full, same as usual."

"Spoil anything?"

"Burnt up a drill 'r two, spite of all I could do. Laid off to lick me when he got through, but I lit out 'fore he got round to it."

"Did, eh? It's a pity; he's a good blacksmith if he'd only let whiskey alone. Try him in the morning next time, and maybe you'll catch him sober."

"Don't make any difrence 'bout the time o' day with him. He's full all the time, he is."

Bartrow's curiosity was beginning to bestir itself, but he put it under foot till he had climbed to the three-roomed cabin on the bench above the tunnel-opening. Wun Ling was laying the table for supper, and the master of the mine sat down on the porch to read his letter. It was from Miss Van Vetter; and the glow on Bartrow's sunburned face as he read it was not altogether the ruddy reflection from the piled-up masses of sunset crimson in the western sky.

"Dear Mr. Bartrow," she wrote: "Mr. Lansdale has just been here, and we made him tell us about your trouble, though he tried very hard not to. From which we infer that you didn't want us to know,—and that was wrong. If one cannot go to one's friends at such times, it is surely a very thankless world.

"Constance told me some time ago that you might not be able to go on with the Little Myriad without the investment of more capital, and I have written about it to a friend of mine in the East who has money to invest. You may call it a most unwarrantable impertinence if you please, but I'm not going to apologize for it,—not here. If you would really like to humble me, I'll give you plenary indulgence when you come to see us.

"I inclose my friend's Philadelphia address, and I may say with confidence that I am quite sure he will help you if you will write him.

"We have abundant faith in you and in the Little Myriad. Don't think of giving up, and please don't evade us when you are next in Denver."

Bartrow absorbed it by littles, and sat fingering the slip of paper with the Philadelphia address on it, quite unheedful of Wun Ling's thrice-repeated announcement that supper was ready. It was his first letter from her, and the fact was easily subversive of presence of mind. Not until the lilt of it had a little outworn itself could he bring himself down to any fair-minded consideration of the offer of help. But when it finally came to that, he put the letter in his pocket and went in to supper, smiling ineffably and shaking his head as one who has set his face flintwise against temptation.

An hour later, however, when he was smoking his pipe on the porch step, the temptation beset him afresh. His faith in the ultimate success of the mine had never wavered. It was unshaken even now, when he was at the end of his resources, and a thing had happened which threatened to demand a costly change in the method of exploiting the lode. But to be confident for himself and for those who, knowing the hazard, had helped him hitherto, was one thing; and to take a stranger's money was quite another. And when the stranger chanced to be the friend of the woman he loved, a person who would invest in the Little Myriad solely on the ground of Miss Van Vetter's recommendation, the difference magnified itself until it took the shape of a prohibition.

The light had faded out of the western sky, and the peaks of the main range stood out in shadowy relief against the star-dusted background. The homely noises in Wun Ling's sanctum had ceased, and silence begirt the great mountain. Bartrow tossed the extinct pipe through an open window, and began to pace the length of the slab-floored porch. It was not in him to give up without another struggle; a final struggle, he called it, though none knew better that there is no final struggle for a strong man save that which crowns perseverance with the chaplet of fruition. The temptation to grasp the hand held out to him was very subtle. If Miss Van Vetter could have been eliminated—if only the proposal had come direct from the Philadelphia capitalist, instead of through her.

The sound of footsteps on the gravel at the tunnel's mouth broke into his reverie, and the figure of a man loomed dimly in the darkness at the foot of the path leading up to the cabin. It was McMurtrie, the mining engineer in charge of the Big Bonanza at Alta Vista. Bartrow called down to him.

"Is that you, Mac? Don't come up; I'll be with you in a second."

The engineer sat down on a tool-box and waited.

"I'm a little late," he said, when Bartrow came down the path. "It's pay-day at the Bonanza. Get a lamp and let's go in and have a look at your new grief."

"You didn't need to tramp up here in the dark," Bartrow rejoined, feeling in a niche in the timbering for a miner's lamp. "I'd given you up for to-night."

"Oh, I said I'd come, and I'm here. I know how it feels to be on the ragged edge,—been there myself. Is that the best lamp you could find? It isn't much better than a white bean. Pick it up a little higher so I can see the wet spots. It's too chilly to go in swimming to-night."

They were picking their way through the damp tunnel, Bartrow ahead with the lamp held high. The "new grief" was an apparent change in the direction of the ore-bearing crevice from its slight inclination upward to a sharp pitch downward; and Bartrow had asked McMurtrie to come up and look at it.

In the heading the engineer took the lamp and made a careful examination of the rock face of the cutting, tracing the outline of the vein with the flame of the lamp, and picking off bits of the shattered rock to determine the lines of cleavage. Bartrow stood aside and waited for the verdict; waited with a tense thrill of nervousness which was quite new to him; and the monotonous drip-drip of the water percolating through the tunnel roof magnified itself into a din like the ringing of hammers upon an anvil.

"Well, what do you say?" he queried, when the engineer made an end and began to fill his pipe.

"You're in for it, Dick,—here, hold this lamp a minute, will you? It's a pretty well-defined dip in the formation, and I'm afraid it has come to stay. That means an incline."

The echo took up Bartrow's ironical laugh and gave it back in mocking reiteration.

"Yes; an incline at the end of a four-hundred-and-forty-foot tunnel, and a steam hoist, and a pumping outfit, and a few other little knickknacks. Say a couple of thousand dollars or so before I can turn a wheel."

McMurtrie bent to light his pipe at the flame of the lamp. "That's about the size of it. Hold that lamp still, can't you?"

"Hold it yourself," retorted Bartrow; and he took a turn in the darkness to steady his nerves. When he stumbled back into the dim nimbus of lamplight he had fought and won his small battle.

"Don't lay it up against me, Mac," he said, in blunt contrition. "It knocked me out for a minute. You know I've been backing my luck here for all I'm worth."

"Yes, I know that. What will you do now?"

"Quit; come off the perch; shut up shop and pull down the blinds. It's all there is to do."

"And give it up?"

"And give it up. Bank's broke; or at least it will be when I've paid the men another time or two."

McMurtrie had Scotch blood in his veins, and was cannily chary of offering unasked advice. None the less, he did it.

"I'd borrow a little more nerve and go on, if it were mine."

"So would I if I could."

"Can't you?"

Bartrow said "no," changed it to "yes," and then qualified the assent until it, too, became a negation.

"It's a pity," was the engineer's comment. "I believe another hundred feet would let you in for a decently good thing."

"So do I. But it might as well be a thousand. I know when I'm downed."

McMurtrie scoffed openly at that, taking his pipe from his mouth to say: "That's the one thing you don't know. You'll chew on it a while and go to Denver; and in a day or so your men will get orders to go on. I've seen you downed before. Why don't you go back East and marry a rich girl? That's the way to develop a mine."

It was a random shot, but it went so near the mark that Bartrow winced, and was thankful that the flaring miner's lamp was not an arc-light. And his rejoinder ignored the matrimonial suggestion.

"You're off wrong this time, Mac. I wish you didn't have to be. But it's no use. I'm in debt till I can't see out over the top of it, and I couldn't raise another thousand on the Myriad if I should try,—that is, not in Colorado. If I go to Denver it'll be to turn over my collateral and let everybody down as easy as I can."

"Then don't go yet a while."

Bartrow took the lamp and led the way out of the tunnel.

"I did mean to stand it off to the last minute," he said, when they were once more under the stars, "but I don't know as it's worth while now. Will you come up to the shack and smoke a few lines? No? Then wait till I get my coat and I'll walk down to camp with you. I want to do a little wiring before I turn in."

They parted at the railway station above the camp at the foot of Bonanza Mountain, and Bartrow went in to send his message. In the hour of defeat he yearned, manlike, for sympathy; and it was to Connie that his cry went out. Notwithstanding the earnestness of it, the appeal was consistently characteristic in its wording.

"I'm hunting sympathy. Can you give me a lonesome hour or two if I come down? Answer while I wait."

He asked the night operator to rush it, and sat down with his feet on the window-sill to smoke out the interval. A half-hour later, when the operator was jogging Denver for a reply to his "rush," the din of an affray floated up to the open window from the camp in the gulch. The operator came to the window and looked down upon the twinkling lights of the town.

"That's the blacksmith again," he said. "He's been on a steady bat for two weeks, and the camp isn't big enough to hold him."

"He'll kill himself, if he don't mind," Bartrow prophesied. "He's raw yet, and hasn't found out that a man can't stand the drink up here that he could in the valley."

"No. Doc said he had a touch of the jimmies last night. He yelled for his daughter till they heard him up at the shaft-house of the Bonanza. McMurtrie said"—But what the engineer's commentary had been was lost to Bartrow, since the clicking sounder was snipping out the reply to the "rush" message.

The operator wrote it out and handed it to Bartrow. The answer was as characteristic as the appeal.

"Two of the three of us go to Boulder to-morrow to return by the late train. The other one is most sympathetic. Come.

"CONNIE."

CHAPTER XXVI

ON the long day-ride from Alta Vista to Denver, Bartrow dwelt upon Myra's letter until the hopefulness of it took possession of him, urging him to reconsider his determination to give up the fight on the Little Myriad. That which seems to have fortified itself beyond peradventure of doubt in the night season is prone to open the door to dubiety in the morning; and the hope which McMurtrie's verdict had quenched came to life again, setting the mill of retrieval a-riding, though, apart from the suggestion in Myra's letter, there was little enough for grist.

From admitting the hope to considering ways and means was but a step in the march of returning confidence; and, setting aside Myra's proposal as an alternative which would bring victory at the expense of the cause in which the battle was fought, he was moved to break his promise to himself and to ask help of Stephen Elliott. This decision was not reached without a day-long struggle, in which pride and generosity fought shoulder to shoulder against the apparent necessity. The pioneer had more than once offered to back the promise of the Little Myriad; but Bartrow, knowing Elliott's weakness in the matter of money keeping, had steadily refused to open another door of risk to the old man who had fathered him from boyhood, and whose major infirmity was an open-handed willingness to lend to any borrower.

But the necessity was most urgent. Bartrow rehearsed the condoning facts and set them over against his promise to himself. If he should give up the fight the Little Myriad would be lost, he would be left hopelessly in debt, and the beatific vision, with Miss Van Vetter for its central figure, vanished at once into the limbo of things unrealizable. Moreover, the investment would be less hazardous for the pioneer than at any previous time in the history of the mine. Notwithstanding the discouragements, it was a heartening fact that the ore-bearing vein was steadily widening; and the last mill-run assay, made a week before, had shown a cheering increase in value.

Bartrow weighed the pros and cons for the twentieth time while the train was speeding over the ultimate mile of the long run, and finally yielded to the importunate urgings of the necessity. The first step was to take Connie into his confidence; and when the train reached Denver he hurried to the hotel, full of the new hope and eager to begin the campaign of retrieval. While he was inscribing his name in the register the clerk asked a question.

"Just come down from the range, Mr. Bartrow?"

"Yes. Can you give me my old room?"

"Certainly." The clerk wrote the number opposite the name. "What do they say up in the carbonate camp about the Lodestar business?"

"The Lodestar? I don't know. I haven't been in Leadville. I came down from the Bonanza district on the other line. Anything broke loose?"

"Haven't you heard? The big producer is played out."

"What!"

"Fact; struck a 'lime horse' two weeks ago, and they've been keeping it dark and unloading the stock right and left. You are not in it, I hope?"

Bartrow was not, but he knew that Elliott was; knew, too, that in any unloading *saive qui peut* the old pioneer would most likely be one of those found dead in the deserted trenches. Wherefore he slurred his supper and hastened out to the house in Colfax Avenue, not to ask help, as he had prefigured, but to ascertain if there were not some way in which a broken man might tender it.

There was a light in the library and none in the parlor; and Bartrow, being rather more a brevet member of Stephen Elliott's family than a visitor, nodded to the servant who admitted him, hung up his coat and hat, and walked unannounced into the lighted room. When he discovered that the library held but one occupant, that the shapely head bending over a book in the cone of light beneath the reading-lamp was not Connie's, he realized the magnitude of Connie's duplicity, and equanimity forsook him.

Miss Van Vetter shut her finger in her book and smiled as if his sudden appearance were quite a matter of course.

"I hoped you would come," she said. "Have you been to dinner?"

The prosaic question might have enabled a less ingenuous man to cover his discomposure with some poor verbal mantle of commonplace or what not; but Bartrow could only murmur "Good Lord!" sinking therewith into the hollow of the nearest chair because his emotion was too great to be borne standing.

Since she was not a party to Connie's small plot, Myra was left to infer that her visitor was ill, and she rose in sympathetic concern.

"Why, Mr. Bartrow! is anything the matter? Shall I get you something? a glass of wine, or"--

Bartrow shook his head and besought her with both hands to sit down again. "No, nothing, thank you; it's miles past that sort of mending. Do you--do you happen to know where your cousin is?"

"Why, yes; she has gone to Boulder with Uncle Stephen."

"I--I thought you were going," Bartrow stammered.

It did not occur to Miss Van Vetter to wonder why he should have thought anything about it.

"I thought so myself, up to the last moment," she rejoined.

Bartrow leaned forward with his hands on his knees.

"Miss Myra, would you--do you mind telling me why you didn't go?" He said it with reproachful gravity.

Miss Van Vetter's poise was an inheritance which had lost nothing in transmission, but the unconscious reproach in his appeal overset it. Under less trying conditions her laugh would have emancipated him; but being still in the bonds of unreadiness, he could only glower at her in a way which lacked nothing of hostility save intention, and say, "I should think you might tell me what you're laughing at!"

"Oh, nothing--nothing at all. Only one would think you were sorry I didn't go. Are you?"

"You know well enough I'm not." This time the reproach was not unconscious. "But you haven't answered my question. I have a horrible suspicion, and I want to know."

"It was Connie's mistake. I was to meet them at the station at half past four--I am sure she said half past four--and when I went down I found the train had been gone an hour. Did you ever hear of such a thing?"

Miss Van Vetter did not know that the small arch-plotter had exhausted her ingenuity trying to devise some less primitive means of accomplishing her purpose; but Bartrow gave Connie full credit for act and intention.

"She'd do worse things than that; she wouldn't stick at anything to carry her point," he said unguardedly.

Myra laughed again. "I hope you don't ask me to believe that she did it purposely," she said.

"Oh, no; of course not. I don't ask you to believe anything--except that I'm foolishly glad you missed the train," rejoined the downright one, beginning to find himself.

"Are you, really? I was almost ready to doubt it."

Bartrow was not yet fit to measure swords of repartee with any one, least of all with Miss Van Vetter, and the quicksand of speechlessness engulfed him. His helplessness was so palpable that it presently became infectious, and Myra was dismayed to find herself growing sympathetically self-conscious. Her letter lay between their last meeting and this, and she began to wonder if that were the barrier. When the silence became portentous, Bartrow gathered himself for another dash toward enlargement. It was that or asphyxia. The very air of the room was heavy with the narcosis of embarrassment.

"Your letter came yesterday," he began abruptly.

"Did it? And you have come to tell me to--to tell me to mind my own business? as I said you might?"

"No, indeed, I haven't. But I can't do it, all the same--drag your friend in on the Myriad."

"Was Mr. Lansdale mistaken? Don't you need more capital to go on with?"

"Need it?--well, yes; rather. But I can't take your Mr. Grimsby's money."

"Why not?"

"Because"--the low-pitched hollow of the big lounging-chair seemed to put him at a disadvantage, and he struggled up out of it to tramp back and forth before her--"well, in the first place, because he *is* your friend; and if he wasn't, I have no security to offer him--collateral, I suppose he'd call it."

"He is not exactly my friend, within your meaning of the word; and he will not ask you to secure him."

He stopped and looked down upon her. She was shading her eyes from the sheen of the reading-lamp and turning the leaves of the book.

"What does he know about the Little Myriad? anything more than you have told him?"

"No."

"And yet you say he is willing to put up money on it?"

"He is ready to help you--yes."

Bartrow's brows went together in a frown of perplexity. "As long as I'm not going to let him, I suppose I haven't any right to ask questions, but"--

She put the book on the table and looked up at him with something of Connie's steadfastness in her eyes.

"Perhaps I was foolish to try to make even such a small mystery of it; but I thought--I was so anxious to--to put it in such a way as to"--

The words would not discover themselves; and Bartrow, to whom the mystery was now no mystery, helped her over the obstruction.

"As to make it easy for me. I think I catch on, after so long a time. Mr. Grimsby is your business manager, isn't he?"

"My solicitor; yes."

"That's what I meant. And it was going to be your own money?"

"Yes."

He met her gaze with a smile of mingled triumph and admiration.

"It was a close call, and you'll never know how near I came to falling down," he said. "It was a fearful temptation."

The pencilled brows went up with a little arch of interrogation between them.

"A temptation? Why do you call it that?"

Bartrow was slowly coming to his own in the matter of unconstraint. "If you had ever dabbled in mineral, you'd know. When a fellow gets in about so deep, he'd foreclose the mortgage on his grandfather's farm to get money to go on with. I didn't read between the lines in your letter. I thought the Philadelphia man was some friend of yours who was interested in a general way, and the temptation to fall on his neck and weep was almost too much for me."

"You still call it a temptation."

"It was just that, and nothing less. I had the toughest kind of a fight with myself before I could say no, and mean it."

"But why should you say no? You believe in the Little Myriad, don't you?"

"Sure. But that's for myself--and for a few people who knew the size of the risk when they staked me. So far as I've gone with it, it's only a big game of chance; and I wouldn't let you put your money into it unless I knew it was the surest kind of a sure thing."

"Not if I believe in it, too? Not if I am willing to take the chances that you and the others have taken?" Myra conceived that her mistake lay in putting it upon the ground of a purely business transaction, and changed front with truly feminine adroitness. "Won't you let me have just a tiny share of it? Enough so that when I go back to Philadelphia I can say that I am interested in a mine? I should think you might. I'll promise to be the most tractable and obedient stockholder you have."

She made the plea like a spoiled child begging for a toy, but there was no mistaking the earnestness of it. Bartrow felt his fine determination oozing, and was moved to tramp again, making a circuit of the entire room this time, and saying to himself with many emphatic repetitions that it could not be possible,--that her motive was only charitable,--that he was nothing more to her than Connie's friend. When he spoke again his circlings had brought him to the back of her chair.

"You're making it fearfully hard for me, and the worst of it is that you don't seem to know it. You think I am a mining crank, like all the rest of them, and so I am; but there was method in my madness. I never cared overmuch for money until I came to know what it is to love a woman who has too much of it."

There was manifestly no reply to be made to such a pointless speech as this, and when he resumed his circumambulatory march she began to turn the leaves of the book again. When it became evident that he was not going to elucidate, she said, "Meaning Connie?"

"No, not meaning Connie." He had drifted around to the back of her chair again. "I wish you'd put that book away for a few minutes. It owls me."

"I will, if you will stop circling about and talking down on me from the ceiling. It's dreadfully distressing."

He laughed and drew up a chair facing her; drew it up until the arm of it touched hers.

"It's a stand-off," he said, with cheerful effrontery; "only I didn't mean my part of it. Let's see, where were we? You said, 'Meaning Connie,' and I said, 'No, not meaning Connie.' I meant some one else. Until I met her, the Little Myriad was merely a hole in the ground, not so very different from other holes in the ground except that it was mine--and it wasn't the Little Myriad then, either. After that, it got its name changed, and its mission, too. From that day its business was to make it possible for me to go to her and say, 'I love you; you, yourself, and not your money. I've money enough of my own.'"

She heard him through with the face of a graven image. "And now?"

"And now I can't do it; I can never do it, I'm afraid. The Little Myriad has gone back on me, and I'm nearer flat broke to-day than I've ever been."

"But this unfortunate young person who has too much money--she is young, isn't she?--has she nothing to say about it?"

Bartrow answered his own thought rather than her question. "She couldn't be happy with everybody saying she'd staked her husband."

"Has she told you that?"

"No; but it's so,--you know it's so."

Bartrow was no juggler in figures of speech, and his fictitious third person threatened to become unmanageable.

Her smile was good to look upon. "I don't know anything of the kind. I think she would be very foolish to let such an absurd thing make her unhappy--supposing any one should be unkind enough to say it."

"They would say it, and I'd hear of it; and then there'd be trouble."

"But you say you love her; isn't your love strong enough to rise above such things? You think the sacrifice would be hers, but it wouldn't; it would be yours."

"I don't see how you make that out."

Myra's heart sank within her. It hurt her immeasurably to be driven to plead her own cause, but the money-fact was inexorable; and the look in Bartrow's eyes was her warrant when she dared to read it.

"Oh, can't you see?" The words wrought themselves into a plea, though she strove to say them dispassionately. "If it touch your self-respect ever so little, the sacrifice is all yours."

That point of view was quite new to Bartrow. He took time to think it out, but when the truth clinched itself he went straight to the mark.

"I never saw that side of it before--don't quite see it now. But if you do, that's different. It's you, little woman; and I do love you--you, yourself, and not your money. I wish I could go on and say the rest of it, but I can't. Will you take me for better or for worse--with an even chance that it's going to be all worse and no better?"

Her eyes filled with quick tears, and her voice was tremulous. "It would serve you right if I should say no; you've fairly made me beg you to ask me!"

Her hand was on the arm of the chair, and he possessed himself of it and raised it to his lips with gentle reverence.

"You'll have to begin making allowances for me right at the start," he said humbly. "When I make any bad breaks you must remember it's because I don't know any better, and that away down deep under it all I love you well enough to--to go to jail for you. Will you wait for me while I skimish around and try to get on my feet again?"

"No"--with sweet petulance.

"There it is, you see; another bad break right on top of the first. Suppose you talk a while and let me listen. I'm good at listening."

"I'll wait, if you want me to,--and if you will let me help you to go on with the Little Myriad."

Bartrow's laugh had a ring of boyish joy in it.

"Back to the old cross-roads, aren't we? I'll let you in on it now; but if you take the mine you'll have to take the man along with the other incumbrances,--simultaneously, so to speak."

"I thought you were anxious to wait."

"If you were as poor as I am, I'd ask you to make it high noon to-morrow."

"Oh! the money again. Can't we put it aside, once for all? There isn't so much of it as you may imagine."

Bartrow overleaped the barrier at a bound.

"Then let's make it noon to-morrow. If we are going to push the Myriad I ought to go back to-morrow night."

She tried to scoff at him, but there was love in her eyes.

"Connie said once that you were Young-man-afraid-of-his-horses, but she doesn't know you. I believe you more than half mean it."

"I do mean it. If I sit here and look at you much longer I shall be begging you to make it nine o'clock instead of twelve. Don't ask me to wait very long. It'll be hard enough to go off and leave you afterward. It's a good bit more than a hundred miles in a straight line from Denver to Topeka Mountain."

"I'm going with you," she said calmly.

"You?--to live in a wicky-up on the side of a bald mountain? But you know what it is; you've been there. You'd die of the blues in a week."

"Would I?" She rose and stood beside his chair. "You don't know much about me, yet, do you? If the 'wicky-up' is good enough for you, it is good enough for me. I am going with you, and I'm going to make that dear little log cabin a place that you will always be glad to remember,--if I can."

He drew her down on the arm of the chair.

"Don't talk to me that way, Myra,--you mustn't, you know. I'm not used to it, and it breaks me all up. If you say another word I shall want to make it seven o'clock in the morning instead of nine."

"Can you wait a month?"

"No."

"Three weeks?"

"No."

She gave up in despair. "You are dreadfully unreasonable."

"I know it; I was born that way and I can't help it. I sha'n't insist on to-morrow, because I'm not sure that Wun Ling has anything for us to eat; but one week from to-morrow, when I've had time to stock up and straighten up a bit, is going to be the limit. Can you make it?"

"What if I say no?"

"I shall come anyway."

She bent over until her lips touched his forehead.

"That is your answer, only you don't deserve it. And now will you answer my question? I asked you when you came in if you had been to dinner, and you said 'Good Lord!'"

"Did I? I think I must have been a bit rattled. You see, I'd just heard some bad news, and I was expecting to find Connie, and wasn't expecting to find you."

"Did Connie write you she would meet you?"

He had one hand free to fish out the day-old telegram and give it to her. She read it with a swift blush crimsoning cheek and neck.

"The unscrupulous little tyke!" she said; and then, with self-defensive tact: "But you said you had bad news."

"Yes. A mine that our good old Uncle Steve is pretty deeply into has gone dry."

"Failed, you mean?"

"Yes, that's it. I wish you'd teach me how to talk English,—good clean English, like yours. Connie has tried it, but pshaw! she's worse than I am. But about the Lodestar: I don't know how deep the old man is in; he's such an innocent old infant about putting up money that I'm awfully afraid they have salted him. You must pump Connie and find out. I'll be in Leadville to-morrow night, and if there is anything to be done on the ground I'll do it. The old man has been a second father to me."

Myra promised, and went back once more to the unanswered dinner query.

"Now you remind me of it, I believe I haven't been to dinner," he admitted. "But that's nothing; a meal or two more or less isn't to be mentioned at such a time as this."

"I am going to get you something."

"No, don't; I'm too happy to eat."

But she insisted, and when she came back with a dainty luncheon on a tea-tray he did ample justice to it, if for no better reason than that she sat on the other side of the small reading-table and made tea for him.

Afterward, when the time drew near for the Elliotts' return, he took his leave, though it was yet early.

"They are the best friends I have on earth," he said, when Myra went to the door with him, "but somehow, I feel as if I didn't want to meet anybody I know,—not to-night. I want to have it all to myself for a few hours."

She laughed at that; a laugh with an upbubbling of content and pure happiness in it; and sent him off with his heart afire. When he was halfway down the walk she recalled him. He came back obediently.

"It will cost you something every time you do that," he protested, exacting the penalty. "Was that what you wanted?"

"Of course not! I merely wanted to ask you what it is to 'owl' a person. You said I 'owled' you."

"Did I? Well, you don't; you never can. That is the best definition I can think of: something you can never do to me. May I say good-night again? the way I did a minute ago?"

The glare of the arc-light swinging between its poles across the avenue was quite ruthless, and there were passers-by in straggling procession on the sidewalk. But at the critical instant the kindly incandescence burned blue, clicked, fizzed, and died down to a red spot in the darkness. For which cause Bartrow presently went his way, with the heart-fire upblazing afresh; and when Myra won back to the library and the cosy depths of the great chair, the color scheme of fair neck and cheek and brow was not altogether the reflection from the crimson shade of the reading-lamp.

CHAPTER XXVII

CONSTANCE TO MYRA

MY DEAR LADY BOUNTIFUL: Your letter--the ridiculous one--came yesterday. The idea of your proposing in the very morning of your honey-month to take the Colfax Avenue house and turn it into a home for indigent relatives! As Tommie would put it, "Wot are you givin' us!"

But seriously, cuzzy dear, it's quite out of the question. Papa wouldn't hear to it, and besides, we are getting along very cosily now, re-learning a good many lessons that prosperity makes one forget. One of them is that gratitude isn't quite like the dodo,--gone into fossilistic extinction, you know.

Margaret Gannon is one of the instances. She has taken a room in our block, and there is no limit to her great Irish tender-heartedness. If I'd let her, she would make me sit down and hold my hands while she does the housework of our three rooms. In spite of all I can say or do, she does do a great deal of it; and I can hear her sewing-machine buzzing deep into the night to pay for it.

Tommie is another. The day we moved down here from the old home in Colfax Avenue that "irreclaimable little savage," as you once called him, brought me his surplus of a dollar and something and asked me to "blow it in" for him. Think of it and weep, you luxury-spoiled darling! I could have hugged him, dirt and all. And since that day he has been my Ariel, in more ways than you would think possible. He is so sharp and keen-witted; and his philanthropy has developed into a passion.

Mr. Lansdale has been most kind. That is the proper phrase, I believe, but now that I have written it down it seems trite and meaningless. If I say that he has fairly earned the right to sign himself "Robert Lansdale, Gentleman," you will understand. The change in our circumstances has been a test that he alone of all our friends has been able to endure unmoved. I don't say that others are not kind and sympathetic, but they are--well, they are different. Now that I can say it without hurting you, I'll admit that I've always had a good bit of contempt for culture of the imported variety (I think I have been spelling it "culchah"), but Mr. Lansdale has converted me. It is worth something to be able to rise superior to circumstances,--the circumstances of others, I mean,--and, between us two, it's a virtue to which we new people haven't quite attained.

I presume you read the Denver papers, and if you do you know all I could tell you about the person whom you once said was better worth saving than other people. Mr. Lansdale, who was one of the original trio, you remember, talks very sparingly of Mr. Jeffard; from which I infer that there isn't much to be said,--in mixed company. The newly arrived one lives in an apartment building, and papa says they are beginning to call him a miser on the street. They'd say that of any capitalist who wouldn't invest in at least one "ground-floor" a day; but I think you will agree with me that they can't say anything worse than the truth about him. I haven't had the ill-chance to meet him yet (I hope I'll be spared that), but I am afraid Tommie has been spying upon him,--for reasons of his own which he won't explain. I happened to overhear the final volley of a small battle royal between my Ariel and Margaret the other day, which had in it a hint of an unnamable thing,--a thing which involves Margaret and the unworthy one. You may remember that he once posed as her *deus ex machina*. And she has grown dangerously beautiful in her year of uprightness.

When you write, tell me all about your plans for the summer; and believe me always

Your cousin-content,
CONNIE.

MYRA TO CONSTANCE

DEAR CONNIE: Really, the S. P. C. C. ought to take you in hand! To think of the cold-blooded way in which you hoodwinked us up to the very last moment, making us believe that the Lodestar involvement was next to nothing, and keeping the home intact solely for the purpose of providing a proper stage-setting for the final act of our little comedy-drama! It's fairly heart-breaking; the more since you won't let us share with you, as we'd be glad to. Before you saw fit to confide in us, Dick had used every argument short of a pick-handle to convince me that I should presently go back to Denver and creature comforts, leaving him here to go on delving in the Myriad. I only laughed at him, but I'll recant if you will listen to reason, and let me make a home for you and Uncle Stephen. But as between living a three-quarter widow in Denver on mere visiting terms with you and your father, and hibernating here with Dick, you may be sure I shall choose the latter.

We are both as enthusiastic as can be over the prospects of the mine. The new machinery is on the way, and we are down twenty feet on the incline. Another month will surely carry it into pay-rock. (You see I am learning to talk

"mineral-English" with the best of them.) Under the circumstances, I don't blame Dick for wanting to stay right here every day; and it won't be so lonesome for me as you may imagine. You see I have Dick, and he can be a whole cityful upon occasion.

You wouldn't know "The Eyrie" (Dick says the altitude is so great that we had to have a high-sounding name) since we have begun to remodel it. We are to have another room, a larger kitchen for Wun Ling (oh, he is a celestial treasure!--quite the archangel of the culinary host), a huge chimney, with immense fireplaces, against a possible winter here, and a wider porch,--board-floored, if you please. And inside I have rugged and portiered, and pictured and bric-a-bracked, until the pristine barkiness of the place is all but effaced.

So far, with the exception of an occasional call from Mr. McMurtrie, we have been "each other's own best company;" but if I stay up all summer it will be conditional upon your and Uncle Stephen's spending at least a month with us when the hot weather makes your block uncomfortable. Don't say no beforehand, unless you want to make me quite disgusted.

Mr. Lansdale is a lineal descendant in the direct line of the Chevalier,--the *sans peur et sans reproche* one; you know I've always said that of him. It chokes me when I think of what is lying in wait for him. Isn't there the least little glimmer of hope? He looked so bright and eager on our wedding day that I could almost make myself believe he was going to get well. You must be very, very careful, Connie dear; not to encourage him too much, I mean; not unless you--but I sha'n't say it without your warrant.

What you say about Margaret Gannon's Irish true-heartedness reminds me of our own wild Irishman. He is the mine blacksmith, a perfect Sheridan for wit and repartee when he is sober, and a maniac of maniacs when he is drunk,--which happens whenever Dick relaxes his vigilance for a single hour.

The other day Pat (if he has any other name I've never heard it) did a thing heroic. They are using dynamite in the tunnel, and after the noon blasts one of the miners went in before the deadly gas had been properly "ventilated" out. One of the others saw him stumble and go headlong down the incline, and the cry went back to the entrance. Pat heard it (he was sober that day), flung his tools to the four winds, dashed into the pit of death, and came out black in the face, but with the man on his shoulder, just as Dick got down to the entrance. Wasn't that fine?

As you surmise, we have read all that the newspapers are saying about Mr. Jeffard. Isn't it queer that he should develop into a millionaire miser! Dick has told me a great deal about him,--at least about the Mr. Jeffard he used to know,--and whatever sins he may have had to answer for in those days, avarice was not one of them. I suppose it is another case of money-spoiling, but I can't help wanting to doubt your latest suspicion of him. I read your letter to Dick, and he shook his head when I came to that part; said he couldn't believe it, even on your testimony,--that the man might be capable of all sorts of villainy, but not that. So I am going over to Dick's point of view far enough to ask you not to be too hard upon the "unworthy one" just because he is no longer one of your poverty-stricken sinners,--he *was* that once, wasn't he? The rich sinners need charity quite as really as the poor; of a different kind, to be sure, and not always as easy to exercise as the other, but none the less necessary.

This is all you are going to get to-night. Dick has just come up from the mine, and he says I sha'n't write any more whatever.

Your loving cousin,
MYRA.

LANSDALE TO BARTROW

MY DEAR RICHARD:--What with a mine for a taskmaster and a wife for your leisure I can fancy you tossing this letter aside unopened. But the promise which you exacted is herein kept, and it must plead my excuse for breaking into your honeymoon with a few pages of barren gossip.

First, as to Miss Elliott and her good father. Your foreboding went nearer the mark than the ostensible fact. They were merely postponing the evil day until after your wedding, and when the crash came it turned out to be no less than a catastrophe. Stephen Elliott met it like a man, giving up everything to his creditors, and coming down to a life of the barest necessities with the serenity of a philosopher, happy, apparently, that the well of assets was deep enough to brim the tank of liability, though at the expense of the final drop.

I am told that he was left quite without resources other than a small sum of money which one of the creditors absolutely refused to accept; and he assures me that he will once more shoulder pick and shovel and go afield again as soon as the season is a little farther advanced. I confess frankly that the heroism of it bedazes me. If there be any finer example of dauntlessness in the heart of man, the novellers have not yet portrayed it for us. He was sixty-three last

January, and he promises to begin the search for another competence with all the enthusiasm and ardor of youth!

Constance you know, and I need not assure you that the sudden down-dropping touches her not at all; or if at all, only on the side of her beneficences to others. So far as one may perceive, the change for her is only of encompassments. She is as much above it as she was superior to the cheapening effect of an elastic bank account. To me she seems the sweeter for the chastening, though really, I presume, she is neither better nor worse for it,--nor any different. You may be sure that my first call upon them after the submergence was made with a heartful of sympathy,--which I took away with me, and with it a lesson in sincerity and simple-heartedness rare enough in my experience. There is gentle blood and enviable in these two. My pen is too clumsy to ink in the details of this picture for you.

As to Jeffard: When he made his appearance I struck hands with your point of view sufficiently to meet him as if nothing save good fortune had overtaken him,--an attitude which it is sometimes as difficult for me to maintain as it appears altogether impossible for some others who used to know him. By which you will understand that he is ostracized in a way, or would be in any casting of the potsherd votes by the unthinking majority.

I am bound to say, however, that the whiplash of public opinion does not seem to be quite long enough to reach him. A fortnight ago, for reasons charitable or experimental, as you please, I got him a bidding to one of Mrs. Calmaine's "ridottos." You know Mrs. Calmaine and her tolerance, and you will appreciate the situation when I tell you that I had to manoeuvre a bit for the formal invitation, though Jeffard used to be in her good book. Jeffard accepted, and I went with him to see what would befall. There were a good many there who had known the prehistoric Jeffard, and while they did not pointedly ignore him, they seemed to be divided between a desire to cold-shoulder the man and to conciliate the prospective millionaire;--wherefore they compromised by giving him what you would call "the high hand-shake."

Whatever may have been my motive in dragging him into it, Jeffard's own reasons for going were confessedly experimental. So much he confided to me on our early retreat from the house of mirth. "I wanted to find out where I stand," he said, "and these good people have been quite explicit. Don't get me any more invitations." And after a time he added, "I can buy them when I want them." From which you will infer that he will henceforth sit in the seat of the scornful, and this, I fear, is the lamentable fact.

Touching his present mode of life, it borders on the puzzling. With a bank deposit which is currently reported to reach seven figures, and which is doubtless well up in the sixes, he lives in two rooms in a block, and takes his meals at the club. A very rich spendthrift might do this, you will say, saving at the spigot and wasting at the bung; but so far as my observation goes, Jeffard seems not to know that his barrel has a bung. And if any of the staves have started on the side of dissipation, the leak is not yet apparent to me. The other evening, when I let drive a little arrow pointed with a gibe at his penuriousness, he laughed and reminded me of something he had said one night in the famine time when we were dining by the help of a small windfall of mine. "I told you I should be a miser if the tide ever turned," said he, "and you scoffed at me. I assure you I can account for every dollar I have spent since the Midas began to pour them in."

This is his attitude as he defines it, but I can qualify the accusation a little on the friendly side. I should rather say that he had set his mark at thrifty frugality. He is not niggardly; in benevolences which may be paid for in the coin of effort he is still generous; and if he were living on a clerk's income people would commend him.

But I fancy I hear you cry "Enough!" and this ends with the heartiest good wishes for you both.

Faithfully yours,
ROBERT LANSDALE.

CHAPTER XXVIII

LANSDALE had defined himself as a reporter on the "Coloradoan," but in reality he was rather more,--or less,--being that anomalous member of a newspaper staff known as the literary editor. Kershaw had taken him in doubtfully, and had afterward wondered why a man with such an evident gift for journalistic work should prefer to spend his days and nights writing stories which no one would buy. For, contrary to all precedent, when he could sink his literary ambitions the fictionist proved to be a general utility journalist of no uncertain ability, running the office gamut from proof-reading in an emergency to filling the editorial columns on the rare occasions when Kershaw was absent.

It was during one of the Kershawan absences that the letter to Bartrow was written; and the hands of the paper-weight clock on the desk were pointing to the supper hour when Lansdale dropped the pen and drew down the desk-curtain. Unlike his chief, he rarely ignored the supper recess, though a walk in the open air often took the place of the meal; and having his night's work well in hand, he let himself into the corridor, said "Down!" and was presently set afoot at the street level.

As usual, the swift rush down the elevator-shaft dizzied him, and he had to steady himself before he could go on. When he allowed himself to think about it he realized that these dizzyings were growing commoner, and were set awhirl by slighter exciting causes. Another man, or a man with another ailment, might have given the unnerving weakness its true name and place and succumbed to it; but Lansdale's *metier* had been love-transformed into unflinching hopefulness, and the trivialities of the daily walk had come to be so many blind and desperate sorties against the indrawing lines of the relentless besieger. For of the two lions standing in the way to the House Beautiful that named Inequality had been slain by the collapse of the Lodestar; wherefore this other of Ill-health must either slay or be slain, since love would not be denied.

This was what was in his resolute step when he went forth into the night; into the whirl of life on the peopled streets and sidewalks. Some vague supper promptings were present, but a stronger impulse sent him riverward, away from the thickly peopled walks and down into the wholesale district toward a shabby apartment building which had been left stranded on the bar of traffic when the uptown tide had set in.

The little excursion was purposeless, as had been many another in the same direction; but when he found himself opposite the stairway of the shabby building he wondered if he might not go up and ask Constance for a cup of tea. He was wise in his generation, and he had long since discovered that the way to Constance Elliott's heart lay through helpings accepted. With love abounding for any human soul at need, there were precious reserves of tenderness for those to whom she might minister.

Lansdale glanced up at the two lighted windows on the third floor and crossed the street. In the stair archway, which was dimly lighted by a single inefficient gas-jet, he stumbled upon a bit of by-play, in which the actors were a man and a woman leaning together across the stair-rail, and a barelegged boy spying upon the twain from the dimnesses beyond. The little tableau fell apart at the sound of the intruder's footsteps. The boy vanished mysteriously, the woman ran upstairs, and the man turned half angrily, as one faulted. It was Jeffard; and when he recognized Lansdale he spoke quickly, as if to forestall possible comment.

"Hello!--think of the devil and you'll hear the clatter of his hoofs. I was just about to go up to the print-shop to see if I could find you. Been to supper?"

"No; I was"--

Jeffard cut in again swiftly, with edgings streetward. "That's lucky; neither have I. Let's go up to the club."

Lansdale acceded rather reluctantly, since a cup of tea with Constance easily outweighed the grill-room prospect.

"I'll go with you, though I can't promise to play much of a knife and fork," he said. "I was just going up to ask Miss Elliott to give me a cup of tea."

They were turning the corner above the stranded apartment house before Jeffard returned the shuttle of speech.

"So the Elliots live down there now, do they?"

Lansdale said "Yes," and began to rummage in recollection. Had Jeffard been on Constance Elliott's visiting list in the prehistoric time? It was probable that he had been,--with Dick Bartrow for his sponsor. But at this point recollection turned up the mental notes of a certain talk with Bartrow, in which the downright one had confessed his sins of omission Jeffardward. So Lansdale added a query to the affirmative.

"Yes; they live in the Thorson Block. Do you know them?"

Jeffard's reply was no reply. "I'll have to take time to think about it," he said; and they had traversed the necessary streets and found a table *a deux* in the grill-room at the club before he pieced out the unfinished rejoinder.

"You asked me if I knew the Elliotts. I did know Miss Elliott,--as I knew some of those people at Mrs. Calmaine's the other evening. It's quite likely she does not remember me."

Lansdale's brain went apart again, and the reflective half of it continued the rummaging. On the two or three occasions when he had mentioned the newest star in the bonanzine firmament Constance had been visibly disturbed. The nature of her resentment had not been quite obvious, but Jeffard's tardy rejoinder made it clear. She had known Jeffard and was sorry to be reminded of him.

Lansdale had not done full justice to himself in slurring his own point of view in the letter to Bartrow. So far as he had analyzed it he had been content to call it negative, but it was not quite that. On the contrary, it was complaisant, concerning itself chiefly with the things of past sight, and not unduly with those of present rumor. Jeffard might be an indubitable scoundrel in his later reincarnation, as certain of the mining-camp newspapers had intimated in their accounts of the fight for possession; but in the older time he had been a good fellow and a generous friend at a pinch. Lansdale remembered some of the generousities, and his heart went soft at the recollection of them. Kershaw had kept the secret of the prearranged purchase of certain unusable manuscripts, but the pigeon-holes of a newspaper office are open archives, and one day Lansdale had found a clue which he had followed out to his comforting; a string of hitherto unexplainable incidents, with two staunch friends at the end of it.

One of these loyal friends was the man at whom public opinion was now pointing a dubious finger; and while Lansdale was munching his toast and drinking his cup of weak tea in troubled silence, it began to be discomfortingly evident that he must presently take sides for or against the man whose hospitality he was at that moment sharing. Left to itself, the insularity in him would have evaded the issue. Loyalty of the crucible-test degree of fineness--the loyalty of the single eye--must needs sit below the salt at the table of any analyst of his kind; and Lansdale was a student first and a partisan only when benefits unforget constrained him. Moreover, frankness in the last resort is rarely at its best in any vivisector of his fellow-men, and it was with no little difficulty that Lansdale made shift to overleap the barrier of reserve.

"Jeffard," he began, when the weak tea was low in the cup, "we used to be pretty near to each other in a time that I like to remember; will you bear with me if I say what is in my mind?"

"Surely," said Jeffard; but the tone was not of assurance.

"You know what the newspapers intimated last fall, and what people are saying of you now?"

"Yes."

"And that your silence makes it rather hard for your friends?"

"I have no friends, Lansdale."

"Oh, yes, you have; or you would have if you would take the trouble to set yourself aright."

"What if I cannot set myself aright?"

"I should be sorry to believe that,--more than sorry to be driven to admit the alternative."

"What is the alternative?"

Lansdale hesitated, as one who has his point at his adversary's breast and is loath to drive it in. "I don't quite like to put it in words, Jeffard; the English is a bit harsh. But you will understand that it is the smiting of a friend. So long as you refuse to say you didn't, the supposition is that you have robbed a man to whom you were under rather heavy obligations."

"Is that Bartrow's supposition?"

"He says it isn't, but I'm afraid the wish is the father to the thought: in his case as in--as in that of others." Lansdale added the inclusive in the hope that the wound would be the better for probing.

Jeffard's laugh was altogether bitter. "Give a dog a bad name," he quoted. "Do you know, I fancied Dick would be obstinate enough to stand out against the apparent fact?"

"That is precisely what he has done, and with less reason than the most devoted partisan might demand. You know

you told him that the claim was Garvin's. He wouldn't believe the newspaper story; he insisted that you would be able to 'square' yourself, as he phrased it, when you came out."

Jeffard was looking past his interlocutor, out and beyond to where the farther tables were emptying themselves of the late diners.

"Yet it is his supposition; and your own, you were going to say. Is it Miss Elliott's also?"

Lansdale resisted the impulse to rummage again, and said: "I don't know that--how should I know? But rumor has made the charge, and you have not denied it."

"I don't mean to deny it--not even to her. But neither have I admitted it."

"My dear Jeffard! aren't the facts an admission?--at least, so long as they stand uncontradicted."

"Everybody seems to think so,--and I can afford to be indifferent."

"Having the money, you mean?--possibly. Am I to take that as an admission of the facts?"

"Facts are fixtures, aren't they? things not to be set up or set aside by admissions or denials. But you may take it as you please."

Lansdale shook his head as one whose deprecation is too large for speech. "I can't begin to understand it, Jeffard,--the motive which could impel a man of your convictions, I mean."

Jeffard broke forth in revilings. "What do you know about my convictions? What do you know about anything in the heart of man? You have a set of formulas which you call types, and into which you try to fit all human beings arbitrarily, each after his kind. It's the merest child's-play; a fallacy based on an assumption. No two men can be squared by the same rule; no two will do the same things under exactly similar conditions. Character-study is your specialty, I believe; but you have yet to learn that the human atom is an irresponsible individuality."

"Oh, no, I haven't; I grant you that. But logically"--

"Logic has nothing whatever to do with it. It's ego, pure and unstrained, in most of us; a sluggish river of self, with a quicksand of evil for its bottom."

Lansdale borrowed a gun of his antagonist, and sighted it accurately.

"What do you know about humanity as a whole? What do you know about any part of it save your own infinitesimal fraction?--which seems to be a rather unfair sample."

Jeffard confessed judgment and paid the costs. "I don't know very much about the sample, Lansdale. One time--it was in the sophomore year, I believe--I thought I knew my own potentialities. But I didn't. If any one had prophesied then that I had it in me to do what I have done, I should have demanded a miracle to confirm it."

"But you must justify yourself to yourself," Lansdale persisted.

"Why must I? That is another of your cut-and-dried formulas. So far from recognizing any such obligation, I may say that I gave up trying to account for myself a long time ago. And if I have found it impossible, it isn't worth while for you to try."

Lansdale was not the man to bruise his hands with much beating upon the barred doors of any one's confidence. So he said, "I'm done. It's between you and your conscience,--if you haven't eliminated that with the other things. But I had hoped you'd see fit to defend yourself. The eternal query is sharp enough without the pointing of particular instances."

Jeffard squared himself, with his elbows on the table.

"Do you want an hypothesis, too?--as another man did? Take this, and make the most of it. You knew me and my lacks and havings. You knew that I had reached a point at which I would have pawned my soul for the wherewithal to purchase a short hour or two of forgetfulness. Hold that picture in your mind, and conceive that a summer of unsuccessful prospecting had not changed me for better or worse. Is the point of view unobstructed?"

"The point of view is your own, not mine," Lansdale objected. "And, moreover, the summer did change you, because advancement in some direction is an irrefragible law. But go on."

"I will. This man whom you have in mind was suddenly brought face to face with a great temptation,--great and

subtle. Garvin drove the tunnel on the Midas three years ago and abandoned it as worthless. It was my curiosity which led to the discovery of the gold. It was I who took the sample to the assayer and carried the news of the bonanza to Garvin. I might have kept the knowledge to myself, but I didn't. Why? do you ask? I don't know--perhaps because it didn't occur to me. What followed Bartrow has told you, but not all. Let us assume that the race to Aspen was made in good faith; that this man who had put honor and good report behind him really meant to stand between a drunken fool and the fate he was rushing upon. Can you go so far with me?"

Lansdale nodded. He was spellbound, but it was the artist in him and not the man who hung breathless upon the edge of expectancy.

"Very well; now for the crux. This man knelt behind a locked door and heard himself execrated by the man he was trying to save; heard the first kindly impulse he had yielded to in months distorted into a desperate plan to rob the cursing maniac. Is it past belief that he crept away from the locked door and sat down to ask himself in hot resentment why he should go on? Is it not conceivable that he should have begun to give ear to the plea of self-preservation?--to say to himself that if the maniac were no better than a lost man it was no reason that the treasure should be lost also?"

It was altogether conceivable, and Lansdale nodded again. Jeffard found a cigar and went on while he was clipping the end of it.

"But that was not all. Picture this man at the crumbling point of resolution tiptoeing to the door to listen again. He has heard enough to convince him that the miracle of fortune will be worse than wasted upon the drunken witting. Now he is to hear that the besotted fool has already transferred whatever right he had in the Midas to the two despoilers; signed a quitclaim, sold his miracle for a drink or two of whiskey, more or less. Are you listening?"

Lansdale moistened his lips with the lees of the tea in the empty cup, and said, "Yes; go on."

Jeffard sat back and lighted the cigar. "That's all," he said curtly. "It's enough, isn't it? You knew the man a year ago; you think you know him now. What would he do?"

If the hypothesis were intended to be a test of blind loyalty it missed the mark by just so much as the student of his kind must hold himself aloof from sympathetic entanglements. Lansdale weighed the evidence, not as a partisan, but rather as an onlooker whose point of view was wholly extrinsic.

"I understand," said he; "the man would do as you have done. It's your own affair. As I said a few minutes ago, it is between you and your private conscience. And I dare say if the facts were known the public conscience wouldn't condemn you. Don't you want to use the columns of the 'Coloradoan'?"

Jeffard's negative was explosive. "Do you write me down a fool as well as a knave? Damn the public conscience!"

"Don't swear; I was only offering to turn the stone for you if you've anything to grind."

"I haven't. If I wanted the consent of the majority I could buy it,--buy it if I had shot the maniac instead of letting him shoot me."

"Possibly; and yet you couldn't buy any fraction of it that is worth having," Lansdale asserted, with conviction. "There are a few people left who have not bowed the head in the house of Rimmon."

The cynical hardness went out of Jeffard's eye and lip, and for the first time since the proletary's reincarnation, Lansdale fancied he got a brief glimpse of the man he had known in the day of sincerity.

"A few, yes; the Elliots, father and daughter, for two, you would say. I wonder if you could help me there."

"To their good opinion?--my dear Jeffard, I'm no professional conscience-keeper!"

"No, I didn't mean that. What I had in mind is a much simpler thing. A year ago Miss Elliott gave me of her abundance. She meant it as a gift, though I made it a loan and repaid the principal--when I was able to. But I am still in her debt. Measured by consequences, which are the only true interest-table, the earnings of her small investment are hardly to be computed in dollars and cents. Naturally, she won't take that view of it, but that does not cancel my obligation. Will you help me to discharge it? They need money."

Lansdale let the appeal simmer in the pot of reflection. His inclination was to refuse to be drawn into any such entanglement; but the opportunity to lessen by ever so little the burdens of the woman he loved was not to be lightly set aside. None the less, the thing seemed impossible.

"I'm afraid it's too big for me, Jeffard; I shouldn't know how to go about it. Don't misunderstand me. I shouldn't stick at the necessary equivocations; but if you know Miss Elliott you must know that Machiavelli himself couldn't be

insincere with her. She would have to be told the truth, and"--

He left the sentence incomplete, and Jeffard took it up at the break.

"And if she should acknowledge my obligation--which she would not--she would refuse to be reimbursed out of Garvin's money. That is why I haven't sent her a note with a check in it. Will you have another cup of tea?"

Lansdale took the query as a dismissal of the subject and pushed back his chair. On the way out they passed a late incomer; a florid man, with a nervous step and the eye of preoccupation. He nodded to Lansdale in passing, and Jeffard said, "Do you know him?"

"Yes; it's Finchly,--John Murray's man of business."

Jeffard had apparently relapsed into the deeper depths of cynicism again.

"Yes, I know. That's the charitable euphemism. Murray is a day laborer, transmogrified by a lucky strike into a millionaire. He doesn't know enough to write his own name, much less how to keep a great fortune from dissolving, so he hires a manager. It was a happy thought. What does Finchly get?"

Lansdale laughed. "A good living, doubtless."

"Of course; and much more, with the pickings. But there is a salary which is supposed to be the consideration, isn't there?"

"Oh, yes; and the figure of it varies with the imagination of the gossips from ten to fifty thousand a year."

Jeffard stopped to relight his cigar, and Lansdale fancied that the Finchly query went out with the spent match. But Jeffard revived it a square farther on.

"Suppose we assume, for the sake of argument, that the man has a conscience. How much could he justly take for the service rendered?"

They were at the entrance of the "Coloradoan" building, and Lansdale took out his notebook and made a memorandum.

"That is good for a column," he said; "The Moral Responsibility of Millionaire-Managers.' I'll answer your question later, when I've had time to think it over."

"But, seriously," Jeffard insisted. "Is it worth ten thousand a year?--or the half of it? The man is only a cashier,--a high-class accountant at best."

"Finchly is much more than that; he is Murray's brain as well as his pen-hand. But if he were only a money-counter, a money-counter's salary would be enough; say two or three thousand a year, to be liberal."

Jeffard nodded and was turning away; had in fact taken three steps streetward, when he came back to return to the subject dropped at the supper table as though there had been no hiatus.

"You were going to say she would refuse to take Garvin's money, and I said it for you. Would it make it any easier if I can assure you that the money I shall put in your hands is honestly mine?--that James Garvin has no claim, ethical or otherwise, upon it? Take time to consider it,--with an eye to Miss Elliott's present needs rather than to my havings or wishes in the matter."

Lansdale was off his guard, and the human side of him came uppermost in the swift rejoinder,--"Then you didn't tell me the whole truth? The Midas is honestly yours, after all?"

Jeffard turned away and snapped the ash from his cigar. "Don't jump at conclusions," he said. "It's always safer to go on voting with the majority. What I said has nothing to do with the story of the man and his temptation; but the meanest laborer is worthy of his hire. I worked all winter with pick and shovel in the Midas. Good-night."

CHAPTER XXIX

It was early in June when the pneumatic drill in the Little Myriad was smashed by a premature blast, and the master of the mine was constrained to make a flying trip to Denver to replace it. As a matter of course, if not, indeed, of necessity, Myra went with him. They traveled by the night train, breakfasted on canned viands out of the Pullman buffet, and so took Constance by surprise.

Myra had projects in view, some Utopian and others more Utopian, with her relatives for nuclei; and when Richard the untactful had been sent about his machinery business, she settled down for a persuasive day with Constance. Now Constance had been taken unawares, but she was of those who fight best at a disadvantage, and the end of the day found the Utopian projects still in air, being held in suspension by an obstinate young person who steadily refused to make of herself a vessel meet for condolence and cousinly beneficence.

"It's no use, cuzzy dear; you shall have an option on the help stock when there is any for sale, but at present there are no quotations."

Thus Connie, at the very end of the persuasive day. Upon which the young wife, with patience outwearing or outworn, retorts smartly:--

"I suppose you think it's heroic--your living like this; but it isn't. It is just plain poverty pride, which is all well enough to keep the crowd out, but which is simply wicked when it makes you shut the door in our faces. Think of it--you living here in three rooms at the top of a block when the Myriad has begun to pay dividends! I didn't mean to tell you just yet, but Dick is going to buy back the Colfax Avenue house, and it shall stand empty till doomsday if you won't go and live in it."

In times not long past Connie would have returned railing for railing--with interest added; but the reproachful day had been no less trying to her than to Myra, and the poverty fight--and some others--were sore upon her. Hence her disclaimer was of courageous meekness, with a smile of loving appreciation to pave the way.

"I hope Dick will do no such preposterous thing--unless you want it for yourselves. You know it would be quite out of the question for us to take it. Or to do anything but make the best of what has happened," she added.

Myra was standing at a window, looking down into the street where the early dusk was beginning to prick out the point-like coruscations of the arc-lights. There was that in Connie's eyes which beckoned tears to eyes sympathetic; and she found it easier to go on with her back turned upon the room and its other occupant.

"To make the best of it, yes; but you are not making the best of it. Or, if you are, the best is miserably bad. You are looking thin and wretched, as if--as if you didn't get enough to eat."

There was a touch of the old-time resilience in Connie's laugh. "How can you tell when you're not looking at me? Indeed, it hasn't come to that yet. We have enough, and a little to spare for those who have less."

Myra had been searching earnestly all day for some little rift into which the wedge of helpfulness might be driven, and here was an opening--of the vicarious sort.

"Won't you let me be your purseholder for those who have less, Connie? That is the very least you can do."

Constance willed it thankfully. After the trying day of refusals it was grateful to find something that could be conceded.

"I believe I told you once that I wouldn't be your proxy in that way, didn't I? But I will, now. You are so much better than your theories, Myra."

Myra left the window at that, wrote a generous check before the concession should have time to shrink in the cooling, and then went over to sit on the denim-covered lounge with her arm around her cousin's waist.

"Now that you have begun to be reasonable, won't you go a step farther, Connie, dear? I know there are troubles,--lots of them besides the pinching. Can't you lean on me just a little bit? I do so want to help you."

Connie did it literally, with her face on Myra's shoulder and a sob at the catching of her breath. Myra let her take her own time, as a judicious comforter will, and when the words came they wrought themselves into a confession.

"Oh, Myra, I thought I was so strong, and I'm not!" she wept. "The bullet in a gun hasn't less to say about where it shall be sent. I said it wasn't the pinch, but it is--or part of it is. Poppa has set his heart upon trying the mountains

again, old as he is, and he can't go because--because there isn't money enough to outfit him with what he could carry on his back!"

"And you would have let me go without telling me!" said Myra reproachfully. "He shall have a whole pack train of 'grub stake,'--is that what I should say?--and you shall come and stay with us while he is away. Consider that a trouble past, and tell me some more. You don't know how delicious it is to be permitted to pose as a small god in a car."

"Yes, I do," Connie responded, out of a heartful of similar ecstasies. "But it isn't a trouble past: he won't let you do it. Everybody has been offering to lend him money, and he won't take it."

"He will have to take it from me," said Myra, with prompt decision. "I'll make him. And when he goes, you will come to us, won't you?"

Constance looked up with a smile shining through the tears. "You're good, Myra, just like Dick! But I can't, you know. I must stay here."

"Why must you?" To the querist there seemed to be sufficiently good reasons, from the point of view of the proprieties, for setting Connie's decision aside mandatorily, but Myra had grown warier if not wiser in her year of cousin-kenning.

"There are reasons,--duties which I must not shirk."

"Are they namable?"

"Yes; Margaret is the name of one of them."

Myra's disapproval found vent in gentle foot-tappings. To the moderately compassionate on-looker it would seem that Constance had long since filled that measure of responsibility,--filled and heaped it to overflowing. But again the experienced one was discreet.

"As Dick would put it, you have 'angeled' Margaret for a year and more. Isn't she yet able to stand alone?"

Connie's answer was prompt and decisive. "Quite as well able as the best of us would be under similar conditions."

"I wouldn't make it conditional; but we've never been able to keep step in that journey. Why is Margaret's case exceptional?"

"Did I say it was? It isn't. She is just one of any number of poor girls who are trying to live honestly, with the barriers of innocence all down and an overwhelming temptation always beckoning."

Myra shook her head. "That is making temptation a constraint, when it can never be more than a lure. I must confess I can't get far enough away from the conventional point of view to understand how a young woman like Margaret, who has been lifted and carried and set fairly upon her feet, could be tempted to go back to the utter misery and degradation of the other life."

Constance spoke first to the sophism, and then to the particular instance.

"It is not true that temptation is always a lure. It is oftener a constraint. And you say you can't understand. It is terribly simple. They sin first for a thing which they mistake for love; but after that it is for bread and meat, and surcease from toil which has become a mere frenzied struggle to keep body and soul together. You don't know what it is to be poor, Myra,--with the barriers down. Have you any idea how much Margaret earned last week, working steadily the six days and deep into the nights?"

"Oh, not very much, I suppose. But her necessities are not large."

"Are they not? They are as large as yours or mine. She must eat and drink and have a bed to sleep on and clothes to cover her. And to provide these she was paid three dollars and eighty-five cents for her week's work; and two dollars of that had to go for rent. Is the temptation a lure or a constraint in her case?"

Myra was silenced, if not convinced, and she went back to the fact existent with sympathy no more than seemingly aloof.

"You hinted at Margaret's peculiar besetment in one of your letters. Is that what you have to stay and fight?"

Constance nodded assent.

"I have been hoping you were mistaken. Dick is still loyally incredulous. Isn't there a chance that you or Tommie, or

both of you, have taken too much for granted?"

Connie's "No" was almost inaudible, and there was chastened sorrow in her voice when she went on to tell how Tommie had seen Jeffard and Margaret together, not once, but many times; how the man was always persuading, and the woman, reluctant at first, was visibly yielding; how within a week Tommie had seen Jeffard give her money.

"And she took it?" Myra queried.

"She didn't want to take it. Tommie says she almost fought with him to make him take it back. But he wouldn't."

Myra's sympathy circled down, but it alighted upon Connie. "You poor dear! after all your loving-kindnesses and helpings! It's miserable; but you can't do anything if you stay."

"Yes, I can. I couldn't stay alone, of course, and she will give up her room and come here to live with me. That will give me a better hold on her than I have now."

"But if you had a hundred eyes you couldn't safeguard her against her will!"

"No; but it isn't her will,--it's his. And he will not come here."

Myra's brows went together in a little frown of righteous indignation. "I should hope not,--the wretch! You were right, after all, Connie, and I'll retract all the charitable things Dick wanted me to say. He is too despicable"--

It was Connie's hand on the accusing lips that cut short the indignant arraignment.

"Please don't!" she pleaded. "He is all that you can say or think, but my ears are weary with my own repetitions of it."

Myra took the hand from her lips and held it fast while she tried to search her cousin's face. But the gathering dusk had mounted from the level of the street to that of the upper room, and it baffled the eye-questioning.

"Connie Elliott! I more than half believe"--She stopped abruptly, as if there had been some dumb protest of the imprisoned hand, and then went on with a swift change from accusation to gentle reproach. "I believe you have only just begun to tell me your troubles,--and I've been with you all day! What are some more of them?"

"I have told you the worst of them,--or at least that part of them which makes it impossible for me to go away. But there is another reason why I ought to stay."

"Is that one namable, too?"

"Yes; but perhaps you won't understand. And you will be sure to tell me it isn't proper. I think one of Mr. Lansdale's few pleasures is his coming here."

"Few remaining pleasures, you would say, if you were not too tender-hearted. Is it wise, Connie?"

"Why not?--if it is a comfort to him?"

Myra hesitated, not because she had nothing to say, but because she knew not how to say the thing demanded.

"You haven't given me leave to be quite frank with you, Connie. But it seems to me that your kindness in this case is--is mistaken kindness."

Constance's rejoinder was merely an underthought slipping the leash. "It is not to be expected that any one would understand," she said.

"But I do understand," Myra asserted, this time with better confidence. "I'm not supposed to have the slightest inkling of your feelings,--you've never lisp'd a word to me,--but Mr. Lansdale's motives are plain enough to be read in the dark. If he were a well man he would have asked you to marry him long ago."

"Do you think so?" said Constance half absently. "I'm not so sure about that. He is far away from home and wretchedly ill; and he has many acquaintances and few real friends."

"But he loves you," Myra persisted.

"He has never said anything like that to me."

"It is quite possible that he never will, in view of the insurmountable obstacle."

"His ill-health, you mean? Myra, dear, you surely know love better than that--now. Love is the one thing which will

both sow and reap even in the day when the heavens are of brass and the earth is a barren desert."

The under-roar of traffic in the street made the silence in the upper room more effective by contrast; like the sense of isolation which is often sharpest in a jostling throng. Myra rose and went to the window again, coming back presently to stand over Constance and say, "I suppose it is ordained that you should be a martyr to somebody or something, Connie, dear; and when the time comes I'm not going to say you nay, because I think you will be happier that way. If Mr. Lansdale should be tempted to say that which I am sure he has determined not to say, is your answer ready?"

Connie's hands were clasped over one knee, and the poise was of introspective beatitude. But the answer to Myra's query was not irrelevant.

"He is the truest of gentlemen; what would your answer be, Myra?"

It was the young wife in Myra Bartrow, that precious bit of clay as yet plastic under the hand of the master-potter, that prompted the steadfast reply.

"If I loved him as I ought, I should pray God to make me unselfish enough to say yes, Connie."

"So should I," said Constance simply; and Myra made the lighting of the lamp an excuse for the diversion which the three soft-spoken words demanded. And when she went back to the matter of fact, she touched lightly upon what she conceived to be a wound yet far from healing.

"You have silenced me, Connie, but I can at least provide for the contingency. If the event shapes itself so that you are free to come to us, don't let Margaret stand in the way. Bring her with you, and we'll find room and work for her."

Connie's eyes were shining, but there was a loving smile struggling with the tears. "I said you were good, like Dick, Myra, dear, and I can't put it any stronger. If I don't take you at your word, it will not be for anything you have left unsaid. Isn't that Dick coming?"

It was. There was a double step in the corridor, and Bartrow came in with Stephen Elliott. Since the battle persuasive with the daughter had kept her single-eyed, Myra had had but brief glimpses of the father during the day; but now she remarked that his step was a little less firmly planted than it had been in that holiday time when he had played the unwonted part of escort in ordinary to two young women who had dragged him whither they would,--and whither he would not. Moreover, there was the look of the burden-bearer in his eyes, though their fire was undimmed; and an air of belated sprightliness in his manner which went near to Myra's heart, because she knew it came of conscious effort. These jottings and others, the added stoop of the shoulders, and the lagging half-step to the rear in entering, as of one who may no longer keep pace with younger men, Myra made while Dick was timing the dash for their train.

"Thirty-five minutes more, and we'll quit you,--say, Uncle Steve, that clock of yours is slow,--that's half an hour for supper, and five minutes for the yum-yums at the car-step. Gear yourselves, you two, and we'll all go and make a raid on the super-room at the station."

"Indeed, we sha'n't," said Connie, in hospitable protest. "You are going to eat bread and butter and drink strong tea on the top floor of the Thorson Block. I've had the water cooking for an hour, and you sha'n't make me waste gasoline in any such way."

Dick would have argued the point with her; was, in fact, beginning the counter-protest, when Myra stopped him.

"Of course we'll stay," she assented. "You go with Connie and help make the tea, Dick. I haven't begun to have a visit with Uncle Stephen yet."

Bartrow gave up the fight and was led captive of the small one to the room across the corridor which served as a kitchen. Left alone with his sister's daughter, Stephen Elliott had a sudden return of the haltingnesses which the Philadelphia niece, newly arrived, used to inspire; but Myra asked only for an acquiescent listener.

"Uncle Stephen," she began, pinning him in the lounge-corner from which there was no possibility of escape, "I've been wanting to get at you all day, and I was afraid you weren't going to give me a chance. You have 'grub-staked' a lot of people, first and last, haven't you?"

The old man eyed her suspiciously for a moment, and then evidently banished the suspicion as a thing unworthy.

"Why, yes; I have staked a good few of them, first and last, as you say."

"I knew it, and I wanted to ask a question. How much money did you usually give them?"

The suspicion was well lulled by this; and finding himself upon familiar ground, the pioneer went into details.

"That depended a good deal upon the other fellow. Some of them--most of 'em, I was going to say--couldn't be trusted with money at all, and I'd go buy them an outfit and stay with them till they got out o' range of the saloons and green tables."

"But when you found one whom you could trust, how much money did you give him? I'm not idly curious; I know a man who wants to go prospecting, and I have promised to 'stake' him."

The suspicion raised its head again, and was promptly clubbed into submission. Some one of the Myriad men wanted to try his luck, and he had "braced" the wife rather than the husband. So thought the pioneer, and made answer accordingly.

"I wouldn't monkey with it, if I were you, Myra; leastwise, not without letting Dick into it. He's right on the ground, and he'll tell you how much you'd ought to put up; or--what's more likely--if you oughtn't to tell the fellow to stick to his day-pay in the mine."

"Dick knows," said Myra, anticipating the exact truth by some brief hour or so, "and he's quite willing. But you know Dick; if I should leave it with him he would give the man all he had and go and borrow for himself. I want a good sober conservative opinion,--not too conservative, you know, but just about what you would need if you were going out yourself."

Elliott became dubitantly reflective, being divided between a desire to spare Myra's purse and a disposition born of fellow-feelings to make it as easy as might be for the unknown beneficiary.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, at length. "If the fellow is going by himself, he won't need much; but if he takes a partner it'll just about double the stake. Is he going to play it alone?"

Myra could see through the open door into the adjoining room, and she saw Connie bringing in the tea. Time was growing precious, if the conclusion were not to be tripped up by an interruption.

"I suppose he'll take a partner; they always do, don't they? Anyway, I want to make it enough so that he can if he chooses. Please tell me how much."

"Well, if he knows how to cut the corners and how to outfit so as to make the most of what he has, he'd ought to be able to do it on a couple of hundred or so. But I don't know if that ain't pretty liberal," he added, as if upon second thought.

Myra went quickly to the table under the lamp, and wrote upon a slip of paper. Elliott thought she was making a note of her information; and when she put the check into his hands he took it mechanically. But her hurried explanation drove the firing-pin of intelligence.

"It's for you--you are the man, Uncle Stephen; and if it isn't enough, it's your own fault." She said it with one eye on the two in the next room, and with nerves taut-braced for the shock of refusal. The shock came promptly.

"Oh--say--here! Myra, girl; I can't take this from you!" He was on his feet, trying to give back the check; and as she eluded him he followed her about the room, protesting as he went. "It's just like you to offer it, but I can't, don't you see? I'll rope somebody else in; somebody that knows the chances. Here, take it back,--I'm getting pretty old, and just as like as not I won't find anything worth assaying. Come, now; you be a good girl, and"--

He had driven her into a corner, and it was time for the *coup de main*. So she put her arms about his neck and her face on his shoulder, and if the attack pathetic were no more than a clever bit of feigning, Stephen Elliott was none the wiser.

"I--I'd like to know what I have done!" she quavered. "You'd take it from a stranger--you said you would--and you've made me just the same as your own daughter, and now you wo--won't let me do the first little thing I've ever had a chance to do!"

There were more strong solvents of a similar nature in reserve, but they were not needed. The good old man was helplessly soluble in any woman's tears, real or invented; and his fine resolution melted and the bones of it became as water.

"There, there, little girl, don't you take on like that. I'll keep it. See? I've chucked it right down into the bottom of my pocket"--he was stroking her hair and otherwise gentling her as if she were a hurt child. "Don't you fret a little bit. I'll spend it--every last cent of it--just the way you want me to. You mustn't cry another tear; Dick'll think I've been abusing you, and he'll fire the old uncle out of one of these high windows. Haven't you got any handkerchief?"

Connie and Dick were at the door, announcing the bread and butter and tea, and Myra's handkerchief became a convenient mask for the moment. A less simple-hearted man than the old pioneer might have suspected the sincerity of such tears as may be wiped away at a word, leaving no trace behind them; but Elliott was too child-like to know aught of the fine art of dissimulation, and he took Myra's sudden return to cheerfulness as a tribute to his own astuteness in yielding a point at the critical moment.

At the tea-table they were all more or less hilarious, each having somewhat to conceal from the others; and even Bartrow was made to feel the thinness of the ice upon which the trivialities were skating. Much to Connie's surprise, the tactless one developed unsuspected resources of adroitness in keeping the table-talk at concert-pitch of levity; and she forgave him when he was brutal enough to make a jest of the simple meal, giving the bread and butter a new name with each asking, and accusing her of being in league with the commissary department of the sleeping-car company. It spoke volumes for Dick's growth in perspicacity that he was able to discern the keen edge of the crisis without having actually seen the stone upon which it had been whetted; and in the midst of her own fencings with the tensities, Constance found time to wonder how Myra had wrought even the beginning of such a miracle in the downright one.

In such resolute ignorings of the moving realities the supper interval was safely outworn; but when, at the end of it, Dick dragged out his watch and called "time," Constance found her tea too hot, and the drinking of it brought tears to her eyes. Whereupon the brutal one made an exaggerated pretense of sympathy, offering her a handkerchief; and the laugh saved them all until the good-bys were said, and the guests, with Elliott to speed their parting, had gone to the station.

Constance stood in the empty corridor until the farther stair ceased to echo their footsteps. The day-long strain was off at last, and she meant to go quickly and clear off the table and wash the supper dishes, to the end that the reaction might not overwhelm her. But on the way she stopped at the little square table in the larger room and took a letter from its hiding place at the back of a framed photograph. It was a double inclosure in an outside envelope which bore the business card of a well known legal firm; and the wrapping of the inner envelope was a note on the firm's letter-head, stating in terse phrase that the inclosed letter had been found under the door of an unoccupied house in Colfax Avenue by the writer in the early summer of the previous year; that it had been mislaid; and that it was now forwarded with many regrets for its unintentional suppression.

Constance read the note mechanically, as she had read it the day before when the postman had brought it. It explained nothing more than the mere fact of delay, but she understood. The writer of the lost letter, or his messenger, had thrust it under the door of the wrong house.

She laid the note aside and tilted the envelope to let a coin fall into her palm. It was a double-eagle piece, little worn, but the memories which clustered about its giving and taking seemed to dull the lustre of the yellow metal. It was the price of sorrowful humiliation, no whit less to the man who had taken than to the woman who had given it. She put it that way in an inflexible determination to be just. Truly, his acceptance of it was a thing to be remembered with cheek-burnings of shame; but she would not hold herself blameless. In the light of that which his letter disclosed, her charitable impulse became a sword to slay the last remnant of manly pride and self-respect--if any remnant there were.

She opened the letter and re-read it to the end, going back from the scarcely legible signature to a paragraph in the midst of it that bade fair to grave itself ineffaceably upon her heart.

"You may remember that I said I couldn't tell you the truth, because it concerns a woman. When I add that the woman is yourself, you will understand. I love you; I think I have been loving you ever since that evening which you said we were to forget--the evening at the theatre. Strangely enough, my love for you isn't strong in the strength which saves. I went from you that night when you had bidden me God-speed at Mrs. Calmaine's, and within the hour I was once more a penniless vagabond.

"When you were trying to help me this afternoon, I was trying to keep from saying that which I could never have a right to say. You pressed me very hard in your sweet innocence"....

She sat down and the letter slipped from her fingers. The hurt was a year in the past, but time had not yet dulled the pain of it. Not to any human soul, nor yet to her own heart, had she admitted the one living fact which stood unshaken; which would stand, like some polished corner-stone of a ruined temple, when all else should have crumbled into dust. For which cause she sat with clasped hands and eyes that saw not; eyes that were still deep wells and clear, but brimming with the bitter waters of a fountain which flows only for those whose loss is irreparable. And while she wept, the sorrowful under-thought slipped into speech.

"He calls it love, but it couldn't have been that. He says it wasn't strong in the strength that saves; and love is always mighty to succor the weak-hearted. I would have believed in him--I did believe in him, only I didn't know how to help. But no one could help when he didn't believe in himself; and now he is just drifting, with the cruel sword of

opportunity loose in its scabbard, and all the unspeakable things dragging him whithersoever they will.... And he meant to end it all when he wrote this letter; I know he did. That would have been terrible; but it would have been braver than to go on to robbery, and unfaith, and--and now to this last pitiless iniquity. Oh, I can't let it go on to that!--not if I have to go and plead with him for the sake of that which he once thought was--love." She went down upon her knees with her face hidden in the chair-cushion, and the unconscious monologue became a passionate beseeching: "O God, help me to be strong and steadfast, that I may not fail when I come to stand between these two; for Thou knowest the secrets of the heart and all its weakness; and Thou knowest"--

CHAPTER XXX

THE Bartrows, with Stephen Elliott to expedite their outsetting, caught their train with nothing to spare; and while the goggle-eyed switch-lamps were still flashing past the windows of the sleeping-car, Myra settled herself comfortably in her corner of the section and demanded the day's accounting.

Bartrow was rummaging in the hand-bag for his traveling-cap, and he looked up with a most transparent affectation of surprise.

"Hah? Wasn't I supposed to be chasing around all day trying to buy a rock-drill?"

Myra ignored the skillless parry and thrust home. "Don't tease," she said. "You did beautifully at the supper-table, and I am quite sure Connie didn't suspect. But I want to know what has happened."

Bartrow laughed good-naturedly. "Same old window-pane for you to look through, am I not? It's lucky for me that I'm a rattling good fellow, with nothing particular inside of me to be ashamed of." He was thumbing a collection of pocket-worn papers, and presently handed her a crisp bill of exchange for five hundred and forty-five dollars. "What do you think of that for one of the happenings!"

She read the figure of it and the date. "I don't understand," she said. "Where did you get it?"

"You wouldn't guess in a thousand years. It's the money I borrowed for Jeffard one fine morning last fall, with bank interest to date."

"Then you have seen him?"

"Saw him, felt of his hand, and went to luncheon with him."

"Dick! And you really had the courage to ask him for this?"

Bartrow's smile was a grimace. "Don't you sit there and tempt me to lie about it. You know what a fool I am with a debtor. Fortunately, I didn't have to ask; it came about as most things do in this world--click! buzz! boom! and your infernal machine has exploded. We cannoned against each other as I was going into the bank to get the money for the machinery man. After we'd said 'Hello,' and shook hands, Jeffard went in with me. On the way out the cashier stopped us. 'Mr. Jeffard,' says he, 'your personal account has a credit of five hundred dollars which doesn't appear in the deposits. If you'll let me have your book I'll enter it.' 'A credit?--of five hundred dollars? I don't understand,' says Jeffard. 'It's all right,' says the cashier. 'It came from the Carbonate City National, in Leadville. Didn't they notify you?' 'No,' says Jeffard; 'it must be a mistake. I had no credit in Leadville.' All this time the cashier was digging into his pigeonholes. 'You must have had,' says he. 'I can't put my hand on their letter, but as I recall it, they said the money was a remittance made by you sometime last year to cover a promissory note. When it reached them the note had matured and had been lifted. They have kept your money a good while, but they claim not to have known your address.'"

Myra was listening with something more than curiosity.

"What did Mr. Jeffard say?" she asked.

"He looked a good deal more than he said; and what he said was rather queer. When he had pulled me a little aside, he lit a cigar and offered me one, as cool as ice. 'Of course, you'll understand that this was all prearranged between Mr. Holburn and myself,' says he. 'It would be too great a tax upon your credulity to ask you to believe that it is merely a coincidence; that I really did send the money to the Leadville bank to lift that note months ago.' I said No, and meant it; and he went over to the exchange window and made out a check and bought that draft. But afterward I could have kicked him for making that suggestion. I couldn't break away from it to save my life, and it stuck to me straight through to the finish."

"But you went to luncheon with him afterward. Didn't he explain?"

"Not a word. I tried my level best to pull the thing out of the hole two or three times, but it was buried too deep for me. And somehow that idiotic sneer of his seemed to color everything he said. He seemed to take it for granted that I'd been setting him down all these months for a scalawag, and everything I could say got twisted into a slap. We worried through the meal, and the cigars after it, in some sort of thankless fashion; but I wouldn't do it again for a farm."

Myra became reflectively thoughtful, and with the jarring of the car the bit of money paper fell to the floor. Dick recovered it, put it away, and waited patiently for her comment. When it came it was no more than a leading question.

"What do you make of it, Dick?"

"I don't know what to make of it. If I could break away from all the things I used to know about him, I should say he acts like a man who has done something to make him declare war upon himself, and--as a natural consequence--upon everybody else. He seems to be ready to fight at the drop of the hat, and that's a bad symptom."

"It is a symptom of a guilty conscience, isn't it?"

Bartrow did not answer at once. To speak by the fact was to admit that all his loyal upholdings of Jeffard had been spent upon an unworthy object, and he was reluctant in just proportion to his loyalty. But the fact was large--too large to be overleaped.

"It is a symptom, yes; and I'm beginning to be afraid it's a true one in Jeffard's case. I didn't find a soft spot in him anywhere till we came to speak of Lansdale."

"They are still friends?"

"Y--es, in a way; a sort of give-and-take way. Lansdale is cool and pretty well-calculated in his friendships as in everything else; and I imagine he forgathers with Jeffard without prejudice to his own private convictions in the Garvin affair. It's a bit odd, but Jeffard seems to have most of the remembrances on his side."

"The kindly ones, you mean?"

"Yes. I hadn't seen Lansdale yet, and I asked Jeffard how he was looking. He wagged his head, and there was a look in his eyes that I'd seen there more than once in the old days. 'Unless there is something to be done more than has been tried, it's only a question of weeks,' said he; and then he went back to something I had said that morning in Leadville just before he climbed the engine for the race to Aspen."

Myra's eyebrows arched a query, and he elucidated.

"Didn't I tell you? We had been talking about Connie, and I had hinted that she'd be willing to buy health for Lansdale at a price; and he"--

Myra cut in swiftly. "Has she told you that, Dick?"

"Hardly; but I've eyes, haven't I? Well, as I was saying, Jeffard went back to that, and asked if Lansdale's recovery still meant as much to Connie. I told him I thought it meant rather more than less; and then he went into his shell, and when he came out it was on the human side. Said he had money to burn now, and asked if there was anything anybody could do to give Lansdale a better show for his white alley. I told him what I'd do if I could break away from the Myriad."

"I remember; you said you would take him afield."

"Yes. Rig up a team and a camping outfit, and chase him out into the mountains. Make him live outdoors for a month or two, and belt him over the head if I ever caught him sharpening a lead pencil. He's grinding away with Kershaw nights and Sundays, and trying to write a novel between times. It's a clear case of work-to-death."

Myra nodded. "I think so; I have thought so all along. But he wouldn't go with Mr. Jeffard."

"That's what I thought, and what I told Jeffard when he hinted at the thing. But we were both off; and that brings me to the other happening. After we'd smoked over it--Jeffard and I--we went around and hunted up Lansdale's doctor. The medicine-man agreed with me that it was the only chance, but he didn't give us much encouragement. Said it was a forlorn hope, with the odds against Lansdale; that he'd die if he didn't go, and would probably die if he did. Jeffard had been in and out of his shell two or three times since the beginning of it, but he came out again at that and stayed out. Said he owed Lansdale, and that would be a good way to wipe out the account. I told him that wouldn't go; that if he wanted to do Lansdale a good turn, he'd have to do it on its merits. 'I sha'n't be such a fool as to tell Lansdale I'm trying to square up with him,' says he. 'You go and persuade him.'"

Myra's hand was on his knee. "You poor boy!" she said; "they always unload the thankless things on you, don't they? Did you try?"

"Sure. If I'd felt like hanging back, a sight of Lansdale would have done the business for me. It's awful, little woman. I've seen dead men, and men that were going to die, but never a dying one that wanted so hard to live. Of course, he kicked clear over the traces when I proposed it, though I lied like a whitehead, and tried to make him believe it was my scheme to help Jeffard get cured of his case of mental and moral 'jimmies.' When that failed, I dug right down to hardpan. 'You want to live, don't you?' said I, and when he admitted it, I biffed him square on the point of the jaw. Says I,

'Then it's a question of your stiff-necked New England pride against your love for a little girl who would give her right hand to see you well and strong, is it? You're not as good a man as I thought you were.'

Myra was moved to protest. "Oh, Dick! I do hope you haven't taken too much for granted! But go on; what did he say?"

"I thought he'd rise up and fall on me at first; but he didn't. He mumbled something about the 'precious balms of a friend breaking his head,' and said I was altogether mistaken; that Connie was only an angel of mercy, one of God's little ones, and a few other things of that sort."

"Only!" laughed Myra.

"Yes, 'only.' But I could see that my shoulder-blow had knocked him out. He switched the talk to Jeffard, and pretty soon he was asking me if I really thought he could do any good in that quarter; or if my saying so was merely a lie cut out of whole cloth. I was soaked through by that time, and another plunge more or less didn't cut any figure, so I told him it wasn't a lie; that there was still hope for Jeffard if any one would lay hold of him and stick to him. 'What kind of hope, Dick?' says he. And I said, 'The only kind that counts; the kind that'll make him all through what he is in part.' He shook his head at that, and said, 'I don't know. That would mean repentance and restitution,--and the money's got its teeth into him now.' I'll have to admit that I was arguing dead against the probabilities, and I knew it; but I wouldn't let go."

Myra's smile was tempered with affectionate pride. "You never do let go. Did he finally listen to reason?"

"Yes, at the end of it. But if it were six for himself and Connie, it was a good half-dozen for Jeffard. 'I'll go, Dick,' said he. 'I'm afraid your assumptions are all good-hearted wishes, but I'll go. Perhaps, if it comes to the worst, God will give me a man for my leave-taking.' That was a new side of him, to me; the Puritan side, isn't it?"

"The human side," she amended. "It is merely crusted a little thicker in the Puritan family."

"But it's there, all the same. Out here, where the horizons and other things are pretty wide open, we're apt to say what we think, and pretty much all of it; but Lansdale and his kind think a good bit more and keep it to themselves. He's all right. I only wish his getting well were as sure as the goodness of him. Are you getting sleepy? Want your berth made down?"

"Presently." Myra was gazing out at the night-wall slipping past the car windows, and for her the thick blackness mirrored a picture of a sweet-faced young woman sitting on a denim-covered lounge, with her hands tight clasped over one knee and her eyes alight with a soft starglow of compassion. And because of the picture, she said: "I'm afraid you didn't take too much for granted, Dick; and I could almost wish it were otherwise. It is heart-breaking to think of it."

Dick went over to a seat beside her, and tried to put himself as nearly as possible at her point of view.

"Let's not try to cross their bridges for them beforehand, little woman," he said, with his lips at her ear. "Life is pretty middling full for all of us,--for us two, at any rate."

It was five minutes later, and the train had stopped for orders at the canyon gateway, when she turned to him to say: "What do you think about Mr. Jeffard now, Dick? Are we all mistaken? or is he the hardened cynic he seems to be?"

Bartrow did not reply on the spur of the moment, as was his custom. When he had reasoned it out, he said:--

"I think we ought to break away from the notion that a man has got to be either all angel or all devil. Jeffard's a human man, like the rest of us. He's done some good things that I know of,--and one pretty bad one; and it's the bad one that is setting the pace for him just now. But, as I once said to Lansdale, I'm betting on the finish. One bad curve needn't spoil a whole railroad."

Myra's hand sought and found his under cover of her wrap. "You are loyalty itself, Dick, and I can't help loving you for it. But you say 'one bad one.' Have you forgotten the Irish girl?"

Dick set his jaw at that, and the big hand closed firmly over the small one.

"When I have to believe that of him, Myra, my faith in my kind will drop back more notches than one. That would make him all devil, don't you see?"

But her charity outran his. "No, Dick; I don't quite see it. It is just one more coil in the puzzle-tangle of good and evil that you spoke of. Connie knows it, and if she can find it in her heart to forgive him"--

There was reverent awe in Bartrow's rejoinder. "Do you mean to say she'd forgive him--*that*?"

The intermittent clatter and roar of the canyon climb had begun, and in one of the breathing spaces Myra made answer.

"She is one of God's little ones, as Mr. Lansdale said. I think she would forgive him even that." And in the next gap in the clamor, "Did you tell him about Garvin?"

Dick shook his head. "No, I didn't dare to. It's a hard thing to say, but I'm not sure he wouldn't prosecute Jim for the attempt to kill. There's no such vindictiveness in the world as that which dates back to benefits forgot. But I told Lansdale, and gave him leave to make use of it if the time should ever come when he could do it without jeopardizing Garvin."

At which Myra's charity stumbled and fell and ran no more.

"That time will never come, Dick. Mr. Jeffard has a double feud with Garvin,—he is Garvin's debtor for benefits forgot, as you say; and he has done Garvin an injury. I am glad you didn't tell him."



CHAPTER XXXI

"SHE'S gone to her rest, at last, poor soul, and it's happy she'd be if it wasn't for the childer."

Constance had been waiting through the long hours of the afternoon for Margaret's return from Owen David's shanty on the North Side; waiting for the summons to the death-bed of the mother of Owen David's children. She had promised to go, wherefore her heart smote her and the ready tears welled up at Margaret's announcement.

"Oh, Margaret! Why didn't you come for me!"

"'Twas no use at all, Miss Constance; 'twas her last word she said to you this morning, when she asked you to try once more with Owen for the childer's sake. When you'd gone she turned her face to the wall, and we never knew when her soul went out."

"Was Owen there?"

"He was; and it's sober he was for the first time in many a day. He took it hard; them Welsh are flighty people, anyway."

"He ought to take it hard," said Constance, with as near an approach to vindictiveness as the heart of compassion would sanction. "Has everything been done?"

Margaret nodded. "The neighbors were that kind; and it's poor hard-working people they are, too."

"I know," said Constance. She was making ready to go out, and she found her purse and counted its keepings. They were as scanty as her will to help was plenteous. Myra's check had been generous, but the askings were many, and there was no more than the sweet savor of it left. "I'm sure I don't know what Owen will do," she went on. "I suppose there isn't money enough to bury her."

Margaret had taken off her hat and jacket and she was suddenly impelled to go to work. The lounge-cover was awry, and in the straightening of it she said:--

"Don't you be worrying about that, now, Miss Constance. It was Owen himself that was giving me the money for the funeral when I was leaving."

"Owen? Where did he get it? He hasn't had a day's work for a month."

Margaret was smoothing the cover and shaking the pillows vigorously. "Sure, that's just what I was thinking" (slap, slap), "but I've his money in my pocket this blessed minute. So you just go and say a sweet word to the childer, Miss Constance, and don't you be worrying about anything."

Connie's hand was on the door-knob, but she turned with a sudden sinking of the heart, and a swift impulse that sent her across the room to Margaret's side.

"Margaret, you gave Owen that money before he gave it to you. Where did you get it?"

Margaret left off beating the pillows and slipped upon her knees to bury her face in one of them.

"I knew you'd be asking that," she sobbed, and then: "Haven't I been working honest every day since Christmas? And does it be taking all I earn to keep me, I'd like to know?"

Constance went down on her knees beside the girl, and what she said was to One who was merciful even to the Magdalenes. When she rose the pain of it was a little dulled, and she went back to the charitable necessities in a word.

"Is there any one to watch with her to-night, Margaret?"

The girl lifted a tear-stained face, and the passionate Irish eyes were swimming, and Constance turned away because her loving compassion was greater than her determination to be judicially severe.

"I'm one," Margaret answered; "and Mrs. Mulcahey'll come over when her man gets home."

"Very well. I'll go over and give the children their suppers and put them to bed. I'll stay till you come, and you can bring Tommie to take me home."

Constance went upon her mission heavy-hearted; and in the hovel across the river found comfort in the giving of comfort. The David children were all little ones, too young to fully realize their loss; and when they had been fed and

hushed to sleep, and one of David's fellow workmen had taken the husband away for the night, Constance sat down in the room with the dead to wait for Margaret. For a heart less pitiful or a soul less steadfast, the silence of the night and the solitary watch with the sheeted figure on the bed might have been unnerving; but in all her life Constance had never had to reckon with fear. Hence, when the door opened behind her without a preliminary knock, and a footstep crossed the threshold, she thought it was one of the neighbors and rose softly with her finger on her lip. But when she saw who it was, she started back and made as if she would retreat to the room where the children were.

"You!" she said. "Why are you here?"

"I beg your pardon." Jeffard said it deferentially, almost humbly. "I didn't expect to find you here; I was looking for-- for the man, you know. What has become of him?"

The hesitant pause in the midst of the explanation opened the door for a swift suspicion,--a suspicion too horrible to be entertained, and yet too strong to be driven forth. There was righteous indignation in her eyes when she went close to him and said:--

"Can you stand here in the presence of that"--pointing to the sheeted figure on the bed--"and lie to me? You expected to meet Margaret Gannon here. You have made an appointment with her--an assignation in the house of the dead. Shame on you!"

It should have crushed him. It did for the moment. And when he rallied it was apparently in a spirit of the sheerest hardihood.

"You are right," he said; "I did expect to meet Margaret. With your permission, I'll go outside and wait for her."

She flashed between him and the door and put her back to it.

"Not until you have heard what I have to say, Mr. Jeffard. I've been wanting to say it ever since Tommie told me, but you have been very careful not to give me a chance. You know this girl's story, and what she has had to fight from day to day. Are you so lost to every sense of justice and mercy as to try to drag her back into sin and shame after all her pitiful strugglings?"

"It would seem so," Jeffard retorted, and his smile was harder than his words. "It is quite conceivable that you should believe it of the man who once took your charity and made a mock of it. May I go now?"

"Oh, no, not yet; not until you have promised me to spare and slay not, for this once. Think of it a moment; it is the price of a human soul! And it is such a little thing for you to concede."

The hard smile came and went again.

"Another man might say that Margaret has come to be very beautiful, Miss Elliott."

The indignation was gone out of her eyes, and her lips were trembling.

"Oh, how can you be so hard!" she faltered. "Will nothing move you?"

He met the beseeching with a steady gaze that might have been the outlook of a spirit of calm superiority or the cold stare of a demon of ruthlessness. The mere suggestion of the alternative made her hot and cold by turns.

"I wonder that you have the courage to appeal to me," he said, at length. "Are you not afraid?"

"For Margaret's sake I am not afraid."

"You are very brave--and very loyal. Do you wonder that I was once moved to tell you that I loved you?"

"How can you speak of that here--and now!" she burst out. "Is there no measure of the hardness of your heart? Is it not enough that you should make me beg for that which I have a right to demand?"

He went apart from her at that to walk softly up and down in the narrow space between the bed and the wall,--to walk for leaden-winged minutes that seemed hours to Constance, waiting for his answer. At the final turn he lifted the sheet from the face of the dead woman and looked long and earnestly, as one who would let death speak where life was dumb and inarticulate. Constance watched him with her heart in a turmoil of doubt and fear. The doubt was of her own making, as the fear was of his. She had thought that this man was known to her, in his potentialities for good or evil, in his stumblings upon the brink of the abyss, and in his later plunge into the depths of wrongdoing; but now that she was brought face to face with him, her prefigurings took new shapes and she feared to look upon them. For the potentialities had suddenly become superhuman, and love itself stood aghast at the possibilities. In the midst of it he stood before her again.

"What is it that you would have me do?" he asked.

The tone of it assured her that her battle was fought and won; but at the moment of victory she had not the strength to make terms with him.

"You know what you ought to do," she said, with eyes downcast.

"The 'oughts' are sometimes terribly hard, Miss Elliott. Haven't you found them so?"

"Sometimes." She was finding one of them sufficiently hard at that moment to compel the admission.

"But they are never impossible, you would say, and that is true also. You asked me a few moments ago if there was nothing that would move me, and I was tempted. But that is past. Will you suffer me to go now?"

She stood aside, but her hand was still on the latch of the door.

"You have not promised," she said.

"Pardon me; I was hoping you would spare me. The cup is of my own mixing, but the lees are bitter. Must I drain them?"

"I--I don't understand," she rejoined.

"Don't you? Consider it a moment. You have taken it for granted that I had it in my heart to do this thing, and, knowing what you do of me, the inference is just. But I have not admitted it, and I had hoped you would spare me the admission which a promise would imply. Won't you leave me this poor shadow of refutation?"

She opened the door for him.

"Thank you; it is much more than I deserve. Since you do not ask it, you shall have the assurance,—the best I can give. I shall leave Denver in a day or two, and you may take your own measures for safeguarding Margaret in the interval. Perhaps it won't be as difficult as you may imagine. If I have read her aright you may ask large things of her loyalty and devotion to you."

The battle was over, and she had but to hold her peace to be quit of him. But having won her cause it was not in the loving heart of her to let him go unrecompensed.

"You are going away? Then we may not meet again. I gave you bitter words a few minutes ago, Mr. Jeffard, but I believed they were true. Won't you deny them—if you can?"

His foot was across the threshold, but he turned to smile down upon her.

"You are a true woman. You said I lied to you, and now you ask me to deny it, knowing well enough that the denial will afterward stand for another falsehood. I know what you think of me,—what you are bound to think of me; but isn't it conceivable that I would rather quench that fire than add fuel to it?"

"But you are going away," she insisted.

"And since we may never meet again, you crave the poor comfort of a denial. You shall have it for what it is worth. When you are inclined to think charitably of me, go back to first principles and remember that the worst of men have sometimes had promptings which were not altogether unworthy. Let the major accusation stand, if you choose; I did have an appointment here with Margaret Gannon. But when your faith in humankind needs heartening, conceive that for this once the tryst was one which any woman might have kept with me. Believe, if you care to, that my business here this evening was really with this poor fellow whose sins have found him out. Would you like to be able to believe that?"

For the first time since doubt and fear had gotten the better of indignation she was able to lift her eyes to his.

"I will believe it," she said gratefully.

He smiled again, and she was no longer afraid. Now that she came to think of it, she wondered if she had ever been really afraid of him.

"Your faith is very beautiful, Miss Elliott. I am glad to be able to give it something better than a bare suggestion to build on. Will you give this to Margaret when she comes?"

It was a folded paper, with a printed title and indorsement blanks on the back. She took it and glanced at the filing. It was the deed to a burial lot in the name of Owen David.

"Oh!" she said; and there was a world of contrition and self-reproach in the single word. "Can you ever forgive me, Mr. Jeffard?"

As once before, when Lansdale had proffered it, Jeffard pushed aside the cup of reinstatement.

"Don't take too much for granted. Remember, the indictment still stands. Margaret Gannon's tempter might have done this and still merit your detestation."

And at the word she was once more alone with the still figure on the bed.



CHAPTER XXXII

FOR what reason Constance, left alone in the house of the dead, went softly from the lighted room to kneel at the bedside of the sleeping children in the lean-to beyond--to kneel with her face in her hands and her heart swelling with emotions too great for any outlet save that of sorrowful beseechings,--let those adjudge who have passed in some crucial moment from loss to gain, and back to loss again. There was a pitiful heart cry in the prayer for help because she knew now that love, mighty and unreasoning, must be reckoned with in every future thought of this man; love heedless of consequences, clinging first to an imagined ideal, and now to the sorrowful wreck of that ideal; love lashed into being, it may be, by the very whip of shame, acknowledged only to be chained and dungeoned in the Castle of Despair, but alive and pleading, and promising yet to live and plead though hope were dead.

It was thus that Margaret found her an hour later; and in the darkness of the little room the true-hearted Irish girl knelt beside her saint, with her strong arms around the weeping one, and a sob of precious sympathy in the outpouring of words.

"There now--there now, Miss Constance! is it kneeling here and crying for these poor left ones that you are? Sure it's the Holy Virgin herself that'll be mothering them, and the likes of them. And Owen'll be doing his part, too. It's a changed man he is."

Constance shook her head. She was too sincere to let the lesser reason stand for the greater, even with Margaret.

"I do grieve for them, Margaret; but--but it isn't that."

"It isn't that, do you say? Then I know full well what it is, and it's the truth I'm going to tell you, Miss Constance, for all the promisings he made me give him. 'Tis Mr. Jeffard's money that's to go for the funeral, and it was him left it with me to give to Owen. He told me you'd not take it from him, and 'twas his own free gift. Ever since he came back he's been giving me money for the poor ones, and making me swear never to tell you; but it was for your sweet sake, Miss Connie, and not for mine. I'd want to die if you didn't believe that."

"Oh, Margaret! are you telling me the truth? I do so want to believe it!"

Margaret rose and drew her confessor to the half-open door; to the bedside of the sheeted one.

"A little while ago she was alive and talking to you, Miss Constance, and you believed her because you knew she was going fast. If I'd be like that, I'd tell you the same."

"I believe you, Margaret--I do believe you; and, oh, I'm *so* thankful! It would break my heart to have you go back now!"

"Don't you be worrying for me. Didn't I say once that the devil might fly away with me, but I'd not live to leave him have the good of it? When that time comes, Miss Constance, it's another dead woman you'll be crying over. And now you'll go home and take your rest; the good old father is waiting on the doorstep for you."

Even with his daughter, Stephen Elliott was the most reticent of men; and on the little journey up the river front and across the viaduct he plodded along in silence beside her, waiting for her to speak if she had anything to say. Constance had a heart full to overflowing, but not of the things which lend themselves to speech with any father; and when she broke the silence it was in self-defense, and on the side of the commonplace.

"Have you decided yet where you will go?" she asked, knowing that the arrangements for the prospecting trip were all but completed.

"N--no, not exactly. Except that I never have gone with the rush, and I don't mean to this time. There's some pretty promising country around up back of Dick's mountain, and I've been thinking of that."

"I wish you would go into the Bonanza district," she said. "If I'm to stay with Dick and Myra, it will be a comfort to know that you are not very far away."

The old man plodded another square before he succeeded in casting his thought into words.

"I was wondering if that wasn't the reason why I want to go there. I'm not letting on to anybody about it, but I'm getting sort of old and trembly, Connie; and you're about all I have left."

She slipped her arm an inch or two farther through his. "Must it be, poppa? Can't we get along without it? I'll be glad to live like the poorest of them, if we can only be together."

"I know; you're a good daughter to me, Connie, and you'd go into the hospital on Dr. Gordon's offer to-morrow, if I'd say the word. But I think the last strike I made rather spoiled me. I got sort of used to the flesh-pots, and I haven't got over feeling for my check-book yet. I guess I'll have to try it once more before we go on the county."

She would have said more had there been more to say. But her arguments had all been exhausted when the prospecting fever had set in, and she could only send him forth with words of heartening and a brave God-speed.

"I'm not going to put things in the way," she said; "but I'd go with you and help dig, if you'd let me. The next best thing will be to have you somewhere within reach, and I shall be comforted if you can manage to keep Topeka Mountain in sight. But you won't."

"Yes, I will, daughter; the string pulls about as hard at my end as it does at yours, and I'll tell you what I'll do. The gulches that I had in mind are all up at the head of Myriad Creek, and I'll ship the 'stake' to Dick, and make the Myriad a sort of outfitting camp. How will that strike you?"

"That will be fine," she said; adding, in an upflash of the old gayety: "and when you've located your claim, Myra and I will come and turn the windlass for you."

They were climbing the stairs to the darkened suite on the third floor, and at the door Constance found a telegraph messenger trying to pin a non-delivery notice to the panel. She signed his blank by the hall light, and read the message while her father was unlocking the door and lighting the lamp.

"It is from Myra," she explained; "and it's good news and bad. Do you remember what Dick was telling us the other evening about his drunken blacksmith?"

"The fellow that went into the blast-choke after the dead man?"

"Yes. He is down with mountain fever, and Myra says nothing but good nursing will save him. Dick has got his story out of him at last; he is Margaret Cannon's father."

"Humph! what a little world this is! I suppose you will send Margaret right away?"

"I shall go with her to-morrow morning. I'll tell Dick what you are going to do, and you can come when you are ready."

The old man nodded acquiescence. "It'll be better for you to go along; she'll be all broke up. Want me to go and wire Dick?"

"If you will. I should have asked the boy to wait, but he was gone before I had opened the envelope. Tell Dick to keep him alive at any cost, and that we'll be there to-morrow evening."

When her father was gone, Constance sat down to piece out the discoveries, comforting and harrowing, of the foregone hour, and to set them over against each other in a field which was as yet too near to be retrospective. She tried to stand aside for herself, and to see and consider only those to whom her heart went out in loving compassion and sympathy; but it was inevitable that she should finally come to a re-reading of the letter taken from its hiding-place in the photograph frame. She dwelt upon it with a soft flush spreading slowly from neck to cheek, reading it twice and yet once again before she laid it in the little wall-pocket of a grate and touched a match to it.

"For his sake and for mine," she said softly, as she watched it shrivel and blacken in the flame. "That is what I must do--burn my ships so that I can't go back."

The charred wraith of the letter went up the chimney in the expiring gasp of the flame, and there was the sound of a familiar step in the corridor. She went quickly to open the door for the late visitor. It was Lansdale, come to say what must be said on the eve of parting, and to ask for his answer to a conditional plea made in a moment when the consumptive's optimism had carried him off his feet.



CHAPTER XXXIII

THE periods of the scene-shifter, in life as in life's mimicking on any stage, have fallen into disesteem. In any flight of fancy or plodding journey of fact these are flat countries to be traversed; interregnums which, however replete with incident for the actors themselves, are deemed alike unworthy of the playwright's outworking or the chronicler's recording. To the audience waiting beyond the footlights these are mere breathing spaces of music-hastened minutes standing for whatever lapses of days, weeks or months the story of the play involves; but for the scene-shifter they are gaps toil-filled, with fierce strivings and wrestlings and doughty compelling of the animate and inanimate perversities.

None the less, for the toiler behind the scenes there are compensations, for the audience, the *entr'acte* is a solution of continuity, more or less skillfully bridged, according to the playwright's gift; but the worker of transformations knows no break in the action. For him the story of the play is complete, marching evenly to its climax through spoken line and drop-curtained interregnum.

The curtain has rung down upon an interior in an apartment house. It is to rise upon a flashlight picture of a summer night scene in a mountain-girt valley. The walls of the homelike interior vanish, and in their stead dim reaches of the forest-clad mountains suggest themselves. A stream tumbles over the boulders in its bed with a hollow roar hinting at canyoned plungings above; and on the margin of it a quaking aspen blinks its many-lidded eyes in the light of a camp fire.

Against the pillared background of forest, primeval firs whose sombre greens become murky black in the firelight, a campers' wagon is drawn up; and the picket pins of the grazing horses are driven in a grass grown extension of the glade to the right. There is a silken whisper abroad in the night, rising and falling upon the sound waves of the tumbling stream: the voices of the trees as they call to each other in the night wind pouring softly down from the sky-pitched peaks.

The scene is set and the actors are in their places. They are two men clad in flannel shirts and brown duck overalls and shooting-coats. One of them is bearded and bronzed, with the well-knit figure of conscious strength. The other is of slighter frame, and on his clean-shaven face the prolonged holiday in the open is but now beginning to impress the stamp of returning health and vigor. The bearded man is on his back beside the fire, with his clasped hands for a pillow and an extinct pipe between his teeth. The clean-shaven one is propped against the bole of a tree; his eyes are closed, and his pipe has slipped from his fingers.

A brand falls into the glowing mass of embers, and the sparks fly upward in a crackling shower. It is the prompter's call-bell. The man reclining at the tree-foot opens his eyes, and the bearded one sits up and feels mechanically for the tobacco pouch.

"Here it is," says Lansdale. "I was just about to fill up again when the realities slipped away. It's astonishing how one can sleep overtime in these upper levels."

The athletic one rises and stretches till his joints crack. "Been asleep, have you? So have I. There's no opiate in the world like a day's tramping in the altitudes. Freshen you up any?"

"As to body, yes. But I've had a curious dream--if it were a dream." Silence while the sob of the river rises and falls on the night wind, and then a half-hesitant query. "Jeffard, do you believe in presentiments?"

The bearded one is on his knees before the fire, pressing a live coal into the bowl of his pipe, and the answer is delayed.

"I don't know whether I do or not; I have never had one."

"But you have known of others having them, haven't you?"

"Of one other: but in that instance it was foreknowledge rather than a foreboding. The presentiment should have been mine; and I had none."

"Would you mind telling me about it?"

"No. It was while I was making the survey for a logging railway in Quebec. I expected to be out all summer, but in the middle of it the company called a halt and I went home. I hadn't wired or written, but when I reached Hinsdale my father was at the station to meet me. For three days my mother had been insisting that I would come, and to quiet her they had been meeting the trains. She died the next evening."

"And you had no premonition?"

"None whatever. For a month or more I had been beyond the reach of the mails; and I had left her in her usual health. It was a bolt out of a clear sky."

Again the brawling stream and the whispering leaves fill the gap of silence; and as before, Lansdale is the first to speak.

"I have always scouted such things, as sanity seems to demand. Stories with any element of the supernatural in them have never appealed to me because, however well authenticated, they were always stories, and never actual happenings in which I had any part. But for the last day or two I've had a growing sense of impending calamity, and I can't shake it off."

There is the brusquerie of heartening in Jeffard's rejoinder.

"Nonsense! It's only the imaginative part of you kicking against the pricks of a longish holiday."

"That is ingenious, but I can't quite accept it. I've eaten and slept with the imaginative fiend long enough to be pretty well acquainted with his vagaries. This is altogether different. It is precisely the feeling you have had just before a storm; a sense of depression as intangible as darkness, but quite as real. It was with me a few minutes ago when I fell asleep, and the dream seemed to be a part of it."

"Oh, dreams," says the scoffer; "I thought they had been accounted for by the dietists. I told you that last batch of panbread held possibilities. But go on and unload your dream. I'm shudder-proof."

Lansdale tells it circumstantially, keeping his pipe alight in the periods.

"It didn't seem like a dream; at least, not in the beginning of it. I was sitting here just as I am now, and you were on your back over there, with the pipe in your mouth. The surroundings were the same, except that the fire was burning low. I remember thinking that you must have fallen asleep, and wondering why the pipe didn't fall and wake you. After a time the roar of the stream seemed to quiet down, and I heard the clink of horseshoes upon stone. The sound came from across the stream, and as I looked I saw a trail and a horseman coming down it. It was all so real that I wondered why I hadn't noticed the trail before. The man rode down to the water's edge and made as if he would cross. I saw him quite distinctly, and thought it curious, because the fire was too low to give much light. He merely glanced at the stream, and then turned his horse's head and rode down the opposite bank. He passed out of sight among the trees, and a moment later I heard the horse's hoofs again, this time as if he were on a bridge of poles."

Jeffard has been listening with attention no more than decently alert, but at this point he breaks in to say: "You've been walking in your sleep. Go on."

"It was just here that the supernatural came in. I told you that the man had passed out of sight, but all at once I seemed to see him again. He was on a corduroy bridge crossing the stream, and I saw plainly what he did not,—that the bridge was unsafe, and that a step or two would plunge him into the torrent. I don't remember what followed, save that I tried to call out, first to him and then to you; but my voice seemed to be swallowed up in the thunder of the water. There was a little gap filled with fierce strugglings, and then I seemed to be here again, lying by the wagon with a blanket over me; and you were walking up and down with another man,—a stranger. That is all; except that I tried to tell you that you were wet through and would take cold,—tried and couldn't, and awoke."

Jeffard has risen to put another log on the fire.

"It's the panbread," he says, with the air of one who sweeps the board for a resetting of the pieces. But after a little he adds: "I was wondering how you came to know about the bridge. That is the only unaccountable twist in it."

"Is there a bridge?"

"Yes; it's just below that farther clump of aspens. But there is nothing the matter with it that I could see. I noticed it while I was picketing the horses."

"And is there a trail on the other side of the stream?"

"There is. There used to be a ford just here, but it was dangerous, and we built the bridge."

"Then you have been here before?"

"Yes, many times. I spent the better half of a summer and all of one winter in this valley. The Midas is just below here. I meant to surprise you to-morrow morning."

Lansdale's gaze is in the heart of the fire and his voice is low. "Do you know, Henry, I'm rather glad you didn't wait?"

Don't ask me why, because I can't tell you in terms divisible by the realities. But somehow the to-morrows don't seem to be assured."

"Oh, pshaw! that's your dream--and the panbread its father. If you had talked that way a month ago, when you were really living from hand to mouth"--

Lansdale spreads his hands palms down and looks at them.

"You promised me a new lease of life, Henry, and you've given it me,--or the key to it. I didn't believe it could be done, and my chief trouble in those first days was the thought that you'd have to bury me alone. And when we camped in a particularly rocky spot, I used to wonder how you would manage it."

Jeffard's smile is of grimness. "If you had mentioned it, I could have helped you off with that burden. These mountains are full of graves, ready-made; prospect holes, where the better part of many a man lies buried. Do you see that heap of earth and stone over yonder?"

Lansdale shades his eyes from the firelight and looks and sees.

"That is one of them. Just behind that heap there is a shaft with a windlass across it, and for six weeks two men worked early and late digging a hole,--which turned out to be an excellent well when the water came in and stopped them."

"And the water was bitter," says Lansdale. "Did you drink of it, Henry?"

"No; but the other man did, and he went mad."

Once more the stream and the sighing night wind share the silence. For many days Lansdale has been assuring himself that the golden moment for speech of the helpful sort must ultimately be made and not waited for. In the hour when he had consented to Bartrow's urgings he had been given to see his opportunity and had determined to grasp it,--had made the determination the excuse for sharing Jeffard's hospitality. He can look back upon that resolve now and see that it was perfunctory; that the prompting had been of duty and not at all of love for the man. But the weeks of close companionship have wrought more miracles than one, and not the least among them is a great amazement builded upon the daily renewal of Jeffard's loving-kindnesses. For the man with the world-quarrel has been a brother indeed; nurse, physician, kinsman, and succoring friend; with the world-quarrel put aside from the moment of outsetting, and with apparently no object in life less worthy than that of fighting a vicarious battle for a sick man. The summary of it is humanizing, and the last upholdings of the crust of reserve break down in the warmth of it.

"May I speak as the spirit moves, Henry?"

"If you think I deserve it. Why shouldn't you?"

"It is a question of obligations rather than of deservings,--my obligations. No brother of my own blood could have done more for me than you have."

"And you want to even it up?"

"No; but I want to tell you while I may that it has come very near to me in these last few days. At first I was inclined to make another query of it, and to speculate as to your probable motive; but latterly I've come to call it by its right name."

Jeffard shakes his head slowly, and removes his pipe to say: "Don't make any more mistakes, Lansdale. I'm neither better nor worse than I was that night when I told you the story of the man and his temptation. I know what you mean and what you would say; but this experiment and its results--the twenty odd pounds of flesh you have put on, and the new lease of life they stand for--mean more to me than they do to you."

"I don't begin to understand the drift of that," says Lansdale.

"No? I wonder if you would understand and believe if I should tell you the truth; if I should confess that my motive, so far as you are concerned, is entirely selfish?"

"Since understanding implies belief, I shall have to say no to that. But you might try,--for your own satisfaction."

"It's altogether unprofitable; but perhaps it's your due. I'll have to go back a little to make it clear. In the old days we were pretty good friends, but I think you will admit that there have always been reservations. You haven't known me and I haven't known you as friends of the David and Jonathan sort know each other. Isn't that so?"

Lansdale is constrained to say "Yes," wishing it were otherwise.

Jeffard refills his pipe and fishes for another live coal in the fire-fringe. The *g-r-r-rh* of the grazing horses comes from the near-by glade, and again the silence begins to grow. Suddenly he says: "Let's drop it, Lansdale, and talk about something else."

"No, go on; nothing you can say will efface the brotherly fact."

"Very well,—if you will have it. You said you were inclined to question my motive. It was more than questionable; it was frankly selfish."

"Selfish? You'll have to spell it out large for me. From my point of view it seems rather the other way about. What had you to gain by saddling yourself with the care of a sick man?"

"I can't put it in words—not without laying myself open to the charge of playing to the gallery. But let me state a fact and ask a question. A year ago you thought it was all up with you, and you didn't seem to care much. A few months later I found you fighting for your life like a shipwrecked sailor with land in sight. What did it?"

That the lava-crust of reserve is altogether molten is evinced in Lansdale's straightforward reply.

"Love,—love for a woman. I think you must have known that."

"I did. That was why you were making the desperate fight for life; and that is why we are here to-night, you and I. I love the woman, too."

Lansdale shakes his head slowly, and an ineffable smile is Jeffard's reward.

"And yet you call it selfishness, Henry. Man, man! you have deliberately gone about to save my life when another might have taken it!"

"I shall reap where I have sown," says Jeffard steadily. "Latterly I have been living for one day,—the day when I can take you back to her in the good hope that she will forget what has been for the sake of what I have tried to make possible."

Once more Lansdale's gaze is in the glowing heart of the fire, and the light in his eyes is prophetic.

"Verily, you shall reap, Henry; but not in a field where you have sown. Don't ask me how I know. That's my secret. But out of all this will come a thing not to be measured by your prefigurings. You shall have your reward; but I crave mine, too. Will you give it me?"

"If it be mine to give."

"It is. Do justice and love mercy, Henry. That is the thing I've been trying to find words to say to you all these weeks."

Jeffard lays the pipe aside and does not pretend to misunderstand.

"Tell me what you would like to have me do."

"I think you must know: find the man who drank of the bitter waters and went mad, and give him back that which you have taken from him."

"Isn't there a possibility that I can do neither?"

"I can help you to do the first,—and for the other I can only plead. I know what you would say: that the man had forfeited his right; that he tried to kill you; that by all the laws of man's inventing this money is yours. But God's right and your debt to your own manhood are above all these. As your poor debtor, I'm privileged to ask large things of you; can't you break the teeth of it and shake yourself free of the money-dragon?"

Jeffard is afoot, tramping a monotonous sentry beat between the wagon and the fire. His rejoinder is a question.

"Do you know where James Garvin is to be found?"

"I don't, but Bartrow does."

"Why didn't he tell me?"

"Because Dick is merciful. The man is a criminal, and you could send him to the penitentiary."

"And Dick thought—and you have thought—that I would prosecute him. It was the natural inference, I suppose,—from your point of view. The man who would rob his partner wouldn't stumble over a little thing like that. Will it help

you to sleep the sounder if I say that vengeance isn't in me?--wasn't in me even in the white heat of it?"

Lansdale nods assent. "I'm on the asking hand, and any concession is grateful. If you were vindictive about it, I'm afraid the major contention would be hopeless."

"But as it is you do not despair?"

"I am very far from despairing, Henry. You spoke lightly of our friendship a little while ago, and one time I should have agreed with you. But I know you better now, and the incredibility of this thing that you have done has been growing upon me. It's the one misshapen column in a fair temple. Won't you pull it down and set up another in its place,--a clean-cut pillar of uprightness, which will harmonize with the others?"

Jeffard stops short at the tree-bole, with his hand on Lansdale's shoulder.

"It has taken me five weeks to find out why you consented to come afield with me," he says. "It was to say this, wasn't it?"

"Just that," says Lansdale, and his voice is the voice of one pleading as a mother pleads. "Say you will do it, Henry; if not for your own sake or mine, for the sake of that which has brought us together here."

Jeffard has turned away again, but he comes back at that to stand before Garvin's advocate.

"It is a small thing you have asked, Lansdale," he says, after a time; "much smaller than you think. The pillar isn't altogether as crooked as it looks; there is something in the perspective. You know how the old Greek builders used to set the corner column out of the perpendicular to make it appear plumb. We don't always do that; sometimes we can't do it without bringing the whole structure down about our ears. But in this case your critical eye shall be satisfied. We'll go down to the mine in the morning and use Denby's wire. If Bartrow can find Garvin, you shall see how easily the dragon's teeth may be broken. Is that what you wanted me to say?"

Lansdale's answer is a quotation.

"And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking ... that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.' I've seen my reward and felt of it; and yours will come a little later,--in a way you little dream of. Pass the tobacco, and let's have another whiff or two before we turn in. I'm too acutely thankful to be sleepy."

For a peaceful half-hour they sit before the glowing embers, smoking placidly while their talk drifts hither and yon over the spent sea of boyhood and youth. It is a heartening half-hour, and at the end of it Jeffard rises to get the blankets from the wagon. Lansdale elects to sleep at his tree-root, and he is rolling himself in his blanket when Jeffard says:

"How about the presentiment? Have we tired it out?"

Lansdale laughs softly. "It's gone," he says. "Perhaps it was nothing more than an upheaval of conscience. I'm subject to that when I've anything on my mind. Good-night, and God bless you, Henry."

And so the curtain goes down upon the summer night scene in the mountain-girt valley, with the two men sleeping peacefully before the fire, and the stars shining softly in the patch of velvety sky overhead. The midnight ebb of the snow-fed stream has set in, and the throbbing roll of the water drum is muffled. The fire burns low. The whispering leaves are stilled, and the wind slipping down from the snow coifs, sinks to a sigh. The pinions of the night are folded, and darkness and murmurous silence wrap the mantle of invisibility around the camp in the glade.



CHAPTER XXXIV

It is the gray dawn that lifts the curtain, and in the little glade where the two men slept there are three figures, dim and ghostly in the morning's twilight. Two of them are afoot, heavy-eyed and weary, tramping a slow-paced beat on the margin of the tumbling stream. The third is a still shape lying blanket-covered beside the wagon.

"Tell me about it, Denby," says one of the watchers, and his voice breaks in the saying of it. "I think I can bear it now. How did it happen?"

The master of men shakes his head. "I can't tell you anything more than the bald fact, Jeffard. I rode down the trail ahead of Higgins, and should have forded the creek here, only I didn't want to disturb you two. I went on to the bridge, and in the act of crossing he ran down the bank on this side, calling to me to go back. It was too late. I had barely time to get free of the stirrups when we were into it,—the two of us and the horse. It isn't more than three or four feet deep, as you know, but I knew it meant death if we went into the mill tail below. I lost my grip and was gone when he grappled me. I don't know yet how he came to save my life and lose his own."

"It was to be," says Jeffard, brokenly. "When I reached you he was holding you up with one hand and clinging to the bridge stringer with the other. His weight and yours with the rush of the water had pushed the timber down, and his head was under."

Two other turns they make, and then Jeffard says, with awe in his voice, "He knew about it beforehand, Denby," and he tells Lansdale's dream.

Denby hears him through without interrupting, but at the end of it he says, gently: "It wasn't a dream. Higgins was overdue with the team from Aspen, and I went out to see what had become of him. I passed here on my way up the trail about nine o'clock, and you were both asleep then. I had crossed by the lower ford and found it pretty bad, so I turned back from here and rode down to see if the bridge was all right. He saw me and heard me."

Jeffard's gesture is of unconvincement.

"That accounts for part of it," he says; "but I shall always believe he foresaw his death and the manner of it."

After that they pace up and down in silence again, treading out the sorrowful watch until daylight is fully come, bringing with it a team from the mine and men to do what remains to be done. The two stand apart until the men have done their office, falling in to walk softly behind the wagon on the short journey down the valley to the mine settlement. On the way, Jeffard accounts for himself briefly.

"He was one of the two best friends I had in the world," he says. "I had him out on a camping holiday for his health, and he was gaining day by day. We were counting upon dropping in on you this morning, and now"—

"I know," says the master. "He gave his life for mine, and it gets pretty near to me, too." And thereafter they keep step with heads bowed and eyes downcast, as those in whom sorrow has murdered speech; and the bellowing stream at the trail-side thunders a requiem for its victim.

The setting sun is crimsoning the eastern snow caps while they are burying him on the plateau above the mine settlement. An hour later, the master of men and the master of the mine are met together in the log cabin opposite the great gray dump; in the cabin builded by Garvin, but which now serves as the office of the superintendent of the Midas. Sorrow still sits between, and Denby would give place to it.

"Put it off till to-morrow, Jeffard," he says. "Neither of us is fit to talk business to-night."

"No, it mustn't be put off. I gave him my promise, and I mean to make it good while time serves. Have you any one here who is competent to witness a legal document?"

"Yes; Halsey is a notary public."

"Good. Sit down at that desk and draw up a writing transferring my interest in the Midas to Stephen Elliott and Richard Bartrow, trustees."

"What's that? Trustees for whom?"

"For James Garvin."

The master of men leans back in his chair, his eyes narrowing and the little frown of perplexity radiating fan-like above them.

"Jeffard, do you mean to say that you are going to step aside in favor of the man who tried to kill you?"

"You may put it that way, if you choose. It would have been done long ago if I had been able to find the man."

"And you stepped into the breach a year ago and secured his property for him because he had put himself out of the running and couldn't? You've touched me on the raw, Jeffard. It's my business to size people up, and you have fairly outflanked me. A blind man might have seen the drift of it, but I didn't; I thought you had robbed him. Why didn't you give it a name?"

"I had no thought of concealment until you warned me. Garvin was a criminal in the eye of the law, and the least I could do for him was to turn the tide of public opinion in his favor."

"Well, you did it; but just the same, you might have passed the word to me. It wouldn't have gone any farther, and I should have felt a good bit easier in my mind."

"Perhaps; but you will pardon me if I say that I wasn't considering you in the matter. I knew better than to defeat my own end. If I had told you the truth at the time, you would not have believed it; you would have struck hands with your own theory that Garvin had attempted to rob me, and you would have talked and acted accordingly."

"What makes you say I wouldn't have believed the truth?"

"It would have been merely a declaration of intention at the time, and you would have said that it didn't square with human nature as you know it. Bartrow knew, and he went over to the majority. But that is neither here nor there. Will you draw up the writing?"

Denby goes to the desk and writes out the transfer, following Jeffard's dictation. When it is signed and acknowledged, Jeffard slips his final anchor.

"I presume you will want to make a new operating contract with the trustees, or with Garvin, and in that case you will want to cancel the old one. I haven't my copy of it with me, but I'll mail it to you when I get back to Denver."

Denby is making a pretense of rummaging in the pigeonholes of the desk to cover a small struggle which has nothing to do with the superintendent's files. When the struggle is fought to a finish, he turns suddenly and holds out his hand.

"Jeffard, that night when we wrangled it out up yonder on the old dump I said some things that I shouldn't have said if you had seen fit to be a little franker with me. Will you forget them?"

Jeffard takes the proffered hand and wrings it gratefully. "Thank you for that, Denby," he says; "it's timely. I feel as if I'd like to drop out and turn up on some other planet. This thing has cost me pretty dear, one way with another."

"It'll come out all right in the end," asserts the master; and then: "But you mustn't forget that the cost of it is partly of your own incurring. It's a rare failing, but there is such a thing as being too close-mouthed. You've made out your case, after a fashion, and I'm not going to appeal it; but your postulate was wrong. Human nature is not as incredulous of good intentions as the cynics would make it out to be. You might have told a few of us without imperilling Garvin."

"I meant to do it; as I say, I did tell Bartrow that morning when I raced Garvin across the range and into Aspen. But he and every one else drew the other conclusion, and I was too stubborn to plead my own cause. The stubbornness became a mania with me after a time, and I had a fit of it no longer ago than last night. I let Lansdale die believing that he had argued me into promising to make restitution. We were coming down here to-day to set the thing in train, and, of course, he would have learned the whole truth; but for one night--"

"For one night you would let him have the comfort of believing that he had brought it about," says Denby, quickly. "That wasn't what you were going to say, but it's the truth, and you know it. I know the feel of it; you've reached the point where you can get some sort of comfort out of holding your finger in the fire. Suppose you begin right here and now to take a little saner view of things. What are your plans?"

"I haven't any."

"Are you open to an offer?"

"From you?--yes."

"Good. I'm unlucky enough to have some mining property in Mexico, and I've got to go down there and set it in order, or send some one to do it for me. Will you go?"

Jeffard's reply is promptly acquiescent.

"Gladly; if you think I am competent."

"I don't think,--I know. Can you start at short notice?"

"The sooner the better. I said I should like to drop out and turn up on some other planet: that will be the next thing to it."

From that the talk goes overland to the affairs of a century-old silver mine in the Chihuahuan mountains, and at the end of it Jeffard knows what is to be done and how he is to go about the doing of it. Denby yawns and looks at his watch.

"It's bedtime," he says. "Shall we consider it settled and go over to the bunk-shack?"

"I have a letter to write," says Jeffard. "Don't wait for me."

"All right. You'll find what you need in the desk,--top drawer on the right. Come over when you get ready," and the promoter leaves his late owner in possession of the superintendent's office.

Judging from the number of false starts and torn sheets, the writing of the letter proves to be no easy matter; but it is begun, continued, and ended at length, and Jeffard sits back to read it over.

"MY DEAR BARTROW:

"When this reaches you, you will have had my telegram of to-day telling you all there is to tell about Lansdale's death. You must forgive me if I don't repeat myself here. It is too new a wound--and too deep--to bear probing, even with a pen.

"What I have to say in this letter will probably surprise you. Last night, in our last talk together, Lansdale told me that you know Garvin's whereabouts. Acting upon that information, I have to-night executed a transfer of the Midas to yourself and Stephen Elliott, trustees for Garvin. By agreement with Denby, I cancel my working contract with him, and you, or Garvin, can make another for the unexpired portion of the year on the same terms,--which is Denby's due. You will find the accrued earnings of the mine from the day of my first settlement with Denby deposited in the Denver bank in an account which I opened some months ago in the names of yourself and Elliott, trustees. Out of the earnings I have withheld my wages as a workman in the mine last winter, and a moderate charge for caretaking since.

"That is all I have to say, I think, unless I add that you are partly responsible for the delay in Garvin's reinstatement. If you had trusted me sufficiently to tell me what you told Lansdale, it would have saved time and money, inasmuch as I have spared neither in the effort to trace Garvin. I told you the truth that morning in Leadville, but it seems that your loyalty wasn't quite equal to the strain put upon it by public rumor. I don't blame you greatly. I know I had done what a man may to forfeit the respect of his friends. But I made the mistake of taking it for granted that you and Lansdale, and possibly one other, would still give me credit for common honesty, and when I found that you didn't it made me bitter, and I'll be frank enough to say that I haven't gotten over it yet."

The letter pauses with the little outflash of resentment, and he takes the pen to sign it. But in the act he adds another paragraph.

"That is putting it rather harshly, and just now I'm not in the mood to quarrel with any one; and least of all with you. I am going away to be gone indefinitely, and I don't want to give you a buffet by way of leave-taking. But the fact remains. If you can admit it and still believe that the old-time friendship is yet alive in me, I wish you would. And if you dare take word from me to Miss Elliott, I'd be glad if you would say to her that my sorrow for what has happened is second only to hers."

The letter is signed, sealed, and addressed, and he drops it into the mail-box. The lamp is flaring in the night wind sifting in through the loosened chinking, and he extinguishes it and goes out to tramp himself weary in the little cleared space which had once been Garvin's dooryard. It is a year and a day since he wore out the midwatch of that other summer night on the eve of the forthfaring from the valley of dry bones, and he recalls it and the impassioned outburst which went to the ending of it. Again he turns his face toward the far-away city of the plain, but this time his eyes are dim when the reiterant thought slips into speech. "God help me!" he says. "How can I ever go to her and tell her that I have failed!"

CHAPTER XXXV

THE news of Lansdale's death came with the shock of the unexpected to the dwellers in the metamorphosed cabin on the upslope of Topeka Mountain, albeit no one of the three of them had ventured to hope for anything more than a reprieve as the outcome of the jaunt afield. But the manner of his death at the time when the reprieve seemed well assured was responsible for the shock and its sorrowful aftermath; and if Constance grieved more than Bartrow or her cousin, it was only for the reason that the heart of compassion knows best the bitterness of infraction.

"It's a miserably comfortless saying to offer you, Connie, dear, but we must try to believe it is for the best," said Myra, finding Constance re-reading Jeffard's telegram by the light of her bedroom lamp.

Constance put her arms about her cousin's neck, and the heart of compassion overflowed. "For unto every one that hath shall be given, but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath," she sobbed. "Of all the things he had set his heart upon life was the least,--was only the means to an end: and even that was taken from him."

"No, not taken, Connie; he gave it, and gave it freely. He did for another what his friend was trying to do for him."

At the reference to Jeffard, Constance went to stand before the crackling fire of fir-splinters on the hearth. After a time she said: "Do you suppose Mr. Jeffard will come here to tell us about it?"

Myra's answer was a query.

"Does he know you are here?"

"No, I think not."

"Then he will be more likely to go to Denver."

Connie's gaze was in the fire, and she swerved aside from the straight path of inference.

"He will write to Dick," she said. "I should like to read the letter when it comes, if I may."

Myra promised, and so it rested; but when Jeffard's letter came, and Bartrow had shared its astounding news with his wife, Myra was for rescinding her promise.

"I don't know why she shouldn't read it," said Dick. "She has always been more or less interested in him, and it will do her a whole lot of good to know that we were all off wrong. Jeffard's little slap at me hits her, too, but she won't mind that."

"No," said Myra; "I was thinking of something else,--something quite different."

"Is it sayable?"

They were sitting on the steps of the extended porch. The night-shift was at work in the Myriad below, and the rattle and clank of a dump-car coming out postponed her answer. When the clangor subsided she glanced over her shoulder.

"She can't hear," said Bartrow. "She's in the sitting-room reading to Uncle Steve."

"I'm not sure that it is sayable, Dick. But for the last two days I've been wondering if we weren't mistaken about something else, too,--about Connie's feeling for Mr. Lansdale. She is sorry, but not quite in the way I expected she would be."

"What has that got to do with Jeffard's letter?" demanded the downright one. His transplantings of perspicacity were not yet sufficiently acclimated to bloom out of season.

"Nothing, perhaps." She gave it up as unspeakable, and went to the details of the business affair. "Shall you tell Garvin at once?"

"Sure."

"How fortunate it is that he and Uncle Stephen came in to-day."

"Yes. They were staked for another month, and I didn't look for them until they were driven in for more grub. But Garvin says the old man is about played out. He's too old. He can't stand the pick and shovel in this altitude at his age. We'll have to talk him out of it and run him back to Denver some way or other."

"Can't you make this trusteeship an excuse? If Garvin needed a guardian at first, he will doubtless need one now."

Bartrow nodded thoughtfully. Another car was coming out, and he waited until the crash of the falling ore had come and gone.

"Jeffard knew what he was about all the time; knew it when he wrote this letter just as well as he did when he shouldered the curse of it to keep a possible lynching party from hanging Garvin. That's why he put it in trust. He knew Garvin had gone daft and thrown it away once, and he was afraid he might do it again."

"Will he?" asked the wife.

"I guess not. I believe he has learned his lesson. More than that, Jim's as soft as mush on the side next the old man. If I can make out to tie Uncle Steve's welfare up in the deal, Garvin will come to the front like a man."

"Where is Garvin now?"

"He is down at the bunk-house."

Myra rose. "I suppose you want to get it over with. Let me have the letter, if you won't need it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Carry Connie off to her room and keep her busy with this while you and Uncle Stephen fight it out with the new millionaire," she said. "I don't envy you your part of it."

Bartrow laughed, and the transplantings put forth a late shoot.

"Come to think of it, I don't know as I envy you yours," he retorted. "She's all broke up about Uncle Steve's health and Lansdale's death now, and she'll have a fit when she finds out how she has been piling it on to Jeffard when he didn't deserve it."

It was an hour later, and the day-men smoking on the porch of the boarding-house had gone to bed, when the husband and wife met again midway of the path leading up from the shaft-house of the Myriad to the metamorphosed cabin. Bartrow had walked down to the boarding-house with Garvin, and Myra's impatience had sent her down the path to meet him. Dick gave her his arm up the steep ascent, and drew her to a seat on the lowest of the porch steps.

"Where is Connie?" he inquired, anticipating an avalanche of questions, out of which he would have to dig his way without fear of interruption.

"She is with her father. Begin at the beginning, and tell me all about it. What did Garvin say? Is he going to be sensible?"

"There isn't so much to tell as there might be," Dick said, smothering a mighty prompting to tell the major fact first. "Garvin took it very sensibly, though a body could see that the lamplight was a good bit too strong for his eyes. He had to try three or four times before he could speak, and then all he could say was 'Thirds, Steve, thirds.'"

"'Thirds?' What did he mean by that?"

Bartrow hesitated for a moment, as a gunner who would make sure of the priming before he jerks the lanyard.

"Did it ever occur to you that any one else besides Garvin and Jeffard might be interested in the Midas?"

"Why, no!"

"It didn't to me. I don't know why, but I never thought of it, though I knew well enough that Jim never in all his life went prospecting on a grub-stake of his own providing. He didn't that summer three years ago when he drove the tunnel on the Midas."

Myra's lips were dry, and she had to moisten them to say, "Who was it, Dick?"

"Who should it be but our good old Uncle Steve? Of course, he'd forgotten all about it, and there he stood, wringing Garvin's hand and trying to congratulate him; and Jim hanging on to the back of his chair and saying, 'Thirds, Steve, I say thirds.' Garvin made him understand at last, and then the old man melted down into his chair and put his face in his hands. When he took it out again it was to look up and say, 'You're right, Jim; of course it's thirds,' and then he asked me where Jeffard was."

Myra's voice was unsteady, but she made shift to say what there was to be said; and Bartrow went on.

"After a bit we got down to business and straightened things out. A third interest in the Midas is to be set apart for Jeffard, to be rammed down his throat when we find him, whether he will or no. Uncle Steve will go back to Denver and set up housekeeping again; and Garvin,--but that's the funny part of the whole shooting-match. Garvin refuses to touch a dollar of the money as owner; insists on leaving it in trust, just as it is now; and made me sit down there and then and write his will."

An outcoming car of ore drowned Myra's exclamation of surprise.

"Fact," said Bartrow. "He reserves an income to be paid to him at Uncle Steve's discretion and mine, and at his death his third goes,--to whom, do you suppose?"

"Indeed, I can't imagine,--unless it is to Connie."

"Not much! It's to be held in trust for Margaret Gannon's children."

"For Margaret,--why, she hasn't any children! And besides, he doesn't know her!"

"Don't you fool yourself. He knows she hasn't any children, but he's living in hopes. I told you there was something between them from the way Garvin turned in and nursed the old blacksmith before Margaret came. You wouldn't believe it, because they both played the total-stranger act; but that was one time when I got ahead of you, wasn't it?"

"Yes; go on."

"Well, I made out the will, 'I, James Garvin, being of sound mind,' and so on; and Uncle Steve and I witnessed it. But on the way down to the bunk-shanty just now I pinned Garvin up against the wall and made him tell me why. He knew Margaret when she was in the Bijou, and asked her to marry him. She was honest enough even then to refuse him. It made me want to weep when I remembered how she had been mixed up with Jeffard."

Myra was silent for a full minute, and when she spoke it was out of the depths of a contrite heart.

"I made you believe that, Dick, against your will; and you were right, after all. Mr. Jeffard was only trying to help Connie's poor people through Margaret, though why he should do that when he was withholding a fortune from Uncle Stephen is still a mystery."

"That is as simple as twice two," said the husband. "Didn't I tell you? Garvin had no occasion to tell him who his grub-staker was in the first place, and no chance to do it afterward. Jeffard didn't know,--doesn't know yet."

Myra went silent again, this time for more than a minute.

"I have learned something, too, Dick; but I am not sure that I ought to tell it," she said, after the interval.

"I can wait," said Bartrow cheerfully. "I've had a full meal of double-back-action surprises as it is."

"This isn't a surprise; or it wouldn't be if we hadn't been taking too much for granted. I tolled Connie off to her room with the letter, as I said I would; and she--she had a fit, as you prophesied."

"Of course," says Dick. "It hurts her more than anything to make a miscue on the charitable side."

"Yes, but"--

"But what?"

"I'll tell you sometime, Dick, but not now. It is too pitiful."

"I can wait," said Bartrow again; and his lack of curiosity drove her into the thick of it.

"If you knew you'd want to do something,--as I do, only I don't know how. Isn't it pretty clear that Mr. Jeffard cares a great deal for Connie?"

"Oh, I don't know about that. What makes you think so?" says the obvious one.

"A good many little things; some word or two that Margaret has let slip, for one of them. How otherwise would you explain his eagerness to help Connie?"

"On general principles, I guess. She's plenty good enough to warrant it."

"Yes, but it wasn't 'general principles' in Mr. Jeffard's case. He is in love with Connie, and"--

"And she doesn't care for him. Is that it?"

"No, it isn't it; she does care for him. I fairly shocked it out of her with the letter, and that is why I oughtn't to tell it, even to you. It is too pitiful!"

Bartrow shook his head in cheerful density. "Your philosophy's too deep for me. If they are both of one mind, as you say, I don't see where the pity comes in. Jeffard isn't half good enough for her, of course; he made a bally idiot of himself a year ago. But if she can forget that, I'm sure we ought to."

"I wasn't thinking of that. But don't you see how impossible this Midas tangle makes it? He won't take his third, you may be very sure of that; and when he finds out that Connie has a daughter's share in one of the other thirds, it will seal his lips for all time. People would say that he gave up his share only to marry hers."

Bartrow got upon his feet and helped her to rise. "You'll take cold sitting out here in the ten-thousand-foot night," he said; and on the top step of the porch-flight she had his refutation of her latest assertion.

"You say people would talk. Doesn't it strike you that Jeffard is the one man in a thousand who will mount and ride regardless?--who will smile and snap his fingers at public opinion? That's just what he's been doing all along, and he'll do it again if he feels like it. Let's go in and congratulate the good old uncle while we wait."



CHAPTER XXXVI

THE day train from the south ran into the early winter twilight at Acequia, and into the night at Littleton; and the arc stars of the city, resplendent with frosty aureoles, were brightly scintillant when Jeffard gave his hand-bag to the porter and passed out through the gate at the Union Depot. By telegraphic prearrangement, he was to meet Denby in Denver to make his report upon the Chihuahuan silver mine; but when he made inquiry at the hotel he was not sorry to find that the promoter had not yet arrived. It is a far cry from Santa Rosalia to Denver; as far as from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth; and he was grateful for a little breathing space in which to synchronize himself.

But after dinner, and a cigar burned frugally in the great rotunda, where the faces of all the comers and goers were unfamiliar, the homesickness of the returned exile came upon him, and he went out to grapple with it in the open air. Faring absently from street to street, with his hands thrust into his overcoat pockets and memory plowing its furrow deep in a field which had lain fallow through many toil-filled weeks, he presently found himself drifting by squares and street-crossings toward Capitol Hill, and out and beyond to a broad avenue and past a house with a veranda in front and a deep-bayed window at the side. There were lights in the house, and an air of owner's occupancy about the place; and on the veranda a big man was tramping solidly up and down, with the red spark at the end of his cigar appearing and disappearing as he passed and repassed the windows.

Jeffard saw the man and saw him not. The memory-plow had gone deeper, and the winter night changed places with a June morning, with the sun shining aslant on the wide veranda, and a young woman in a belted house-gown with loose sleeves tiptoeing on the arm of a clumsy chair while she caught up the new growth of a climbing rose. Just here the plow began to tear up rootlets well-buried but still sensitive; and Jeffard turned about abruptly and set his face cityward.

But once again in the region of tall buildings and peopled sidewalks, the thought of the crowded lobby and the loneliness of it assailed him afresh, and he changed his course again, being careful to go at right angles to the broad avenue with its house of recollection. A little way beyond the peopled walks the church bells began to ring out clear and melodious on the frosty air, and he remembered what the uncalendared journey had made him forget; that it was Sunday. Pacing thoughtfully, with the transit-hum of the city behind him and the quiet house-streets ahead, and the plow still shearing the sod of the fallow field, he wondered if Constance Elliott would be among the churchgoers. It was an upflash of the old cynicism which prompted the retort that it was improbable; that the Christianity for which she stood was not found in the churches. But the Puritan blood in him rose up in protest at that, and in the rebound the open doors of a church on the opposite side of the way beckoned him.

He crossed the street and entered. The organist was playing the voluntary, and a smart young man with a tuberoso in his buttonhole held up the finger of invitation.

"Not too far forward," Jeffard whispered; but the young man seemed not to have heard, since he led the way up the broad centre aisle to a pew far beyond the strangers' precinct.

The pew was unoccupied, and Jeffard went deep into it, meaning to be well out of the way of later comers. But when the finale of the voluntary merged by harmonious transpositions into the key of the opening hymn, the other sittings in the pew were still untaken, and Jeffard congratulated himself. There be times when partial isolation, even in a sparsely filled church, is grateful; and the furrows in the fallow field were still smoking from their recent upturning.

Jeffard stood in the hymn-singing, and bowed his head at the prayer, not so much in reverence as in deference to time, place, and encompassments. Since the shearing of the plowshare filled his ears, the words of the beseeching were lost to him, but he was sufficiently alive to his surroundings to know that the pew filled quietly at the beginning of the prayer; and sufficiently reserved afterward to deny himself so much as a glance aside at his nearest neighbor.

How long he would have sat staring abstractedly at the pictured window beyond the choir must remain a matter for conjecture. The minister had given out the psalm, and Jeffard stood up with the others. Whereupon he saw of necessity that his neighbor was a woman, so small that the trimmings on her modest walking hat came barely to his shoulder; saw this, and a moment later was looking down into a pair of steadfast gray eyes, deep-welled and eloquent, as she handed him an open book with the leaf turned down.

He took the book mechanically, with mute thanks, but afterward he saw and heard nothing for which the evensong in St. Cyril's-in-the-Desert could justly be held responsible, being lifted to a seventh heaven of ecstasy far more real than that depicted in the glowing periods of the preacher. He made the most of it, knowing that it would presently vanish, and that he should have to come to earth again. And not by whispered word or sign of recognition would he

mar the beatitude of it. Only once, when he put aside the book she had given him and looked on with her, did he suffer himself to do more than to enjoy silently and to the full the sweet pleasure of her nearness.

Under the circumstances it was not singular that his by-glancings did not go beyond her; and that Dick Bartrow's hearty handclasp and stage-whisper greeting at the close of the service should take him by surprise. This he endured as one in a dream; also the introduction to a radiant young woman with whom Bartrow presently led the way into the stream of decorously jostling outgoers pouring down the great aisle. That left Jeffard to follow with the small one; and he was still groping his way through the speechless ravishment of it when they overtook the Bartrows on the sidewalk. Dick promptly broke the spell.

"Well, well!" he began. "Nothing surprises me any more; otherwise I should say you are about the last man on top of earth that I'd expect to run up against in church. Don't say 'same here,' because I do go when I'm made to. Where in the forty-five states and odd territories did you drop from?"

"Not from any one of them," laughed Jeffard; and Myra remarked that Connie's hand was still on his arm. "I am just up from Old Mexico."

"And you made a straight shoot for a church--for our church and our pew. Good boy! You knew right where to find us on a Sunday evening, didn't you?"

Jeffard laughed again. Since a time unremembered of him it had not been so easy to laugh and be glad.

"Don't believe him, Mrs. Bartrow," he protested. "My motive was a little mixed, I'll confess, but it was altogether better than that. I was passing, and it occurred to me that I hadn't seen the inside of an American church for a long time."

"Or of any other kind, I'll be bound," Bartrow amended; and then, in a spirit of sheer ruthlessness: "Why don't you say something, Connie? Call him down and make him tell the truth about it."

"You don't give any one a chance to say anything," retorts the quiet one, with a summer-lightning flash of the old mock-antagonism. And then to Jeffard: "We are all very glad to see you again, Mr. Jeffard. Will you be in town long?"

Bartrow took the words out of his mouth and made answer for him.

"Of course he will; he is going to settle down and be home-folks--aren't you, Jeffard? Fall in and let's walk to where we can wrestle it out without freezing. It's colder than ordinary charity standing here."

Now the way to his hotel lay behind him and Jeffard hesitated. Whereupon Bartrow turned with a laugh derisive.

"Come on, you two. Have you forgotten the formula, Jeffard? I'll prompt you, and you can say it over after me. 'Miss Elliott, may I have the pleasure of seeing you'--"

Myra pounced upon the mocker and dragged him away; and Constance cut in swiftly.

"You mustn't mind what Dick says. He calls going to church 'dissipation,' and he is never quite responsible afterward. Won't you go home with us, Mr. Jeffard?"

Jeffard murmured something about a hotel and an appointment, but he had been waiting only for an intimation that he was forgiven. So they went on together, walking briskly, as the frosty night demanded, but they were not able to overtake the twain in advance. For a time they were both tongue-tied, and for a wonder it was the man who first rose superior to the entanglements of memory. But he was careful to choose the safest of commonplaces for a topic. They were ascending Capitol Hill, and by way of a beginning he said, "Are you living in this part of the city now?"

"Yes; in the old place on Colfax. Dick ran across the owner in California last autumn and bought it."

"It is a very pleasant place," Jeffard ventured, still determined to keep on ground of the safest.

"Do you know it?" she said, quickly.

"Oh, yes;--er--that is, I know where it is. I passed it one morning a long time ago."

"While we were living there?"

"Yes."

Silence again for one entire square and part of another. Then she said, "How did you know it was our house?"

He laid hold of his courage and told the truth. "I met your father a block or two down the avenue and I was hoping I

might come upon the place where you lived. I found it. You were on the veranda, tying up the new shoots of a climbing rose."

"My 'Marechal Niel,'" she said. "It is dead now; they let it freeze last winter."

He held his peace for a time, but the rejoinder strove for speech, and had it, finally.

"The memory of it lives," he said. "I shall always see you as I saw you that morning, whatever comes between. You had on some sort of a dress that reminded me of the old Greek draperies, and you were standing on the arm of a big chair."

They were at the gate, and she let him open it for her. Bartrow and Myra were waiting for them at the veranda step. He realized that the ground was no longer safe, and would have taken his leave at the door. But Dick protested vigorously.

"No, you don't--drop out again like a ship in a fog. We've been laying for you, Uncle Steve and I, ever since you absconded last summer, and you don't get away this time without taking your medicine. Run him in there, Connie, and hang on to him while I go get my slippers and a cigar."

"There" was the cozy library, with a soft-coal fire burning cheerily in the grate, and the book-lined walls inviting enough to beckon any homeless one. But Jeffard was far beyond any outreaching of encompassments inviting or repellent. Constance drew up a chair for him before the fire, but he stood at the back of it and looked down upon her.

"Miss Elliott, there is something that I should like to tell you about--if it is far enough in the past," he said, when they were alone.

She was sitting with clasped hands, and there was a look in her eyes in the swift upglancing that he could not fathom. So he waited for her to give him leave.

"Is it about Mr. Lansdale?" she asked.

"Yes. I was with him up to the last, and I thought that--that you might like to know what I can tell you."

She gave him liberty, and he told the story of the jaunt afield, dwelling chiefly on the day-to-day improvement in Lansdale's health, and stumbling a little when he came to speak of their last evening together.

"It was a hard blow for me," he said, at the end of it, and his voice was low and unsteady with emotion. "You know what had gone before--what I had lost and couldn't regain; and having failed at all points I had hoped to succeed in this: to bring him back to you sound and well. And when the possibility was fairly within reach it was taken out of my hands forever."

She was silent for a little time, fighting a sharp battle with reticence new-born and masterful. When she spoke it was as one who is constrained to walk with bare feet in a thorny path of frankness.

"To bring him back to me, you say; and in your letter to Dick you said that your sorrow was second only to mine. Was he not your friend, as well as mine?"

"I loved him," said Jeffard, simply; "but not as you did."

Again the struggle was upon her, and for a moment she thought that the sound of Dick's returning footsteps would be the signal of a blessed release. But the heart of sincerity would not be denied.

"Let there be no more misunderstandings," she said, bravely. "We have all wronged you so deeply that you have a right to know the truth. Mr. Lansdale was my friend--as he was yours."

"But he meant to be more," Jeffard persisted--"and if he had come back with the courage of health to help him say it, you would not have denied him."

She made a little gesture of dissent.

"His health had nothing to do with it. And--and he said it before he went away."

Jeffard smiled. "You have halved the bitterness of it for me--as you would have lessened my reward if I had succeeded in bringing him back alive and well. My motive was mixed, as most human promptings are,--I can see that now,--but the better part of it was a desire to prove to you that I could do it for your sake. My debt to you is so large that nothing short of self-effacement can ever discharge it."

"How can you say that!" she burst out. "Wasn't I one of the three who ought to have believed in you?--the one who promised and failed and made it harder for you at every turn? You owe me nothing but scorn."

He contradicted her gravely. "I owe you everything that has been saved out of the wreck of the man who once sat beside you in the theatre and found fault with the world for his own shortcomings. You are remorseful now because you think you misjudged me; but you must believe me when I tell you that it was my love for you that saved me, at the end of the ends,--that kept me from doing precisely what you thought I had done. It was a fearful temptation. Garvin had fairly tossed the thing into the abyss."

"I know; but it was only a temptation, and you did not yield to it."

"No; I was able to put it aside in the strength born of four words of yours. At a time when I had forgotten God and so was willing to think that He had forgotten me, you said 'I believe in you.' You remember it?"

She nodded assent, looking up with shining eyes to say, "Don't make me ashamed that I hadn't the strength to go on believing in you."

"Don't say that. You have nothing to regret. My silence was the price of Garvin's safety, at first, and I knew what the cost would be when I determined to pay it. Later on the fault was mine; but then I found that I had unconsciously been counting upon blind loyalty; yours, and Dick's, and Lansdale's;--counting upon it after I had done everything to make it impossible. I had told Dick in the beginning, and I tried to tell Lansdale. Dick wanted to believe in me,--has wanted to all along, I think,--but Lansdale had drawn his own conclusions, and he made my explanation fit them. It hurt, and I gave place to bitterness."

"And yet you would have saved him for--for--"

"For that which I couldn't have myself. Yes; but you know the motive."

She met his gaze with a new light shining in the steadfast eyes. "I am not worthy," she said, softly; and he went quickly to stand beside her.

"You are worthy; worthy of the best that any man can give you, Constance. How little I have to offer you, beyond a love that was strong enough to stand aside for the sake of your happiness, you know. Ever since that afternoon when you strove with me for my own soul I've been living on your compassion, and it is very sweet--but I want more. May I hope to win more--in time?"

She shook her head, and his heart stopped beating. But it came alive again with a tumultuous bound at the words of the soft-spoken reply.

"You won it long ago, so long that I've forgotten when and how. And it's strong, too, like yours. I've tried hard enough to starve it, but it has lived--lived on nothing."

She was sitting in a low willow rocker, and the distance between them was altogether impossible. So he went down on one knee and put his arms about her; and but for his manhood would have put his face in her bosom and wept.

"Do you really mean that, Constance?" he said, when he had drunk his fill from the deep wells in the loving eyes.

"I do."

"In spite of what you believed I had done to Garvin, and of what you believed I was capable of doing with Margaret?"

"In spite of everything. Wasn't it dreadful?"

"It was--" There was no superlative strong enough, though he sought for it painfully and with tears. "God help me, sweetheart, I believe I shall go mad with the joy of it." And having said that, speech forsook him, and the silence that is golden came between. After a while she broke it to say:

"Dick is good, isn't he?--to be so long finding his slippers and the cigar."

"Dick is a man and a brother. I wonder if we can persuade him to give me a place on the Myriad."

"You wouldn't take it."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you own an undivided third of a richer mine than the Little Myriad, and--and you are going to marry

another third," she said, with sweet audacity.

There was a hassock convenient, and he drew it up to sit at her feet.

"Break it as gently as you can," he entreated. "My cup is too full to hold much more. Besides, I've been in Mexico for the last three months, and nothing happens there."

"It's the Midas," she explained, beginning in the midst. "You saved it for Garvin, but he was only a half-owner."

"And the other?"

"Was my father. When it came to the apportionment they both said 'thirds,' and that is what poppa and Dick are waiting to say to you now."

He found his feet rather unsteadily.

"I can't take it," he said; "you know I can't. It would be too much like taking a reward for an act of simple justice. Moreover, I have my reward, and it isn't to be spoken of in the same day with any Midas of them all. I'll go and tell them so."

She rose and stood beside him, lifting the loving eyes to his. The soft glow of the firelight made a golden aureole of the red-brown hair, and the sweet lips were tremulous.

"If you must, Henry. But loving-kindness isn't always in giving and serving and relinquishing. My father has his ideal of justice, too, and so has James Garvin. But for you, they say, the Midas would never have been found, or, having been found, would straightway have been lost again. I know the money is nothing to you,--to us two, who have so much; but won't you make a little concession, a little sacrifice of pride,--for their sakes, Henry?"

He took her face between his hands and bent to kiss the lips of pleading.

"Not for their sakes, nor for all the world beside, my beloved; but always and always for yours. Come; let us go together."

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