# A GIRL OF THE KLONDIKE

VICTORIA CROSS

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# A GIRL OF THE KLONDIKE

**BY**

## VICTORIA CROSS

*Quid non mortalia pectora cogis*
*Auri sacra fames?*

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***A Girl of the Klondike is now issued***

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# CHAPTER I

## A NIGHT IN TOWN

Night had fallen over Alaska—black, uncompromising night; a veil of impenetrable darkness had dropped upon the snow wastes and the ice-fields and the fettered Yukon, sleeping under its ice-chains, and upon the cruel passes where the trails had been made by tracks of blood. Day by day, as long as the light of day—God's glorious gift to man—had lasted, these trails across the passes, between the snowy peaks, the peaks themselves, had been the theatre of hideous scenes of human cruelty, of human lust and greed, of human egoism. Day by day a slow terrible stream of humanity had wound like a dark and sluggish river through these passes, bringing with it sweat and toil and agony, torture and suffering and death. As long as the brilliant sun in the placid azure of the summer heavens above had guided them, bands of men had laboured and fought and struggled over these passes, deaf to all pity or mercy or justice, deaf to all but the clamour of greed within them that was driving them on, trampling

down the weak and the old, crushing the fallen, each man clutching and grasping his own, hoarding his strength and even refusing a hand to his neighbour, starving the patient beasts of burden they had brought with them, friends who were willing to share their toil without sharing their reward, driving on the poor staggering strengthless brutes with open knives, and clubbing them to death when they fell beneath their loads with piteous eyes, or leaving them to freeze slowly where they lay, pressing forward, hurrying, fighting, slaughtering, so the men went into the gold camps all the summer, and the passes were the silent witnesses of the horror of it all and of the innocent blood shed. Then Nature herself intervened, and winter came down like a black curtain on the world, and the passes closed up behind the men and were filled with drifts of snow that covered the bones and the blood and the deep miry slides, marked with slipping tracks where struggling, gasping lives had gone out, and the river closed up behind the men and the ice thickened there daily, and the men were in the camps and there was no way out.

And now, in the darkness of the winter night, in the coldness in which no man could live, there was peace. There was no sound, for the snow on the tall pines never melted and never fell, the water in the creeks was solid as the rocks and made no murmur, there was no footfall of bird nor beast, no leaf to rustle, no twig to fall.

But beyond the silent peaks and the desolate passes, beyond the rigid pines, low down in the darkness, there was a reddish glow in the air, a strange, yellowish, quivering mist of light that hovered and moved restlessly, and yet kept its place where it

hung suspended between white earth and black sky. All around was majestic peace and calm and stillness, nature wrapped in silence, but the flickering, wavering mist of light jumped feverishly in the darkness and spoke of man. It was the cloud of restless light that hung over the city of Dawson.

Within the front parlour of the "Pistol Shot," the favourite and most successful, besides being the most appropriately named saloon in Dawson, the cold had been pretty well fought down; a huge stove stood at each end of the room, crammed as full as it would hold with fuel, all windows were tightly closed, and lamps flared merrily against the white-washed walls.

At this hour the room was full, and the single door, facing the bar, was pushed open every half minute to admit one or two or more figures to join the steaming, drinking, noisy crowd within. It was snowing outside. As the door swung open one could see the white sheet of falling flakes in the darkness; the air was full of snow—that cruel, light, dry snow, fine and sharp like powdered ice, borne down on a North wind. The figures that entered brought it in with them, the light frosty powder resting on their furs and lying deep in the upturned rims of their seal caps.

There had been a successful strike made that afternoon, and the men were all excited and eager about it. Every one pressed to the "Pistol Shot" to hear the latest details, to discuss and gossip over it. There was as much talk as digging done in Dawson. Men who had no chance and no means to win success, who owned no claims and never saw gold except in another man's hands, loved to talk work and talk claims and talk gold with the rest. It was

exhilarating and exciting, and there was only that one topic in the world for them. They were like invalids in a small community afflicted by a common disease who never meet without discussing their symptoms. They were all invalids in reality, all suffering from the same horrible plague and fever, the gold fever that was eating into their brains.

At one end of the bar counter, between it and the back wall, a girl was standing idly surveying with indifferent eyes the animated crowd that moved and swayed round her, the men jostling each other in their efforts to push up to the thickly surrounded counter. She was tall rather than short, and her figure well made, showing good lines even in the rough dress she was wearing; long rubber boots came to her knees, where they met her short buckskin skirt, and above this, in place of bodice, she wore merely a rough straight jacket drawn into the waist by a broad leather belt, in which was stuck, not ostentatiously but still sufficiently conspicuously a brace of revolvers. Her hair was cut short, and only a few dark silky rings showed themselves beneath the edge of her sealskin cap, pushed down close to her dark eyebrows. The dark eyes beneath looked out upon the scene before her with a half-disdainful, half-wearied expression which deepened into scorn now and then as she watched the bar-tender rake over the counter double and three times the price of a drink in the generous pinch of gold dust laid there by some miner almost too drunk to stagger to the bar. She had a very attractive face, to which one's eyes would wander again and again trying to reconcile the peculiar resolution, even hardness of the expression with the soft, well-moulded features and the sweet youthful lips full of freshness and colour. The miners took very little notice of her, and

she certainly made no effort to attract it, leaning listlessly against the bar with one elbow on the counter, a silent and motionless spectator of all this excited eager humanity. There was no thought in their mind, no word on their lips just then but gold. Gold! gold! The thought possessed them with a grip on their brains like the grip of fever on the body, and the word sounded pleasant as the sweetest music to their ears. Gold! The syllable went round and passed from mouth to mouth, till the very air seemed to be getting a yellow tint above the grey fumes of tobacco.

Amongst the last batch of incomers was a slim young fellow of twenty odd years, and when he had worked his way with difficulty up to the crowded counter, he found himself near the girl's corner. She looked at him, letting her dark eyes wander critically over his face. He formed a strong contrast to the figures around him, being slight and delicate in build, with a pale good-looking face that had a tender sympathetic expression like a woman's. Feeling the girl's gaze upon him, he glanced her way, and then having looked once, looked again. After a series of glances between drinks from his glass, the furtive looks began to amuse the girl, and the next time their eyes met she laughed openly, and they both spoke simultaneously.

"You're a new comer, aren't you?" she said.

"I haven't seen you here before," was his remark.

"You might have done, I should think," answered the girl carelessly; "but I don't come here very often, although my father is running this place."

"Are you Poniatovsky's daughter?" he asked in

surprise, unable to connect this splendid young creature with the ugly little Pole he knew as the proprietor of the saloon.

The girl nodded. "Yes, Katrine Poniatovsky is my name—what's yours?"

"Stephen Wood," he answered meekly.

"What have you come here for—mining?" she asked next. Although her queries were direct there was nothing rude in the fresh young voice making them.

The young fellow coloured deeply, the rush of blood passed over his face up to his light smooth hair and deep down into his neck till it was lost beneath his coat collar.

"No—yes—that is—well, I mean—I do mine now," he stammered after a minute.

The girl said nothing, and when Stephen glanced around at her he saw she was regarding him with astonished eyes under elevated eyebrows. This expression made the pretty oval face fairly beautiful, and the young man's heart opened to her.

"I came with the intention of doing some good here amongst the people—in a missionary, religious way I mean, but"—and he stopped again in painful embarrassment.

Katrine laughed.

"For the present you've laid religion aside and you're going to do a little mining and make a fortune, and then the religion can be taken up again," she said.

The young fellow only flushed deeper and turned his glass around nervously on the counter.

"That's all right," the girl said soothingly, after a second. "This place is a corner of the world where we all are different from what we are anywhere else. As soon as men come here they get changed. They forget everything else and just go in for gold. It's a sort of madness that's in the air. You'd be able to missionise somewhere else all right, but here you are obliged just to dig like the rest, you can't help it. Got a claim?"

The young man's face paled again.

"Yes," he answered in a low tone. "It was the claim that tempted me. It's one of the best, I believe, over in the west gulch, only about ten miles from here."

There was a pressing movement round them as some fresh miners came pushing their way through to the bar, and Stephen and Katrine moved away, to make room for them, towards the wall of the room; they put their backs against it and looked over the mass of moving heads towards the door.

"Look at this fellow coming in now," Stephen said to his companion suddenly, as the door swung open, to a mist of whirling whiteness, and two or three men entered: "Henry Talbot. He has the claim next mine in the gulch. He has just struck a fresh lot of gold, and he'll soon be one of the richest men here."

The girl craned her neck to get a good view between the intervening heads, and though she had not been told which of the incoming figures to look at, she fixed her eyes as if by instinct on the right one. A man of rather tall, slight figure, pale face, and marked features. He made his way towards the bar, and then catching Stephen's signals to him, he smiled and came their way.

"What are you doing down here?" he said, speaking to Stephen but looking at Katrine, who in her turn was scanning his face closely.

"Why, enjoying Miss Poniatovsky's society," answered Stephen, with a bow. His friend bowed too, and then they all three laughed and felt instinctively they were friends. There is nothing truer than the saying, "Good looks are perpetual letters of introduction." These three carried their letters of introduction on their faces, and they were all mutually satisfied.

"I know your father quite well," remarked Talbot to her. "This 'Pistol Shot' has been an institution longer than I have been here, but I never knew he had a daughter."

"No," said Katrine, tranquilly, "I daresay not. Father and I quarrelled a little while ago, and since then I have been living by myself in one of those little cabins in Good Luck Row. Do you know it?"

"No," answered Talbot. "I come into town very seldom, only when I want fresh supplies. I stay up at the claim nearly all the time. Do you live all by yourself then?" he added, wondering to himself as he looked at her, for her beauty was quite striking, and she was certainly not over twenty, yet there was something in the strong, noble outlines of her figure, in the tranquil calm of her manner, the self-reliance of her whole bearing, and the business-like way those pistols were thrust in her belt, that modified the wonder a little.

"Quite," she said, with a laugh. "Oh, I've always been accustomed to take care of myself."

"But don't you feel very dull and lonely?"

"Sometimes," answered the girl; "but then I would much rather live alone than with some one I can't agree with."

Both the men knew the drunken habits of old Poniatovsky, so that they silently sympathised with her, and there was a pause as they watched other miners coming in.

"Well," said Katrine after a few seconds, straightening herself from her leaning attitude, "I think I will go home now; this place is getting so full, we shan't be able to breathe soon."

The men looked at each other, and then spoke simultaneously: "May we see you as far as your cabin?"

Katrine smiled, such a pretty arch smile, that dimpled the velvet cheeks and illumined the whole face.

"Why yes, do, I shall be delighted."

They all three went out together: the cold outside seemed so deadly that Talbot drew his collar up over his mouth and nose, unable to face it; the girl, however, did not seem to notice it, but laughed and chatted gaily in the teeth of the wind, as they made their way down the street. It was still snowing—a peculiar fine powdery snow, light and almost imperceptible, filled the whole air. Katrine walked fast with springing steps down the side-walk, and the two men plunged along beside her. Such a side-walk it was: in the summer a mere mass of mud and melted snow and accumulated rubbish—for in Dawson the inhabitants will not take the trouble to convey their refuse to any definite spot, but simply

throw it out from their cabins a few yards from their own door, with a vague notion that they may have moved elsewhere before it rots badly,—now frozen solid but horribly uneven, and worn into deep holes. On the top of this had been laid some narrow planks, covered now by a thick glaze of ice, which rendered them things to be avoided and a line of danger down the middle of the path. Katrine made nothing of these slight inconveniences of the ground, but went swinging on in her large rubber boots, and talking and jesting all the way. At the bottom of the street, at the corner, there was a large wooden building, a double log-cabin turned into a saloon. Lights were fixed outside in tin shades, and the word "Dancing" was painted in white letters on the lintel. Katrine stopped suddenly.

"Let's go in and have a dance," she said, and turned towards Talbot, as if she felt instinctively he was the more likely to assent.

"If you like," he answered from behind his collar. "But can you dance in those boots?"

"Oh, I can dance in anything," said Katrine, laughing.

"Oh, don't go in, come on," remonstrated Stephen, trying to push on past the saloon.

"Why not?" said Katrine; "it's too early to go to bed. Come in, I'll pay," and before either of them could answer she had pushed open the door, and was holding it for them with one hand, while with the other she laid down three quarters on a small trestle inside, where an old man was sitting as doorkeeper.

It was a large oblong room, with a partition running half-way down the middle, dividing it into the front

part, where they were standing and where the bar was, and the back part, which was strictly the dancing portion. Stephen sat down on a bench that faced the inner portion, with the determination of a man who was not to be moved from his seat. At the other side of the room was a low raised platform, where some very seedy-looking musicians were sawing out a jerky tune from their feeble violins. The room was fairly full, and a more heterogeneous collection of human beings Stephen thought he had never seen. There were miners in the roughest and thickest clothing, labourers, packers, a few Indians, some youths in extraordinary attempts at evening dress, some negro minstrels with real dress shirts on and diamond studs, girls with old velvet skirts and odd bodices that didn't match; and here and there, idling against the wall, looking on with absent eyes, one could find a different figure—that of student, or artist, or newspaper correspondent, or gentleman miner; one need not despair of finding almost any type of humanity in that room.

Talbot looked at the girl's bright sparkling face as they entered, and then without a word slipped his arm round her waist and they started over the rough wooden floor.

"You dance fine," observed Katrine, after a long silence, in which they had both given themselves up to the pleasure of mere motion. "I guess you have had lots of practice before you came out here."

Talbot smiled down into her admiring eyes.

"Yes," he said, thinking of the foreign embassies, the English ball-rooms, the many polished floors his feet had known, "in England."

"My! I expect you're a great swell!" remarked the saloon-keeper's daughter.

"All the same," he answered, laughing, "I have never had a partner that danced so perfectly as you do."

"Now that's real kind of you," answered Katrine, with a flush of pleasure, and then they gave themselves up to silent enjoyment again.

At the end of the dance they came back to Stephen, and found him in the same corner, watching the room with a doleful sadness on his face. Katrine, flushed and with sparkling eyes, sat down on the corner of the step beside him.

"You look so miserable," she said. "Come and have a dance with me to cheer you up."

"I can't dance," said Stephen, shortly.

"I'll teach you," volunteered Katrine, leaning her chin on her hands and looking up at him.

Stephen flushed angrily.

"It's not that—my conscience won't allow me to."

"I'll make you forget your conscience," with a very winning smile on her sweet scarlet lips.

Stephen turned towards her and looked at her with a sudden horror in his eyes. The girl looked back at him quite undisconcerted and unmoved. She saw nothing in what she had said. To her, conscience was a tiresome possession, that might, she knew, trouble you suddenly at any time, and if any one could succeed in making you forget you had one, he was surely entitled to your gratitude. Words failed Stephen, he only looked at her with that silent horror

and fear growing in his eyes. Katrine waited what she considered a reasonable time for him to reply or to accept her offer, and then she rose and turned to Talbot, who had been standing looking down upon them both with amusement.

"I'm very thirsty, let's go and have a drink," she said, and they both strolled across the room, and then down into the farther end where the bar was. They elbowed their way to the counter and stood there waiting to be served. Most of the men seemed to know Katrine and made way for her, and she had a word of chaff, or a nod, or a smile or laugh or friendly greeting, for nearly all of them. Talbot noted this, and noted also that though the men seemed familiar, none of them were rude, and though rough enough, there was apparently no disrespect for her. Talbot wondered whether this was due to her morals or her pistols.

"Who's your friend?" asked two or three voices at her side while they stood waiting.

"Mr. Talbot—one of the lucky ones!" replied Katrine promptly. "He has a claim up the gulch that's bringing him in millions—or going to," she added mischievously. The men looked Talbot up and down curiously. Even in his rough miner's clothes, he looked a totally different figure from themselves. Slim and tall and trim, with his well-cut head and figure, with his long neck and refined quiet face, he was a type common enough in Bond Street, London, or on Broadway, New York, but not so common in the Klondike.

"Well, if that's so, pardner," slowly observed a thick-set, crop-haired man, edging close up to him, "you won't mind standing a drink for us?"

"Delighted," returned Talbot, with a pleasant smile. "Give it a name."

The result of taking votes on this motion was the ordering of ten hot whiskies and two hot rums, the latter for himself and Katrine. Talbot never drank spirits at all, and the terrible concoctions of the cheap saloons were an abomination to him. He took his glass, however, to show his friendliness, had it filled nearly to the brim with water, and then could hardly drink it. The fluid seared his throat like red-hot knife-blades. Katrine took hers straight as it was handed across the counter and tossed it down her throat at one gulp, seeming to enjoy it.

"Well, Jim," she said to the young miner next her, "what luck have you had lately?"

"None," he replied gloomily. "Since I left the old place, I've lost all along in the 'Sally White.'"

Talbot thought they were speaking of claims and that the man was referring to his work, and the next minute when Katrine turned her head to him and said rapidly, "The 'Sally White' is the third in the next street," he was rather mystified. He came so little into town, and mixed so little with the uncongenial life and company it offered, that he was ignorant of its prevailing fashion, pastime, and vice—gambling. Fortunes were made and lost across the trestle tables of the saloons quicker and easier than up on the claims. He did not now take much notice of what she had said, nor ask her for an explanation. The girl was handsome and a beautiful dancer, but the company at the bar he did not appreciate at all, and his only idea was to withdraw her from it.

"Are you not ready for another dance?" he said, as

the violin began to squeak out another tune.

Katrine nodded, and they had already turned away, when a voice said over her shoulder, "You won't quite forget me this evening, will you?"

Katrine, without turning her head, answered, "You shall have the next, if you come for it."

Then they started, and for the next ten minutes Talbot tried to forget, to be oblivious of the sordid common scene around him, to get a glimpse back into his old life, which seemed so far away now, as one tries to re-dream a last night's dream.

Stephen, sitting in his corner, whence he had never stirred, watched her sullenly. She was not dancing with Talbot now. Stephen could see that he, too, was watching her from the other side of the room, standing with his back to the wall. She was waltzing with a man Stephen had not seen before, evidently a stranger in every way to the place and the surroundings. He was a young fellow, sufficiently good-looking, and danced with as much ease as if he were in a New York ball-room. His left hand clasped Katrine's and drew it high up close to his neck and shoulder, his right arm enclosed her waist and drew her to him so firmly that the two figures seemed fused into one as they glided together over the imperfect floor. Katrine was giving herself up wholly to the pleasure of the dance. Stephen saw, as her face turned towards him, that her eyes were half closed, and a little smile of deep satisfaction rested on her lips. The young fellow's face showed he was equally absorbed and lost to his surroundings, and there was something in its expression, coupled with the peculiar ease and sway of the two blent forms, which raised a savage and jealous anger in Stephen's breast.

To an absolutely unprejudiced eye, and one that saw only the extreme grace of the movement, which neither their rough clothes, the uneven floor, nor the wretched music could spoil, those two figures made a harmonious and fascinating picture; to Stephen's view, naturally narrow and now darkened by the approaching blindness of a nascent passion, it was a sinful and abhorrent sight. When they floated silently close by him the second time, still lost in their dream of pleasure, and the girl's eyes fell upon him beneath their drooping lids, obviously without seeing him, he started up as if to plant himself in their way, then checked himself, and when they had passed went across the room to where Talbot was standing.

"You see her dancing?" he said excitedly, without any preface.

Talbot nodded.

"Did you notice how they are dancing? that's what I mean."

Talbot laughed slightly. "That's not dancing, that's—"

Stephen flushed a dull red. "It's disgraceful; I'm going to stop her," he muttered.

"My dear fellow, remember you only met her this evening."

"I don't care; she ought not to dance like that."

"I don't like it myself," answered Talbot, "but *you* can't interfere."

"I'm going to."

"You'd much better not make an ass of yourself," returned Talbot, putting his hand on the other's arm.

"Leave me alone," said Stephen, roughly shaking it off, as the two delinquents, still in the same manner, came moving up towards them.

Stephen waited till they were just opposite him, then he stepped forward and seized the girl's arm and dragged it down from the level of the young fellow's neck where he had drawn it. Both the dancers stopped abruptly, and the man faced Stephen with an angry flush and kindling eyes.

"What the devil do you mean, sir?" he said angrily, advancing close to Stephen, who had his eyes fixed on Katrine's face, all warm tints and smiling, as a child's roused from a happy dream.

He ignored the man and addressed her.

"You are not going to dance any more to-night," he said with sombre emphasis.

The young man's face went from red to purple. He put his hand to his hip with an oath, and had half drawn his pistol, when Katrine sprang forward and seized his wrist.

"Now don't be silly; I'm tired anyway, Dick. I'll dance with you to-morrow night. This is Mr. Stephen Wood. Mr. Wood—Mr. Peters. Now let's go and have some drinks. I'm not going to have any fighting over me."

She put herself, smiling, between the two men, who stood glaring at each other in silence. She was annoyed at the dance being broken off, but she saw in Stephen's interference the great tribute paid to her own attraction, and therefore forgave him. At the same time she had no wish to have her vanity further gratified by bloodshed. There was a certain hardness

but no cruelty in her nature. She turned from the men and strolled very slowly in the direction of the bar, and they followed her as if her moving feet were shod with magnets and theirs with steel. Talbot went too, and in a few minutes the four were standing at the counter with glasses in their hands.

Peters kept close beside Katrine, and he and Stephen did not exchange a word. Katrine kept up the chatter between herself and the two other men.

"May I see you home?" Peters said abruptly to her, interrupting the general talk.

"No," returned Katrine, lightly; "to-morrow night, not to-night. I have my escort," and she smiled at Stephen and Talbot.

"I will say good-night then," and Peters, after a slight bow to Talbot, withdrew, taking no notice of Stephen, who since the girl's surrender of the dance had looked very self-contented and happy, and was now standing glass in hand, his eyes fixed upon her face.

"I think I really will go home now," she said. "We've had a jolly time. I only wish you'd have joined us. Are you always so very good?" she said innocently to Stephen. He flushed angrily and said nothing.

A few seconds later they were on the way to Good Luck Row. One of the neatest-looking cabins in it had a light behind its yellow blind, and here Katrine stopped and thanked them for their escort. They would both have liked to see the interior, but she did not suggest their coming in. She wished them good-night very sweetly, and before they had realised it had disappeared inside.

They walked on down the row slowly, side by side. The next thing to do was to find a lodging for the night, and they both felt about ready to appreciate a bed and some hours' rest.

"There's Bill Winters," said Stephen, after a moment's silence. "He said he'd always put us up when we came down town; let's go and try him."

"Do you know where his cabin is?"

"I think so. Turn down here; now it is the next street, where those little black cabins are."

They walked on quickly, following Stephen's directions, and made for a block of cabins that had been pitched over and shone black and glossy in the brilliant moonlight. When they got up to them the men were puzzled, each was so like its neighbour, and Stephen declared he had forgotten the number, though Bill had given it to him.

"Well, try any one," said Talbot, impatiently, as Stephen stopped bewildered. They were standing on the side-walk, now a slippery arch of ice, between two rows of the low black cabins. There was no light in any of them; it was two o'clock; the moon alone shone up and down the street. Talbot felt his moustache freezing to his face, and his left eye being rapidly closed by the lashes freezing together, and that's enough to make a man impatient. Stephen did not move, and Talbot went up himself to the nearest cabin and knocked at the door. They waited a long time, but at last a hand fumbled with the catch inside, and the door was opened a little way; through the crack came out a stream of warm air, the fumes of tobacco and wood smoke; within was darkness.

"Is this Bill Winters'?" Talbot asked, and the door opened wider.

"I guess it is," said a voice in reply. "Why, it's Mr. Talbot and Mr. Wood—come in, sirs."

Talbot and Wood stepped over the threshold into the thick darkness, and the door closed behind them. There was a shuffling sound for an instant as Mr. Winters groped for a light, then he struck a match and lighted up a little tin lamp on the wall. The light revealed a good-sized cabin with a large stove in the centre, round which, with their feet towards it, four or five men rolled up in skins or blankets were lying asleep.

"You want a bed for the night, I expect," Winters went on; "we've all turned in already, but I guess there's room for two more."

Wood and Talbot both expressed their sense of contrition at disturbing him, but Winters would not listen.

"Oh, stow all that," he said, as he set about dragging forward two trestles and covering them with blankets. "You two fellows are so damned polite, you don't seem suited to this town, you don't seem natural here, that's a fact."

He was stepping over and about amongst the prostrate forms, and sometimes on them, but none of them roused themselves sufficiently to do more than utter a sleepy ejaculation and turn into a fresh position. Wood and Talbot stood waiting close against the door. It was half-an-hour before Bill had prepared their beds just as he wanted them, extinguished the lamp again, and retreated to his

own corner. Then darkness and stillness reigned again over the smoky interior.

The low trestles on which the men lay were hard and unyielding, and a doubled-up blanket makes a poor mattress; the air of the cabin was thick and heavy, and the stove, which was close to Talbot's head, having been stuffed to its utmost capacity with damp wood that it might burn through the night, let out thin spirals of acrid smoke from all its cracks. Stephen did not close his eyes long after they had lain down, and there was utter silence in the place except for heavy breathings. He lay with open eyes staring into the thick darkness, a thousand painful wearying thoughts stinging his brain. Talbot, tired and worn out with bodily fatigue, but with that mental calm that comes from an absolute singleness of aim and hope and purpose, fell into a deep and tranquil sleep the moment his head touched the pillow. He lived now but to work; the night had come when he could not work, therefore he slept that he might work again on the morrow.

When the faint grey light of morning came creeping into the low and narrow room, which was not very early, as the nights now were far longer than the days, Talbot was the first of the sleepers to awake. He refilled the stove, which had burned down in the long night hours, and then let himself out.

When he returned Bill and the other men were all stirring, and Stephen sitting up on his trestle rubbing his red and weary-looking eyes.

"Well, pardner, what are you going to do to-day?" he asked a few minutes later, when they had the cabin to themselves for a moment.

"Going to do?" replied Talbot in astonishment, looking up from turning the coffee into the coffee-pot, according to Bill's orders. "Why, if we collect together all the stores we want, and get back to the diggings this afternoon, we shall have about enough to do."

"Oh, I meant about the girl."

"What girl?" queried Talbot, now standing still and staring Stephen in the face.

"The girl you danced with last night—the saloon-keeper's daughter, Katrine Poniatovsky—do you want any more identification?" returned Stephen, sarcastically, opening his heavy lids a little wider.

"Well, *what* about her?" returned Talbot, looking at him expectantly.

"Oh, well, I didn't know; I thought perhaps we wouldn't go back to-day, that's all," answered Stephen, rather sheepishly.

To his sympathetic, impulsive nature, open to every new impression, easily distracted like the butterfly which may be caught by the tint of any chance flower in its path, the incident of last night was much. To Talbot, self-concentrated, determined, and absorbed, it was nothing. He looked at his friend now with something like contempt.

"She's so handsome, and dances so well," Stephen went on hurriedly, feeling foolish and uncomfortable before the other's gaze.

"I did not come here to dance with girls," remarked Talbot shortly, going over to the stove, and the entry of the other men at that moment stopped the

conversation.

They had breakfast together at the rough wood table in the centre of the room. The coffee was the redeeming feature of the meal: from that bright brown stream of boiling liquid the men seemed to gain new life; they watched it lovingly, expectantly, eagerly, as Bill poured it out into their thick cups.

The moment the meal was over Talbot crushed his hat on to his eyes, but before he left the cabin he glanced at Stephen, who was standing irresolutely by the stove.

"I shall get all I want," he said, "and be back here by two at the latest. If you're here then, we can start up together; if not, I shall go ahead;" and he went out.

Stephen lingered by the stove, then he and Bill drifted into a discussion over some of the latest discoveries of gold in Colorado, and they both fell to wondering how much more had been found since their last news, seven months old; and they had a pipe together, and then Bill thought he'd drop down to the "Pistol Shot," and Stephen crushed on his fur cap as determinedly as Talbot had done and went out—to Katrine's number in Good Luck Row.

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# CHAPTER II

## AT THE WEST GULCH

Talbot made his start back to the cabin later than he

intended; he had knocked at Winters' cabin before leaving the town, but all the occupants were out, and there had been no response.

It was afternoon, and already the uncompromising cold of evening had entered into the air; the sky was grey everywhere, and dark, almost black, in front of him; it seemed to hang low, frowning and ominous, over the desolate snowy waste that stretched before him: there was no snow falling yet, only the threat of it written in the black and dreary sky that faced him. His cheeks and chin felt stiff and frozen already, as if a thin mask of ice were drawn over them, and his eyes were sore and tired from the continuous glare of the snow. The little pony beside him plodded along the path patiently, and his master at intervals drew a hand from a comfortable pocket to lay it encouragingly on his neck, at which familiar caress the pony would throw up his head and step out faster for some paces. Talbot felt sorry for the little beast toiling along under his heavy though carefully packed burden of stores, cans of oil, loaves, and every sort of miscellaneous provisions, and would have spoken cheeringly to it, but his lips felt too stiff and painful to form the words, and so man and brute toiled along in silence over the trail under the angry sky. As he walked, Talbot's thoughts went back involuntarily to the picture of Stephen sitting smoking by the stove in the snug interior of Bill Winters' cabin; he felt instinctively, as surely as if he had seen it, that he would so sit through the afternoon, and by evening he would be finding his way down to the nearest saloon and pass the hours there with Katrine; and he compared him vaguely with himself, tired with tramping through the town from store to store, half frozen while he stood to pack the pony, and now labouring up alone to his

cabin in the gulch.

He wondered dimly whether it would turn out that he should ever realise a reward for his toil, whether he should live to get out of this icy corner of the world, or whether he should die and rot here, caught in this great snow-trap, in this open grave, where the living were buried. He wondered a little, but his mind was not one inclined to abstract thought. He spent very little time in retrospection, reflection, and contemplation, very little time in thinking of any sort, and on this account possessed so great a stock of energy for acting. Each human being has only a certain amount of energy supplied him with which to do the work of his life. Thinking, speaking, and acting are all portions of this work, and whatever of his energy he consumes in any one, so much the less has he for the others. Thinking, the formation of ideas, is hard work; speaking, the expression of ideas, is hard work; and acting, the carrying out of ideas, is hard work. It is false to suppose that the first two are natural, instinctive, involuntary movements of the brain, and that only the last requires effort.

Talbot thought very little and spoke very little. His ideas came to him in simple form; they were not elaborated in his mind nor in his speech, they turned into actions immediately or died quietly without giving him any trouble or wasting his time. A decision once made he carried out. He never thought about it afterwards, or frittered away his strength in hours of torturing doubt as to whether it was a good one to have made, or whether some other might not have been better. Once made, he kept to it, good or bad, leaving it to chance whether he died or succeeded in his attempt to carry it out. And this conservation of energy in all other mental processes

resulted in a splendid strength for action and a limitless endurance in the carrying out of his decisions.

And as he walked now he thought very little, except in a resigned way, of the physical discomfort he was enduring, and of the time when he should reach his cabin. Dusk had already fallen before he came to the gulch, and he had to strain his eyes to find the narrow trail which descended the side of the gorge. His log cabin, carefully and solidly constructed, stood half-way down the northern slope of the gulch, on a sort of natural platform formed by the vagaries of the now narrowed stream in its younger and wilder days. Beneath the cabin stretched his claims, 500 feet of dry soil on the slope of the hill, 100 feet this side of the stream and fairly in the creek, and 100 feet on the farther side, a stretch of 700 feet in all, and of a quality that made it at that time the richest claim for fifty miles round. Shafts, reaching down to bed rock, were sunk all over it, and great mounds of frozen gravel beside them showed how untiringly they had been worked. In addition to these, the man's native energy had prompted him to drive a tunnel horizontally for some distance into the side of the hill that rose steeply behind the cabin. The tunnel pierced the hill for 100 feet, and at the end a shaft had been sunk to bed rock, and it was from here at present that the highest grade ore was coming. Moved by an instinct to protect what he intuitively felt would be his richest possession, Talbot had built his tunnel in one solid block with the cabin, and closed its outer end with a huge door, well provided with bars and bolts. So long as this door was successfully held, no claim-jumper could penetrate into the tunnel or reach the shaft at the end. By this means, too, a double protection was

afforded the living cabin, though of this he thought comparatively little, for the face of the cabin presented nothing but its one small window and this huge solid door. Upon opening this you found yourself in the tunnel; if you kept straight on you reached the shaft; if you entered the small door upon your left hand you found yourself in the interior of the living cabin.

The gulch ran east and west, and at sunset at some times in the year a red light from the dying sun would fall into it, like a tongue of flame, and the whole gulch would seem on fire. At such moments Talbot would cease his work and stand looking up the gorge, with the red light falling on his face and banishing its careworn pallor. No one knew what he was thinking of in those moments, whether he was recalling Italian or Egyptian skies that had been as fair, or whether for a moment some vanished face seemed to look at him from out those brilliant hues, or if merely the great sheets of gold that spread above the gulch brought visions of that wealth he was giving his best years to attain. No one who met him knew much about him, except that he was an Englishman, had travelled much and experienced many different forms of life, and finally come to the Klondike,—but why this last? He was believed to have been rich before he came: was it merely to increase his wealth, or was there some other reason? Was there any one awaiting his return? There were several portraits in his cabin of soft and lovely faces, but then the number was confusing, and the most curious of the men who worked under him could not come to any satisfying conclusion. All they knew was that he worked harder than any common miner, that his reserve was unbroken, and his life one continual self-denial. There were thirty men in all who worked

for him, and by them all he was respected and feared rather than liked. There was a chilling reserve wrapped about him, an utter absence of ingenuousness and frankness of character, that prevented any affection growing up amongst the men for their master, and his attitude towards them was summed up in the answer he gave to an acquaintance who once asked him how he got on with his men, if he had any friends amongst them. Talbot had raised his dark, marked eyebrows and merely said coldly, "I don't make friends of miners."

Stephen Wood's cabin was a little higher up the gulch by several yards, and the claims of the two men had been staked out side by side. A great friendship had grown up between the two, such a friendship as common danger, common privations, common aims, and Nature's awful loneliness drives any two human beings in each other's proximity into. But besides this friendship there was a quiet liking on Talbot's part for this weak, impulsive, boyish character, so unlike his own, and on Stephen's side a warm admiration for all Talbot's qualities that he could not and yet wished to emulate. He, as others, was completely excluded from the elder man's confidence, and knew nothing of his past or what was likely to be his future; but then Stephen was one of those people always so deeply absorbed in himself, his own aims and views, that he really never noticed that his manifold confidences were never returned in the smallest degree. He would come over to Talbot's cabin in the evening, seat himself on the opposite side of the fire, and talk incessantly. Talbot would allow him to do so until he felt too much bored, when he would rise and quietly tell him to go. Stephen would hastily apologise and retire, to return the following night quite unabashed, with more

views and aims to impart. In the first week of their acquaintance Talbot had heard all about his home life—about the little English village, and the red brick, ivy-covered school-house, where he had been master since he was eighteen; of the village schoolmistress he had loved, because she was so good, and had abandoned, presumably for the same reason; of his doubts, fears, hopes, wishes, and intentions,—and after ten months he knew no more of Talbot than he did the day of their first meeting.

The cabins of the men employed by both Stephen and Talbot were dotted over the gulch, some higher and some lower than their own; while a number of the men lived some distance off, a few of them even having lodgings in the town.

When at last Talbot reached his cabin door this evening darkness had completely fallen; there was no light from within to guide him, but with his half-frozen fingers he managed to unlock the outer door, and he and his tired beast went in together. The first thing he thought of when he had closed the great door behind him and lighted up the passage, was to unpack the animal and put him up in the stable which he had built opposite his own cabin door; and it was fully an hour before, having seen the beast comfortably installed, he turned into his own room and struck a light. Here there was only one living thing to greet him, and that was a shabby little black cat that leaped off the bed in the corner and came purring to meet him. One morning he had found this cat lying on his claim with a broken leg and carried it back to his cabin, where he had set the leg and nursed the miserable little creature into recovery. Denbigh, his foreman, who had seen Talbot sitting up for two whole nights to watch the helpless

animal, had carried away the impression that the cold, quiet, hard and selfish man, as he appeared to the miners, had another side to his character that they never saw. It was this other side that the kitten was familiar with, and she came mewing and purring with delight towards him. Talbot, who was ready to sink to the floor with exhaustion, stooped and stroked the animal, which followed his steps everywhere as he set about lighting up his stove. It was very quiet, there was absolute silence all round him, and every step of his heavy boots on the wooden floor, every crackle of the igniting wood in the stove, seemed a loud and important sound in the stillness. It was always very quiet at the gulch, Nature's own solemn quiet, except in the summer time, when she filled it with the laughing voices of a thousand streams and rills.

That evening, when his domestic arrangements were all put into working order, his fire blazing, his coffee boiling on the hob, and his table laid, he sank back in his chair with a weary sigh, his hand idly stroking the cat, which had jumped purring on his knee. It seemed lonely without Stephen, and he foresaw that probably many evenings would pass now without his society.

The next morning, when it was yet barely light, and the gulch was holding still all its damp black shadows of the night, Talbot was out tramping over the claims, showing his men where to start new fires, and carefully scanning the fresh gravel as it was thawed and dug out. All his men had a pleasant salutation for him as he passed by, except one, who merely leaned over his work and threw out his spadeful of gravel savagely, as Talbot stopped by the fire. He took no notice apparently of the man, and

after a second's survey passed on to the next fire. The man looked after him a moment sulkily and returned to his work. He was a huge fellow, some six feet four, and with a massive frame and head to suit his height. He had been working for many months with Talbot now, and was a valuable labourer on account of his great strength and capacity for work. At first he had been rather a favorite with Talbot, and there hung now in his cabin a first-class six-shooter, the gift of his master when he first came up to the gulch.

Dick Marley had had a devoted admiration for Talbot until the last few months, when it had turned into a bitter, sullen resentment over a matter with which in reality Talbot had absolutely nothing to do. Dick, being a hard and constant worker, had managed to save out of his liberal wages quite a considerable sum, and this he had entrusted to a man on his way to Seattle to invest for him in securities. After a time the man disappeared, and Dick discovered his securities had never been bought, and that he was in fact robbed and cheated. In his first rage and disappointment he cast about unconsciously in his mind for some one besides himself to lay the blame upon, and finding no one he grew daily more and more morose. Hour after hour, as he worked upon the claims, his thoughts would revolve sullenly round his loss, and the offender being beyond his reach, his anger burned against any and every man near him, and apparently chiefly against his employer.

A week passed before Stephen reappeared at the gulch, then one evening after dark, when Talbot was sitting back in his chair, dozing after the cold and fatigue of the day's work, a loud banging came on his outer door, and when he opened it, Stephen, looking

very flushed and animated, came into the quiet little room, laden with packages and with a general air of city life about him.

"Well, old man, how are you? Hello, Kitty!" this as he stumbled over the little black cat at his feet. "Well, I've had such a glorious time! I wish you'd stayed down there too: that girl is just the finest creature I've ever seen. Have you anything for a fellow to eat? —I'm perfectly famished. Look here, I've brought you up some cans of things and a bottle of rye, the very best. I say, you look dreadfully blue—what's the matter?"

"Life in the west gulch in the winter isn't particularly exhilarating," answered Talbot, quietly, as he went about his preparations for Stephen's supper.

"How have the men been—all right?" questioned Stephen, as he took off his coat and settled himself in the best chair.

"They have been working pretty steadily, but I notice a difference in them since that fellow Marley has been here. He has been stirring them up, doing a lot of mischief, I think."

"You must assert your authority, I suppose," remarked Stephen pompously, stretching his feet out comfortably in the cheerful blaze. "Perhaps he doesn't know who's master here."

"He will very soon find out then," returned Talbot, so grimly that Stephen looked at him sharply. "Well, what's all your news?" asked Talbot, as if desirous to get away from the question of his men.

"I don't know that there is much, except I've been having a good time. You've looked after my ground

and seen to the workings, haven't you? Thanks, I knew you would, and so I felt I could stay down town a little: you're a better hand at managing men than I am, any way,—women too, for that matter; do you know that you impressed Katrine awfully? She has talked about you to me—you are so good-looking, so distinguished, she wants to know whether you are a Count or a Prince in disguise, and all sorts of things."

Talbot smiled. "It is extremely kind of her," he said quietly.

"Oh, I know she's not the kind of girl you admire," said Stephen, in rather a nettled tone. "You wouldn't look at a saloon-keeper's daughter simply because she *is* a saloon-keeper's daughter; you like a girl in your own rank, all grace and dignity and good manners, and awfully clever and intellectual, and gifted and educated, and all that."

Talbot merely laughed and remained silent, a habit he had which successfully baffled questions, innuendoes, and suppositions alike.

"And any way your passions are engaged somehow, somewhere."

"How do you know that?" asked Talbot, with a hardening of his mouth.

"Know it! why, otherwise you could not lead this dog's life as you do, and you could not be indifferent to a beautiful girl like Katrine,—for she is beautiful, she's not 'pretty' or 'nice,' but she's downright beautiful," returned Stephen, emphasising his remarks by striking the table.

Talbot said nothing, but put more wood in the stove

in silence.

"Your supper is ready now; if you are famished, as you said, you'd better have it, and discuss Miss Poniatovsky afterwards," he remarked.

Stephen turned to the table. "Won't you have something too?" he said.

Talbot shook his head. "No, thanks; I'm not hungry."

"You ascetic creature, you never are," replied Stephen, as he began to carve into the cold bacon.

"Well, you know how I detest her surroundings," he began again after a few minutes, "and drinking, and saloons, and almost everything she does, but then I can't help liking her. She's so different from any girl I've ever seen. She attracts me, she holds my thoughts so, and if I could get her to give up all that, if I could alter her views—"

"You would be doing away with that difference from others that is the basis of your attraction," put in Talbot, dryly.

"Well," returned Stephen after a minute, in a sulky tone, "we are all like that,—a man falls in love with a girl, because she *is* a girl, and then immediately wants to turn her into a married woman."

Talbot laughed. "Good!" he said. "You are quite right."

"It's the altering process we like, and we want to do the alteration ourselves. I showed her my pocket Greek testament yesterday," he continued.

"And was she interested?" inquired Talbot, dryly.

"Not so much as she was in the shooting gallery," admitted Stephen. "I told her how a bible at a man's heart had often saved his life, and she said a pistol had done that too, and she'd rather trust the pistol."

Talbot laughed. "You say you like altering. I should think in Katrine you've a splendid field. If you want to get her down to the schoolmistress pattern, you've employment for a lifetime!"

Stephen flushed, as he always did at any allusion to the girl he had loved as the type of all virtues, and yet had tired of. Good people are always more or less interested in and attracted by the wicked, while the wicked are not generally the least interested in nor attracted by the good. Stephen was drawn towards this reckless daughter of the saloons partly through the sense of her general badness, it formed unconsciously a sort of charm for him, whereas his goodness did not act at all in the same way upon her. To her eyes it was his one great drawback, an overwhelming disadvantage.

He finished his supper in silence, and the two men drew in close to the fire to smoke. That is to say, Stephen did the smoking, as he did the talking. He consumed Talbot's tobacco, and filled Talbot's cabin with its fumes. Talbot himself did not smoke.

Stephen's return to his own claim freed Talbot from the double share of work he had been doing for the last week, and he remained on his own claims all day, tramping from one end to the other, directing where a new shaft should be made, overseeing closely all the work that went on, and doing a good deal of it himself; and in those days he became more clearly conscious than ever of the difference that was growing up in his men's manner towards him. There

was a veiled insolence in their replies to his questions, a certain want of promptness in obeying his orders, which caused a curious gleam to come into the quiet grey eyes as, apparently without noticing it, he passed on.

He did not speak of it, not even to his foreman, Denbigh, the man whom he liked and trusted most. He was accustomed to manage his own affairs, and rarely took counsel with any one. He was one of those men who are born with the gift of governing others. He was an organiser, an administrator, by nature. Had he been born to a throne, his kingdom would have been well ruled from end to end, and rarely if ever embroiled with other nations; and the same spirit that would have ruled a kingdom showed itself here in the ruling and management of his seven hundred feet of ground.

He never bullied, never swore, no one had ever seen him in a passion. He gave his orders in a pleasant friendly voice, his manner was quiet, even to gentleness, but he had a way of getting those orders invariably carried out that was hard to analyse. If he said a thing was to be done, it was done, and no one knew of an instance where it was not. He never countermanded an order, and never receded from a position once taken, even if in his own heart he recognised later it was an unwise one. But the forethought and caution, the deliberation in decision that were his by nature, made the occasions on which he regretted an order very seldom, and if such there were, no matter, the order stood. He himself looked upon his word as irrevocable, whether given in promise or command, and instinctively all who came in contact with him looked upon it in the same light. The men, when they made engagements with

him and stipulated certain terms for certain work, and other details, never asked for paper, and even refused it when offered. Whatever came from those silent, resolute lips they knew unalterable, unanswerable, final, and absolute; they all trusted his word completely, and it passed amongst them as other men's bond.

Everything on the claims was well organised, all was kept in smooth working order. The men had exact hours of work, exact time for changing off, each his specified work and place on the ground, each his tools, for which he was accountable as long as he worked there.

Talbot's forethought even went far enough to provide for the happy-go-lucky and mostly ungrateful creatures who had no idea of providing for themselves. He established a sick fund, and to this each of the men who worked for him was obliged to subscribe a trifle out of his weekly wages. Then in their not infrequent sickness there was alleviation and comfort waiting for them. If the miners were not his friends they were his dependents, and as such he cared for them and looked after them. He was always friendly in manner to them, always ready to help and assist them, to attend to their wants, to listen to their complaints, and settle the frequent disputes amongst themselves, which they invariably brought to him for decision. If he had not instilled affection into them, they felt an unlimited faith and confidence in his absolute justice.

"He's hard, real hard," they said amongst themselves, "but he'll never go back on you;" and that was the received opinion amongst them.

Although he was conscious now of the feeling

growing up amongst his men, he appeared to ignore it entirely. As long as his instructions and commands were carried out, he affected to be in ignorance whether it was with a smiling or a scowling face. He felt certain that the disaffection owed its origin to the man Marley, and he expected every day that some matter would bring this man and himself into a personal conflict, in which he meant to conquer, and he preferred to wait for this to happen than to, in any way, take an initiative step in bringing the covert hostility to light.

It was his method. On the same principle, when one of his debtors, having completely lost his head in blind rage against a quiet order that he should pay what was due, shook his fist in the other's face and threatened to wipe the floor with him, Talbot did not knock the man down, as some might have done. He simply remarked in his dryest tone, "You'd better try it," and for some reason or other the man did not. Shortly after the money was paid.

So now he simply stood his own ground, saw that his work was properly done, and waited until the man courted his own punishment. In the meantime, the men mistook his forbearance, his quietness, his smoothness of tones and manner for weakness, and Marley, a bully by nature, and quite incapable of understanding his employer, grew elated and triumphant.

Stephen had been back at the gulch a fortnight or more, when Talbot found late one afternoon some of his tools broken, and this, combined with other work he had to do in town, decided him to go down that afternoon and return the following day before daylight failed. He got ready, locked up his house,

and called upon Stephen to say he was going. Stephen looked quite surprised, Talbot went to town so seldom, and then began to chaff him upon his motives and intentions.

"As it happens, I'm going about some mending of spades," Talbot returned.

"Are you sure it's not the breaking of hearts?" Stephen laughed back from the fire by which he was sitting. "Well, you'll see Katrine any way. Tell her—"

"My dear fellow," interrupted Talbot, impatiently, "I'm not going to see her. I shall have as much as I can do to be back here before mid-day to-morrow," and he went out before the amazed Stephen could say another word.

"Going down town and not going to see Katrine! why, he must be mad," ejaculated Stephen mentally; "wonder what his own girl's like anyway." Then he tossed himself back on the rug and looked at a little postage-stamp photograph Katrine had given him of herself, which he had stuck on the fly-leaf of his Greek testament.

The following morning, before it was fully light, found Talbot toiling up to the west gulch on foot. He had made an early start, as he wanted to be back before the men began work, and the air hung round one and against one's cheek like a sodden blanket in the dusky dawn. It took him over three hours to make the distance, and when he reached his cabin he felt chilled through. All his muscles were stiff and numb from the long climb. He felt a longing to sit down and rest and get a little warmth kindled in his half-frozen limbs. The first thing that encountered him at the main door, which led into the block

composed of his own cabin and the tunnel, was a sheet of smooth ice, only an inch deep perhaps, but glazing over the ground from where he stood to his own door. He saw at once what had happened: the waste water from the workings had been diverted from its proper outlet, and had simply run freely at its own will over the level ground. Talbot's face darkened as his eyes rested on it. It was Marley's business to see that the egress for the water was kept free and unblocked with ice, and only yesterday he had given him orders to attend to it. It was the second or third time he had returned to find the entrance to his own house almost impassable. Crossing over with difficulty the frozen stream, he looked into his cabin. There was about a foot of muddy water and ice covering the floor and floating his slippers and some pairs of socks he had left by the hearth. The fire was out, and the lower part of the stove filled with mud and water. The bed was completely soddened, the blankets and quilt dabbling in the water. He did not go beyond the threshold. After a minute's survey he turned and walked down the tunnel leading to the shaft where he knew the men were working.

"Marley!" he called down the shaft.

"What is it?" came up from below in a surly tone.

"You have allowed the waste to run into the tunnel again, and my cabin is flooded."

"Well, clean it out then!"

"I think that is your business," answered the dry cutting tones from above. "Come up at once, and see to it."

"I'm not going to swab out your blasted, dirty old cabin," shouted Marley hoarsely from the bottom of the shaft. "Do it yourself."

A strange look came over Talbot's quiet face. It whitened and set in the darkness. He knew his men were gathered about Marley, listening to what passed, and this open defiance of his authority, this public insult before them, angered him excessively. He made his answer very quietly, however, only his voice was peculiarly hard, and the words seemed to drop like ice on the men standing listening below.

"I allow no one to speak to me like that here," he said. "This is the last day that you work on the claim."

"I'll work here as long as it suits me," retorted Marley, with an oath. "You can't turn me out."

"We will see about that," returned Talbot, in the same even, frigid tone, and he turned away from the pit and walked back to his flooded cabin.

He found Denbigh had arrived there. It was close to the luncheon hour by this time, and he was doing what he could to get rid of the water. He looked up, and saw at once from the other's face there had been some unusual incident.

"What's up?" he inquired, standing still, with his mop in his hand.

"That fellow Marley is making all the trouble he can," returned Talbot. "I have just told him he has got to get out, that's all."

Denbigh's face fell. "I think it's a bad job," he remarked after a minute. "You know what a

desperate devil he is; he would kill you, I believe, if he had to give up his work."

"Well, he has been trying to boss this business for some time now," returned Talbot, "and I am tired of it. To-day he finished with a gross insult before a lot of the men, and it's time, I think, to show him and them who is boss here."

"Couldn't you overlook it?" replied Denbigh, tentatively, with a scared look on his thin face.

"I have no wish to," replied Talbot, coldly. "There is bound to be trouble some time. It may just as well come now as later."

Denbigh opened his mouth to make a further protest, but Talbot stopped him.

"Don't let us discuss it any further, please," he said curtly, and Denbigh closed his mouth and dropped back on his knees to his floor-mopping.

Talbot drew out his pistol, glanced over it, and buckled it round his waist.

When the room was reduced to some appearance of dry comfort again, the two men sat down to their luncheon in silence. Talbot was too excited to swallow a mouthful of the food. Although so calm outwardly, and with such absolute command over his passion, anger was with him, like a flame at white heat, rushing through his veins.

As they sat they heard the miners tramping by the cabin door, and saw their heads pass the window as they went out to get their mid-day food. Denbigh himself, as soon as he had finished, made an excuse and departed. He was eager to join his companions

before they came back to work and hear some more delectable details of the row than he could get from Talbot. When all his men had filed out from the tunnel, Talbot went into the passage and walked up to the heavy wooden door and shut it, barring it with a steady hand. This was the main entrance to the shaft, and at the present time the only one. The door was never, under ordinary circumstances, closed, but stood open all day for the men to pass in and out to their work. When he had fastened it he walked back, turned into his own cabin, and took up his place at the window. From here he could see the men as they came back. They began to return earlier than was their wont, knowing that trouble was in the air, and each one was anxious to be on the spot for the crisis. All through the lunch hour Talbot's words and the possibility of Dick Marley being obliged to "quit" was the sole topic of conversation.

Dick talked largely, and with a great many of the miners his oaths, and the imputations of cowardice he heaped on his employer, carried the day. Some of the others, quieter men with keener perceptions, merely listened in silence, and shook their heads when appealed to for an opinion.

"I dunno. He's got grit," remarked one between mouthfuls of bread and bacon, in response to a sanguinary burst of Dick's.

"He's a slip," answered Dick, contemptuously.

"But a dead sure shot."

"He'd funk it," said Dick, his face paling a little. "He'd never stand up to me. He's got no fight in him. Why, he's managed that claim there now for two years and he's never so much as fired a shot over it. Now that

fellow Robinson wot's got the claim a mile farther up the creek, he's the boy for me. Why, he hadn't been there two days before there was trouble, and at the end of the week we was reckoning up he had made five corpses over it."

He looked round the circle, and there was a murmur of admiring assent.

The old miner nodded his head slowly as he munched his beans.

"Yes, that's Talbot's way; he's just as smooth as butter as long as you know he's the boss and act accordin', but jest as soon as you begin to try and boss him, you'll know you have your hands full."

Dick took another pull at the tin whisky bottle, and tightened his belt.

As the men returned to their work they were surprised to see their employer leaning idly against his window, and still more surprised when they passed round to the main entrance to find the great door shut. Talbot came himself and let each man in, in turn as they came up, shutting the door afterwards. Their curiosity at this unusual state of things was great, but there was a look on the pale, stern face they encountered on the threshold that froze all open question or comment, and each man went by silently to his work. When they got down towards the shaft and out of hearing, however, their tongues were loosened again.

"'E's waiting for Dick to come back, that's what he is," volunteered one of the miners; "and somehow or other I don't feel jest dying to be in Dick's shoes when he do come."

There was no dissent openly offered to this guarded opinion. Most of the men hung about in the tunnel, and seemed unwilling to quit the scene of the coming contest.

At last, among the final batch of men, Marley came sauntering past the window. Talbot's eyes flashed as the tiger's when the brush crackles. He walked out to the great door and flung it wide open. Dick fell back a step, and the little crowd of miners who accompanied him closed in round the two, open mouthed and eyed, to see the battle.

"You can't come in," and the sentence had an accent of inflexibility that made it seem like a drawn sword across the entrance.

"To hell I can't!" returned Dick, a dull red flush coming over his face.

"No, you can't," Talbot replied in the same calm, incisive way, that contrasted strongly with the coarse, whisky-thickened tone of the other.

"Oh well, I guess I'm coming in any way," answered Marley, and he made a step forward. A slight motion of Talbot's right hand to his belt was his only answer.

Marley stopped, put his own hand, half involuntarily, to his hip, remembered he had no revolver with him, and turned pale and red in confusion.

By this time the loud voices and talking at the door had brought the remainder of the men upon the scene. Those who had already passed into the shaft left their work and came up behind Talbot in the tunnel; those in front pressed a little nearer. Talbot stood now completely surrounded by the crowd of rough working men. Marley's adherents were in full

force. He was quite alone. He did not glance round them. He did not think of himself, nor of his own danger should two or three of them back up their fellow and commence to hustle him. He felt nothing but a cool though intensely savage determination to subdue this burly brute, to defend his position and title, though it cost him his life.

"There can be only one boss here," he said coldly, as Marley hesitated before him. "If you are not satisfied who it is, go to your cabin and get your six-shooter, and we will settle it here on the dump."

There was a movement and a murmur of satisfaction amongst the men. Now this was coming down to business and giving them something they could understand. Here was a man willing to defend his rights in a good, square stand-up fight on the spot, and they one and all agreed in their own minds that he was the right sort. They glanced at Dick expectantly, and some said to themselves he weakened. They were not going to take sides with either party. One of the men was their friend and fellow-worker, the other was their employer. The two had a difference, and they could settle it between themselves. They had no business to interfere. All they had to do was to stand round and see a square fight and "with'old their judgment," as they said afterwards, talking it over in the bar of the "Pistol Shot." They waited, and Dick hesitated. He felt his opponent's eyes upon him; he glanced round the men, they were watching him.

"Fetch your six-shooter," commanded Talbot again, with increasing sternness, and Dick, feeling he must do something, nodded sullenly and turned away towards his cabin. He strode up the incline in the

direction of the miners' dwellings, and Talbot, whose brain seemed to himself half splitting with nervous, angry excitement, began to pace up and down a short length before the door, waiting for him to come back. He did not order his men away, and they stayed in their places.

The excitement was intense amongst them as they waited; not one of them shifted his place on the log or bank where he had sat down; they hardly seemed to draw their breath. All their eyes were fixed upon Talbot. He walked up and down in front of the door, his arms folded, his revolver still in its case on his hip. The men watched him curiously. His face was very white and exceedingly determined.

The afternoon was placid and lovely. The temperature was not within many degrees of zero, but the gold of the sunshine was bright, and the air dazzlingly clear. It was absolutely still, not a leaf rustled, not a breath stirred. Nature was in her calmest, gentlest mood; nowhere could there have been a more tranquil arena to witness the passions of men. There was perfect silence, except for the crack of the ice sometimes as it split beneath the firm, resolute steps of the man pacing up and down. His face was set as a stone mask, as immovable and as calm, but the passion of anger increased within him as he waited; a mad impatience for his adversary to return grew at each step that he walked to and fro, with the insult of the morning echoing in his ears.

At last he stopped in his walk and fixed his gaze on the road which led to the miners' cabins. All the men's eyes followed his, and they saw the figure of their fellow-worker coming slowly down towards them. A huge, hulking form, contrasting strongly

with the slim one of the man waiting for him. Some of the miners glanced up at Talbot, wondering silently if he "funked it," but there was something in that attitude and that iron countenance that reassured them and stirred a dull admiration in their hearts. Talbot ceased to walk up and down. He planted himself directly in front of the wide open door and waited there. Passion and excitement had dilated his pupils until the usually calm light grey eyes looked black; his nostrils quivered slightly as he watched his enemy coming up. As Marley drew nearer, the miners noted with satisfaction his enormous six-shooter swinging in his belt; the sunlight caught the steel at every other step forward he made. Their hearts beat fast with keen anticipation. There would soon be some fine shooting, and one dead man perhaps, or two, for Marley meant business; and as for the other, he looked like the devil himself as he stood there. And he was a fine shot, there was no mistake about that. Denbigh stared hard at him with round fixed eyes. He was thinking of the nights when he had watched Talbot teaching Dick to shoot straight—teaching the very man he had sent off now to get his pistol to shoot himself with! He remembered how Talbot had stood with Marley at this very tunnel's mouth and showed him how to snuff a candle at thirty yards! And Denbigh stared and glowed with admiration. Marley drew nearer down the path, his heavy crunching steps echoing through the serene and frosty air. A few minutes more and he was close upon the eager, expectant, silent circle; the men watched him with their breath suspended. On he came, sullenly, filled with a sort of dogged, brutal animosity against the man he had wronged and insulted. He stepped between the men, who made a

short line, and then into the clear open space, facing Talbot.

For the first time he looked him full in the face, with a fugitive, fleeting glance, and his eyes shifted away. His pace slackened, but he did not stop; his feet dragged loosely over the rough snow and gravel, his huge form seemed to shrink together, to lessen; while to the fascinated eyes of the men watching the two, that slight figure at the doorway, motionless as a statue, seemed to dominate the scene. Marley felt a peculiar, sick paralysis stealing over him, a curious tugging back of his muscles when he tried to get his hand to his hip, a strangling feeling in his throat: that glance seemed petrifying him. The absolute fearlessness, the indomitable will that filled it, seemed to overcome him.

The very fact, perhaps, that Talbot had not even yet drawn his pistol, the extreme coolness that relied upon the swiftness of his wrist to draw it at a second's notice, staggered and scared him. He remembered the skill that had long been his admiration, and that he had at last learned to imitate, the sureness of aim and eye, the dexterity and quickness of that hand, and his tongue fairly cleaved to the roof of his dry mouth. He struggled to draw his revolver, but his arm refused to obey his will. Yet it was not wholly cowardice that swept over him in a sickly tide. As he had met those scornful, indignant eyes, there had rushed back to his mind a thousand small benefits conferred upon him by this man, a thousand instances of friendliness, the memory of the first days they had worked together, how he had slept under his roof, fed at his table, how, more than all, he had been given by him and instructed in the use of this very weapon that now

would be turned to the giver's own breast. A horror of killing this man, of wounding him, firing upon him, combined with his terror of being killed, swept over him, and between these he felt cowed and beaten, unable to stand up and face him, unable to do anything but drag one trembling foot behind the other and go by, keeping watch from the side of his eye that that deadly pistol was not drawn upon him. But Talbot never moved, simply stood and watched him too, with fixed eyes; and Marley, overwhelmed by some power he did not understand, as if dragged forward against his will, without another look at his opponent, passed by them all and went on slowly down the road leading to the town. Not a word was spoken, not a breath was drawn, no one moved. They watched his retreating figure, some half hoping, half expecting, some half fearing, he would turn and shoot from a distance,—all wondering greatly, and a little overawed. Then, as he neither turned nor looked back, but kept steadily ahead, his large figure well outlined against the stretches of white snow, his six-shooter glistening in the sun, his head hanging down, till at last by a turn in the road he was lost to view, there was a long-drawn breath of surprise and wonder, a general turning of the eyes to Talbot. It was a victory, though a bloodless one, and they felt it. Each one felt that the conqueror was before them. Talbot said nothing. He simply stood aside from the door, to let the miners who were outside enter. The men took it as a signification that they were to recommence work, and hastened to obey. They did not dare to speak to him, not even to congratulate him. They were awed into submissive silence before him. Not a sound was uttered. The men filed silently into the tunnel like cowed sheep into their pen, leaving their master standing motionless in the

sunshine.

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# CHAPTER III

## KATRINE'S NEIGHBOURS

Good Luck Row was a little row of small, insignificant cabins towards the back of the city, and at right angles to the direction of the main street. Dawson faces the Yukon, and its main thoroughfare lies parallel with the river. In the summer, when the Yukon and the Klondike, that joins it just above, are free, the waters of the two rivers united come rolling by in jubilant majesty, tossing loose blocks of ice, the remnants of their winter chains, on their swelling tide. They form a little eddy in front of the city, and their waters roll outward and swirl back again to their course, as if the great stream made a bow to the city front as it swept past. Here in the summer, with the steamboats ploughing through the rocking green water, and the sun streaming down upon the banks crowded with active human beings, glinting on the gay signs of the saloons and the white and green painted doors of the warehouses, with the brilliant azure sky stretched above, and far off the tall green larches piercing it with their slender tops,—in the summer this main street is a pleasant, cheerful sight; but now, with the river solid and silent, the banks black and frozen, and the bleak, bitter sky above, it looked more desolate than the inner streets of the town, more uninviting than Good Luck Row, which had little cabins on each side, and where the

inhabitants overlooked their opposite neighbours' firelit interior instead of the frozen river. The side-walks of the row were like the other side-walks of the city, a wealth of soft mud and slush and dirt through the warm weather, and now frozen hard into uneven lumps, big depressions, and rough hummocks. The cabins were uniform in size, small, with one fair-sized window in the front, beside the door, which opened straight into the main room, where the front window was. At the back there was another smaller room with a tiny window, looking out over a black barren ice-field, for Good Luck Row was on the edge of the town.

Katrine lived at No. 13. This cabin had been the last to be occupied on account of its unlucky number, but Katrine only laughed at it, and painted it very large in white paint upon the door. Here Katrine lived alone, though her father, the little stunted Pole who kept the "Pistol Shot," was one of the richest men in the city.

And because she lived alone some of her neighbours declared she was not respectable. As a matter of fact, she was more respectable than many of the married women living in the row, and Katrine knew many a story with which she could have startled an unsuspecting husband when he came into town after a week or two's absence prospecting or at work on the claims; but she did not trouble about other people's affairs; she gave her friendship to those who sought it, and heeded not at all those who condemned her.

On an afternoon about three weeks after her first meeting with Stephen, Katrine stood in front of her little glass in the corner of her cabin, smoothing her

short glossy hair; when this was flattened with mathematical exactness to her well-shaped head—for Katrine was always trim and neat in her appearance—she turned to the table and wrote on a slip of paper, "I'm next door;" this she pinned to the outside of her door, and then locking it went into the next cabin in the row. She had grown quite accustomed to Stephen's visits now, and generally left a note on her door when she went out, in case he should come unexpectedly in her absence. The cabin she entered presented a different appearance from her own. There was the same large stove opposite the door, the same rough table in the centre and wooden chairs round, but the floor was dirty and gritty, quite unlike Katrine's, which always maintained a white and floury look from her constant attentions, and the stove looked rusty and uncleaned. The small square panes of the window, too, hardly let in any light, they were so obscured by dust inside and snow frozen on to them without. By the stove sat a young woman, in whose face ill-health and beauty struggled together for predominance. Her hair, twisted into a loose knot at the back of her head, was of the lightest gold colour, like a young child's, and her face brought to one's mind the idea of milk and violets, the skin was so white and smooth and the eyes so blue. This was the beauty which no disease could kill, but ill-health triumphed in the livid circles round the eyes, the drawn lines round the faded lips. Katrine entered with her brightest smile.

"Well, Annie, are you better to-day?" she asked.

The woman rose with an unsteady movement from the chair, and before she could answer burst suddenly into a rain of tears. "Better? Oh, Katie, I shall never be any better! But I wish I could go home

to die!"

Katrine advanced and put her arms round her, drawing the frail attenuated form close against her own warm vigorous frame.

"What nonsense!" she said gently. "You are not going to die at home or anywhere yet. Why, Will is going to make a big strike, and take you home to live in style all the rest of your life."

"No," sobbed the girl,—for she was no more than a girl in age,—falling back in her chair again. "No, it won't come in time for me."

"Where is Will?" asked Katrine, looking round.

"He's just got a job up at the west gulch on Mr. Stephen Wood's claim," returned the other. "Oh, I am that thankful he's found some one to employ him at last."

"Yes, it's delightful," returned Katrine, absently, as she sat down on the other side of the rusty stove and looked round the dirty, cheerless room. It was due to her urgent pleading with Stephen that Will had obtained the place on the claim, but his wife did not seem to know, and Katrine did not tell her.

"But then it don't lead to nothing," continued Annie, despairingly. "He can't look out for himself if he's working another man's ground."

"Well, he only does a few hours' work, I believe, and has the rest of the day to look round for himself," returned Katrine.

"It don't amount to much, anyway; this time of the year there ain't no day to speak of," replied the other, gazing plaintively through the dim glass of the

window. "And then if he do see a bit of land he fancies, why, he can't buy it, he's got no money."

"I think Mr. Wood will advance him enough to buy any ground he thinks well of," replied Katrine, gently.

"Mr. Wood!" repeated Annie, opening her sunken eyes wide with the first display of interest she had shown. "Why should he help my man along?"

"I don't know," returned Katrine, evasively, with heightened colour; "but he told me he would do so, and I know he will. How is Tim to-day?" she added suddenly, to divert the conversation.

The mother looked round.

"Tim!" she called; "where is that child? Katie, you go and look if you can see him in the wood-shed."

Katrine crossed the room to the lean-to attached to the cabin and looked in. On the floor of the wood-shed, with the happy indifference to the cold usually displayed by Klondike infants, little Tim sat on the floor with a pile of chips beside him. Great icicles hung from the rafters above him, and his tiny hands were blue with cold, but he was contentedly and silently piling up the wood on the frozen ground. Katrine picked him up and carried him into the next room, and put him by the fire at his mother's feet. He did not cry nor offer any resistance, but when put in his new location looked round for a few minutes, and then calmly leaned towards the stove and began to play with the cinders in place of his vanished wood chips.

"What a good little fellow he is!" said Katrine, leaning over him.

"Yes; he's his mother's darling, that's what he is!" returned the other, stooping to smooth the curly head that was only a shade lighter than her own.

"Will you have some coffee?" asked Annie presently, looking helplessly towards the dirty stove, where a feeble fire was burning sulkily amongst the old wood ash.

"No," returned Katrine, cheerfully; "you must be getting tired of coffee. I brought you some tea for a change," and she extracted a neat little packet from one of her pockets. "May I do up the fire and make some for you?"

"Why, it will make you so dirty; that stove is in an awful state," replied Annie, looking over the other's neat dress and figure dubiously.

"I don't mind that. Pick up the baby," Katrine answered, rolling up her sleeves and displaying two rounded muscular arms white as the snow outside. "You'd better move farther out of the dust," she added, going down on her knees before the stove. Annie picked up the child and retreated to a chair by the window, from where she watched the other with a sort of helpless envy.

"Lord! I've grown that weak lately I can't do nothing," she said after a minute. "You know how nice I used to keep the place for Will when we first came."

Katrine nodded in silence, and two bright tears fell amongst the wood ash she was taking from the stove. She did remember the bright, active young wife, the united little family moving into the cabin next her only a year ago; she remembered the interior that had always been so neat and clean and cheerful to

receive Will when he came home, the unceasing devotion of his wife, and the mutual love and hope that had buoyed them up and made them face all hardships smilingly. Then she had watched sorrowfully the gradual deterioration of the man under the constant disappointment; she had met him more and more frequently in the saloons, less and less at his home. She had seen day by day the rapid decline of the bright, beautiful young creature he had brought with him into this poor faded wraith dragging herself about in the neglected, cheerless cabin.

"You'll get stronger again in the warm weather," she said after a minute, when her voice was steady.

"You wouldn't say that if you'd seen what I saw on the snow this morning when I'd been coughing there back of the wood-shed," returned Annie, drearily leaning her tired head against the dingy pane.

"What do you mean?" asked Katrine, looking up apprehensively. "Blood?"

The other nodded in silence, and there was quiet in the cabin except for the crooning of the child. Then Katrine rose from the hearth impulsively with a flushed, lovely face and the ash dust on her hair and dress. She went over to Annie and drew her head on to her strong, warm bosom.

"Oh, you poor, poor thing! What can we do?" she said desperately.

"Nothing," murmured Annie, closing her eyes in the girl's soothing embrace, "unless you could persuade Will to take me home, and nobody could do that now, he's so set upon the gold. That's the second

bleeding from the chest that I've had this month; now the third'll do for me."

She shivered as if from cold, and Katrine kissed her and hastened back to her work at the fire. It is not a pleasant nor an easy thing to do to clean out a stove that has been left to itself for a week or more and fresh fires kindled on the old ashes every day, but in a few minutes Katrine had the work completed and the fresh wood crackling and filling the stove with red flame. Then she made the tea rapidly, and neither of them spoke again till Annie held a great tin mug of it to her white lips. Katrine pulled her chair close to the stove again, and took Tim on her own lap, where he found a new toy in her cartridge belt. Annie sipped from her mug and gazed absently into the flames.

"Lord, we were so happy," she said musingly, a little colour coming into her face under the influence of the hot tea and the warmth from the re-invigorated fire. "We had the nicest little home down in Brixham. I daresay you don't know where that is?" Katrine shook her head. "It's just the prettiest, sweetest village in the world, down in Devonshire; and we had a cottage there, quite in the country, with pink roses all over the front,—I can smell those roses now. Oh, it was lovely; and Will had regular work all the time, and he was the best husband woman ever had. He used to bring his wages in Saturdays, and say to me, 'Annie, old girl, ain't there enough there to get you a new ribbon for Sunday or a fresh sash for the baby?' He never spent a penny for drink nor tobacco. And Sunday we'd go out on the downs and stand looking at the sea; it do come in so splendid there, and the wind from it seems to put new life in yer. We was as happy and as well as could be, all of us; and

then them newspapers got to printing all those tales of the gold in the Klondike, and Will he just got mad like, and nothing would do but he must sell the house and come out here. He thought he'd come back so rich; well, so he may, but he won't have no wife to go back with."

She lay back in her chair, and Katrine, gazing at her white face and transparent hands, said nothing.

"I'm glad I stuck to Will, though," the woman went on softly after a minute, "and didn't let him come out here alone. A wife's place is by her husband wherever he goes, and I'd rather die with him than be separated. But there, I do hate the name of gold. It broke up our home, it's broke up our lives, and it's just killed me, that's what it's done. And what's the good of it? Why, as I said to Will before we came, 'We can't be no more than happy, and we're that now.'"

Katrine said nothing. She was one of those women who in society would have gained the name of a good conversationalist, for she always listened attentively and spoke hardly at all.

It grew rapidly darker outside and began to snow a little, the peculiar sharp, small snow of Alaska. The two women could hardly see each other's faces in the gloom, when Katrine rose and offered to light the lamp.

"There ain't no oil left," returned Annie, drearily. "I just sit in the dark most of the time; I don't mind as long as I have a bit of fire. It do seem more lonesome though when you've no light," she added with a sigh.

"Haven't you any money to buy it with?"

Annie shook her head. "Not till Will comes back."

"Well, here's enough to keep you in oil for the next three months," said Katrine, taking a little object from her belt which looked like a well-filled tobacco pouch and putting it on the shelf above her head.

"What's that? dust?" said Annie. "Where-ever do you get so much money?" she added, staring at her.

"I won that last night," returned Katrine, lightly. "I do have such luck. I wish you could come, Annie, and see the fun we have down town of a night, instead of moping up here; and I do have such luck," she repeated again with a half sigh. "I don't know what I'd do if it should change. I'd have to be bar-keep for a living, I suppose. Think I'd make a good bar-keep?" she said, getting up and stretching her arms above her head. All her full lissom figure was revealed to advantage by the attitude, and the firelight fell softly on the gay, bewitching face, slanted over to one shoulder as she put the question.

"I do that," replied Annie, with emphasis. "Your bar would always be crammed by all the chaps in the place, my dear."

Katrine laughed. "I'm glad you think so. I'll bring you some of my oil to burn for to-night, and then I must be off earning my living."

She went into her own cabin and brought back a can of oil with her, trimmed and cleaned and lit Annie's lamp, and then with a kiss bade her good-bye till next day, and took her way down to the main street. She had only a little dust in her belt, just enough to start playing with, and if luck should go against her she would have to return empty handed; but then

she always trusted to luck, and it had never forsaken her. Her mode of life, precarious and uncertain, dangerous and unsatisfactory as it might seem to an onlooker, never troubled her. She was in that state of glorious physical health and strength which lends an unlimited confidence to the mind, a sense of being able to cope with any difficulty which might suddenly present itself, when every present or possible trouble looks small, and when mere life itself, the mere sensation of the blood being warm in one's veins, is a joy. She loved the excitement, even the uncertainty of her life, and she had more friends in the town than she could count, who would be glad to lend her all she needed if her luck failed.

That night, when Katrine lay fast asleep in her small inner room, her curly head tucked down comfortably under the rugs, she dreamed she heard a knocking on her door. The sound seemed faint at first, but grew louder, and after a minute she woke up, lifted her head, and listened. Yes, there was a tapping on her door, she heard it quite distinctly. She got up immediately, slipped into her fur coat and boots, and taking one of her pistols in her hand, went to the door. That there was danger in answering such a summons at such an hour she knew quite well, but that did not hinder her. She was accustomed to live with her life in her hand, and she felt instinctively confident of being able so to hold it, and meant to keep a tight grip on it. When she opened the door it was to a vivid moonlight, clear and brighter than day; the whole white world was shining under it.

"Annie!" she exclaimed as her eyes fell on the slight, feeble figure muffled in a blanket that stood on her steps. "What is the matter? Come in," and she put the door wide open and stood back for her to pass.

"Oh, Katie," she said, seizing the other's hands when they stood inside the room, "forgive me for waking you, but I want Will. I feel I'm going to die to-night, and I can't without him—I can't," and she burst into a flood of tears broken by short sobbing coughs. She had slipped to her knees and was holding Katrine's hands in a feverish clutch. The blanket had fallen from her head and shoulders, and showed to Katrine that she was still in her day dress; it did not seem as if she had been to bed at all. There was a dark, half-dried stain upon the front of her bodice.

"I'm dying! Oh, Katie, it's so dreadful all alone there. Will you go and bring Will to me? Oh, do."

Katrine looked down upon her as she tried to raise her to her feet. The fire was still burning brightly and filled the room with light. Many people older than Katrine would have laughed at the woman's statement in face of her ability to come to them and make it, but Katrine's keen perceptions read much, too much, in the bright glazed eyes that looked up at her, in the hoarse grating tones that came from the sunken chest, and the feverish grasp of those burning fingers. She stooped down and put her arms round the kneeling figure and drew her up.

"Why, of course I will. I will bring him to you. But you are only ill, dear; you're not dying."

"Oh, I may not, I know; but if I should, and he not here! Katie, can you go now?—it's so late, and so cold, and so far. I don't see how you can."

"He's working up on Mr. Wood's claim at the west gulch. I suppose if I go to Mr. Wood's cabin he can tell me where to find Will."

"Oh, yes, yes," returned Annie, eagerly, a crimson flush now lighting up each cheek; "go straight to Mr. Wood and ask him for Will. One of Will's ponies is down here, back of our house; you can take him and ride up. Oh, it may kill you to go; I ought not to ask it. Oh, what shall I do?"

Katrine laughed. "Kill me!" she said. "It would take more to kill me than that, I think. I shall be up there and Will down here before you know where you are. Now you've just got to drink this brandy while I go and get some things on. You're just fretting for Will, that's what is the matter with you. I believe you will feel all right when you see him again."

She put the trembling woman into a chair, and went back to her room to put her clothes on. She noticed that her boots, which had been damp the night before, had frozen to the ground, and she had to break them from it by force.

"I shall be lucky if I get back with my feet unfrozen," she thought to herself, looking regretfully at the warm bed she had left; but it never once, even remotely, occurred to her to refuse the unwelcome mission. She put on all her thickest garments, buckled her pistols on her hip, and went back to Annie, who was crouching over the fire in the next room.

"I had better take the pony," she said; "he'll get me there and back quicker than I can walk, if you think the little animal is up to it."

Annie nodded. "He's well fed," she said, "and has had nothing to do since Will's been gone."

Katrine shut the stove up, and the two women went

out together.

It was a still dead cold without, the sort of night on which your limbs might freeze beyond recovery, and without your knowing it, so insidious and so little aggressive was the cold.

"You go in and keep warm," said Katrine; "I'll find the pony and manage him," and she pushed Annie gently within her own door, and went round to the shed at the back of the cabin where the pony was. Her hands in that short time had grown so stiff with cold she could hardly put the saddle on and fasten the girth and straps. The pony knew her, and pricked his ears and snorted while she was getting him ready; he had been idle in his stable two days, and by this time was willing to welcome any change in the monotony of life. When she had adjusted everything carefully by the light of the strong moon falling through the little window, she threw herself cross leg upon his back and rode him out of the shed. Annie had her face pressed eagerly against the back window of her cabin, watching for her to appear. Katrine smiled at her, lifted her fur cap above her head for an instant as a man would do, and then the next moment was cantering away over the snowy waste that stretched behind Good Luck Row. She went at a good pace, urged on by that last glimpse of the pale face, with the terrible look of haunted fear on it, pressed to the window.

The temperature was very low, but the absence of wind and dampness in the air made the cold bearable. Katrine, haunted by the fear of frostbite, kept pinching her nose and pulling her ears and banging her feet against the pony's side to keep the blood stirring in them. Inside the first half-hour she

was away some distance from the lights of Dawson, and nothing but great snowy stretches lay around her.

That night up at the west gulch it happened that neither Stephen nor Talbot had gone to bed. There is little to choose between night and day there, since half of the day hours are dark as the blackest night, and a man can sleep in them as profitably or more so than in the moonlit hours of the night. Three o'clock in the morning had come, and the two men were still sitting talking on each side of the stove, with an opened whisky bottle on the table between them, in Stephen's cabin, when the dull sound of a horse's footfall broke the blank silence of the gulch. Both sprang to their feet on the instant, and Talbot drew his pistol from his belt and stood listening with it in his hand.

"I always said we oughtn't to keep our gold up here," said Stephen, and his face whitened.

Talbot held up his hand to enjoin silence, and they waited while the sound of hoofs moving slowly over the treacherous and uneven soil came nearer. Then there was a pause, which seemed to the men inside endless. Then two distinct taps at the door. Talbot, who was nearer it, made a forward movement, but Stephen caught his arm.

"What are you going to do?" he whispered.

"Open it and fire," returned Talbot, laconically, and he pushed back the latch and raised his revolver as he opened the door.

Stephen was close behind him, and Talbot almost stepped upon him as he drew back with

astonishment the next instant. Katrine jumped from the pony's back and stepped over the threshold without invitation.

"How lucky I am to find you up!" she exclaimed, and then seeing Talbot's hastily lowered revolver in his right hand she burst out laughing. "So you were going to shoot, were you?" she said, drawing out her own. "Well, I was quite ready; I have been all the ride. I am sorry I frightened you."

"Frightened us!" repeated the two men in a breath, with an indignant glance.

"Oh no, of course I didn't mean that," rejoined Katrine, laughing. "Disturbed you, I should say. Oh, Stephen, give me some of that whisky; I am almost dead with cold."

Her face did indeed look frozen white with cold under her fur cap, and her dark eyes shone in it with a liquid splendour that made Stephen's heart beat tumultuously against his side. He poured out some of the spirit for her and pushed her gently into a chair, commencing to pull off her thick gloves for her.

"I want Will Johnson," she said, with her customary directness. "Stephen, I've come up to fetch him. He's one of your men. Tell me where I can find him."

"What do you want with him at this time of night?" questioned Stephen, while Talbot silently extracted a plate of bread and bacon from the cupboard and put it on the table at her elbow.

"I don't want him for myself," she answered mischievously. "His wife has sent me up to find him; she thinks she is dying, and wants to see him to-night. Where can I find him?"

"His cabin is a little higher up the gulch, but you mustn't go there; I will go after him," said Stephen hastily.

"I don't know," replied Katrine; "I'd better ride up there and then take him on home with me, hadn't I?"

"Ride back again to-night!" exclaimed Stephen. "What madness! It was bad enough to make the ride once. She mustn't think of it, must she, Talbot?" and he turned to his friend for corroboration.

"Certainly not, I should say," returned Talbot, in his quiet but final way. "I will ride up to Johnson's place and send him down home, and you can make Katrine comfortable here."

The girl sprang to her feet.

"Why, what an idea!" she said, with a flush on her pale cheeks. "I only came to you to find Will. Of course I can't stay here all night."

"Your mission will be accomplished, won't it, if Will goes to his wife?" returned Talbot quietly. "There is no need to risk your life again. There is no good in it; besides, it will save time if you let Will have the pony at once to take him back. You can have one of ours in the morning."

She looked up at him. She admired Talbot exceedingly. His voice was so invariably gentle and quiet, so different from all the voices that she heard round her daily. Stephen's, though his resembled it, had not the same curious accent of refinement. His manner, too, had the same extreme gentleness; and yet beneath this apparent softness she knew there existed a courage that equalled any in the whole camp. He looked very handsome too, she thought, at

this moment, as she met a soft smile in his eyes, and her tones were more hesitating as she repeated—

"I think I ought to return."

"Well, I'm going to despatch Will for you," replied Talbot, turning away. "I leave it to you, Stephen, to persuade her to stay," and he walked out. A second later they heard the pony's hoofs going up the narrow trail past the cabin.

"You can have my room; I'll sleep here on the floor," remarked Stephen.

The girl got up.

"No," she said in her most decided tone. "I'll stay if you let me sleep here on the floor, or I'll go home. Turn you out of your own comfortable bed I will not."

"Go home you can't," said Stephen in an equally decided tone, "so I'll make you up a bed here just in front of the stove."

He went into the next room, and Katrine, left alone, drank up her whisky and gazed round the cabin. It was not at all an interesting interior, and had not the faint suggestions of artistic taste that redeemed Talbot's. A few prints were on the walls, seemingly cut from illustrated papers and principally consisting of views of cathedrals and school buildings, which Katrine's eyes wandered over without interest. At the farthest end from her there were some stout shelves nailed against the wall, and on these rested a row of flat tin pans; between the pans were pushed one or two books, and she recognised amongst them his Greek testament. She rose and strolled over to the shelf, and standing on tiptoe looked into the pans. As

she thought, they contained thin layers of gold dust. She was standing there looking into them when Stephen returned and came up behind her.

"They look fine, don't they?" he said. "That's a thirty dollar pan."

Katrine turned, and looking up was startled by the eager light in his face and the greed written in every line of it. For herself, reckless, happy-go-lucky gambler that she was by nature, gold had little value for her except to toss by the handful on the tables to buy half-an-hour's excitement. With a sudden movement she seized the fullest pan by the rim in one hand and the Greek testament beside it in the other, and danced away from him to the other side of the room. Stephen turned with an involuntary cry, and followed her with anxious eyes.

"Now which would you rather lose?" she said, laughing.

His eyes were fixed upon the pan, which was heavy and as much as she could support with one hand. He dreaded each minute to see it tip up and its golden treasure pour out on the floor.

"Oh, I don't know. Don't be foolish," he said in a vexed tone.

Katrine sidled up to the window.

"Answer, or I'll—"

Stephen turned white. He felt she was capable of doing any mad thing when he met those mocking, sparkling eyes.

"Oh—I—I—would rather lose the book," he stammered, in an agony to see the gold safely put

back. "I could replace that, you know."

Katrine advanced to him, balancing the pan as if weighing it.

"Stephen, this is very heavy," she said, looking him straight in the eyes.

"Let me take it from you," he said, eagerly stretching out his hands.

"Do you know what makes it so?" she said, still balancing it and still looking at him. "Your soul is in it!" and she gave it back to him.

Stephen reddened angrily, and took both the book and the gold from her and replaced them sulkily on the shelf. Katrine had turned her back and walked over to the fire, humming.

"What a royal couch you've made me!" she remarked, breaking the awkward silence that followed, and looking down on the pile of red blankets he had spread in front of the stove.

He had, in fact, stripped his own bed and collected blankets from every corner to make a comfortable resting-place for her. Before Stephen could answer he was summoned to the door. Talbot looked in upon them, but would not come inside.

"I've sent Will off," he said; "he swore like anything, but he is gone. No, thanks, Steve, I won't come in. I'm tired, and going to my own cabin now. See you at breakfast. Good-night," and before Katrine could thank him he was gone.

The two thus left entirely alone in the deep quiet of the gulch to pass the night together looked at each other for a moment with a shade of silent

embarrassment. But the girl, accustomed as she was to take care of herself in all sorts of situations and surroundings, and endued with a certain fierce chastity of nature, recovered herself instantly and spoke quite naturally.

"I feel tired too, and would like to go to sleep now, if I may."

"Certainly," said Stephen. "You have this room to yourself. The stove will burn till daylight, and you have the whisky if you feel cold in the night. Good-night."

His tone was very formal, for he would so much have liked it to be otherwise, and without looking at her he took a match from his pocket and went into the other room, shutting the door after him. The girl waited a moment, then she shut the door of the stove and threw herself down on the soft pile of blankets, and drawing one of them over her to her ears, drew a deep, contented sigh, and was peacefully asleep in a few seconds.

The next morning Stephen rose stiff and cramped from his denuded bed. When he was completely dressed he silently opened his door and crept noiselessly into the adjoining room. The girl was not yet awake, and he stole softly over to the bed on the hearth and looked down at her. She lay warm and sleeping comfortably amongst the blankets. She was fully dressed, just as she had been the previous evening, except that two or three buttons were unfastened at the collar of her dress, and allowed the solid white neck to show beneath the rounded chin. The little head, with its mass of dark silky curls, lay inclined towards the stove, and the curled rosy lips had a softer smile than they generally wore in the

daytime. Stephen leaned over her, entranced and breathless. As his eyes followed the dark arch of the eyebrows, the sweet delicate contour of the cheek, he forgot the horror he felt of her sometimes in her waking moments, forgot the hideous background of the saloons, forgot all the evil there might be in her, and bowed before that supreme power that human beauty has over us; he worshipped her as he had never worshipped his God. For a few seconds it was enough for him to gaze on her, then came an overwhelming impulse to stoop and kiss the soft youthful lips, to touch them even if ever so lightly. If he could without awakening her! But no, she was his guest, under his roof and protection. All that was best in his nature rose and held him motionless like a hand of iron. After a few seconds Katrine stirred, and Stephen, feeling she was about to awake, would have moved away, but his eyes seemed fixed and as impossible to remove from her face as one's hands are from an electric battery. The next minute her lids were lifted, and her eyes, two wells of living light, flashed up at him.

"Good-morning," she said, sitting up. "How dreadfully pale you look, Stephen! What is the matter?"

"Do I?" he answered, with a forced laugh, feeling the blood, which had seemed to rest suspended in his veins for those few seconds, rush to his heart again in great waves.

"You do indeed," she said, getting up. "I expect you want your breakfast. Tell me what I can do to make myself useful."

She shook her hair straight, fastened the collar of her bodice, and, was dressed. She needed no toilet apparently, but looked as clean and fresh as a rose

waking up in its garden.

"Nothing," returned Stephen hastily. "Go over and tell Talbot to come in to breakfast, if you like; I'll have it ready when you come back."

Katrine looked round regretfully, as if she would have liked to stay and help him; then concluding she had better do as she was told, she took up her fur cap and went out.

The west gulch looks magnificent in the first early light, with all degrees of shadows, some black, some dusky, some the clearest grey, lingering in its snowy recesses, and the first glimpse of gold falling down it from the east. Katrine stopped and gazed up at the impressive beauty above and around her: trees in the gulch, now covered with a thick snowy mantle, stood assuming all sorts of grotesque forms, and extending their arms as if calling the spectator to their cold embrace. It was beautiful, but to Katrine it seemed so silent, so overawing, and so death-like, that she shivered as she looked up and down from the flat plateau where she stood, and hurried on the few necessary yards to Talbot's cabin.

When they came back together they found Stephen had all in readiness, the fire blazing on the hearth and the breakfast waiting on the table. He made Katrine sit at the head and pour out the coffee for them, which she did with pleased, smiling eyes. Talbot said good-bye to her and went out to his claim immediately it was over, and Katrine and Stephen were left alone. He said he would go and get a pony for her and Katrine rose, but then Stephen hesitated and did not go after all. He turned to her instead, and came back from the door to where she was standing.

"Will you listen to something I want to say to you?" he said, his heart beating wildly.

"Why, certainly I will," the girl answered simply, and she sat down in the chair behind her and folded her hands. Then she looked up inquiringly, waiting for him to begin, but Stephen's voice was dried up in his throat. He stood in front of her, one damp hand nervously clasping the back of a chair, unable to articulate a word. Confusion and excitement overwhelmed him, and he stood turning paler and paler, staring at the proud, handsome face framed in the living yellow sunshine before him. At last he felt he could not even stand, and he turned away with a groan and sank down on the nearest chair with his face in his hands. Katrine, who had been watching him anxiously for the last few seconds, sprang up and went over to him.

"What is the matter?" she said, laying her hand on his shoulder. "Are you ill?"

"No, oh no," said Stephen, catching the little hand in both of his. "No, I want to tell you I love you. Do you care for me? Will you marry me right away, and come up and live here with me?"

His voice had come back to him all right now, and he turned and gazed eagerly up at her.

Katrine did not answer immediately, but she did not withdraw her hand that he was pressing hotly between his own, and a faint smile that came over her face showed she was not displeased; and here Stephen missed his cue—he should have taken the hesitating figure into his arms and kissed the undecided lips. In the sudden awakening of womanly feeling, in the momentary excitement, in the glimpse

into passion, Katrine would have consented, welcoming as her nature did any new emotion; but Stephen was embarrassed and afraid. Fear and uncertainty held him back, the kiss burned ungiven on his own lips, and Katrine uninfluenced by passion could think clearly.

What! come up here and live in this deathly quiet, away from even such amusement as the camp offered? Submit to all his tiresome religious conversations, and, above all, give up those feverish nights of excitement? the hazard and the stimulus of the long tables and the little heaps of gold dust? and her free life, her incomings and outgoings, with no one to question her? No, it was an impossibility.

The next thing Stephen knew was that she was smiling and looking down into his eyes, shaking her head.

"No, Stephen, I can't do that. I like you awfully, and should like you to come and see me; but I wouldn't do for your wife at all, and if you knew all about me you wouldn't want it either."

Stephen clung fast to her hand.

"What is it that I don't know?" he said desperately, putting, as people always do, the worst construction he could upon her words, and at the same time feeling he would forgive her everything, and in a sort of background in his brain contemplating the figure of the forgiven Magdalen at the feet of Christ.

Katrine dragged her hand away suddenly. She was not going to tell him she was a gambler and devoted to the excitement of the tables. She knew that if she did their pleasant talks in the evenings would be at

an end. He could never come to see her without thinking it his duty to try to reform her; and as she knew she was not going to reform, what would be the good of it?

"What does it matter to you? I am not your wife, and am not going to be; I am an acquaintance. If you like me as I am, very good; if you don't, no one cares."

Stephen got up and faced her. He was as white as the snow outside.

"You make me think the worst by refusing to confide in me."

Katrine laughed contemptuously.

"I don't care a curse what you think! Haven't I just told you so? Great heavens," she added, with a burst of conviction, "it would never do for us to marry! Never! Your one idea is to curtail a person's liberty."

"No," answered Stephen quietly, "not liberty in a general way; only the liberty to sin and do evil, the liberty to be ignorant and do things which have terrible consequences that you don't know."

He looked very well at this moment, his pale ascetic face and sympathetic eyes lighted up with enthusiasm. Katrine looked at him and then smiled with her quick, impulsive smile.

"Stephen, you are a good man, and perfectly charming at times; but I am not a good woman, and don't want to be, and we should never get on. So don't let's bother any more about this question at all."

An exceedingly pained expression came over Stephen's face, and Katrine was quick enough to feel that from her words he judged her errors to be other

than they were. In a few words she might have cleared his mind from the idea of her actual immorality, but she was too proud to stand upon her own defence before him; besides, if her faults were not of that class, he would want to know what they were, and in his eyes a girl that gambled and drank and swore, and preferred the dance halls and variety shows to the mission church any day, was quite bad enough; so she concluded in her thoughts, "It doesn't matter if he is mixed."

Stephen at the moment was afraid to press her further, and did not know quite how to treat her; but he was not wholly discouraged, and he thought it best to retain the ground he already had.

"Well, I shall be in town in a few days," he said, "and I shall come to see you as usual, mayn't I?"

"Of course," returned Katrine, and they did not speak again till they were outside and she was mounted at the head of the trail.

What a morning it was! The crisp air was like a bath of sparkling sunlight; the untrodden snow glittered everywhere. Far above the trail a ridge of dark green pine broke against the pale azure of the sky. Stephen leaned against the pony's side and gazed into the warm, lustrous eyes.

"Good-bye, my darling—my own darling perhaps some day."

"I don't think so," she answered, with a mischievous smile, and set the pony at a trot down the trail.

She had to pass Talbot's cabin on her way back, and as she approached she saw him a little way up the creek surrounded by his men. She reined in her horse

to a walk as she passed, and contemplated him. His figure always pleased and arrested her eyes—it had a certain height and strength and grace that marked it out distinctly from others; and then what an advantage it was, she thought, he had no religion and believed in none of those things, and, in short, was quite as bad or worse than she herself was. She walked her horse on slowly, thinking. Somehow it seemed to her that life in his cabin would be far more piquant and amusing than in Stephen's. Yet he neither drank nor gambled, and as for the dance halls and theatre,—well, he had told her he liked dancing; and what a waltz that had been they had had together! But life with Stephen! He would be too good for her, and too stupid. She had a vague sense that what she lived for, excitement, he condemned in all its forms. Just what she cared for in drink, in play, in the dance, the electric pleasure of them, was just what he shrank from as a wile of the Evil One. Even the religious services of the High Church he condemned for the same reason. No, it would never do; life with him would be as cold as the snow around her. She was glad that her answer had been as it had. There was a level place in the trail here, and she put the horse to a gallop, and so came into town with her cheeks stung into rich crimson by the keen air, and her spirits exhilarated and ready for any mischief going.

She went at once to No. 14 in the row, and found Will sitting by his wife's bedside like a model husband. The girl was lying down, her weak white hand clasped in and nearly hidden by the swollen, rough red hand of the miner. She gave a little cry as Katrine entered, and buried her head under the blanket.

"You are not angry with me for sending you up when it wasn't really necessary?" came a smothered voice.

Katrine flung herself on her knees beside the bed and put her arms impetuously round the thin form under the coverlet.

"Angry with you for not dying!" she said, between laughing and crying. "Why, I think you're the best girl in the world, and Will's a pretty good doctor, too!" she added, glancing up at him.

Will coloured and looked a little uneasy, remembering his oaths of last night when he was roused to a ten-mile ride; but Katrine couldn't or wouldn't notice anything amiss. She said sweet things to both of them, and then, unwilling to rob Annie of any part of Will's company, she withdrew to her own cabin.

Two or three weeks passed, and dreary weeks they were. The temperature fell below the zero mark and stayed there, the sun hardly ever shone, the whole sky being blotted out as behind a thick grey curtain. The few hours of daylight that each twenty-four hours brought round was little more than a dismal twilight. Times were dreary, too, provisions ran scarce and very high, and the cheerless cold and darkness seemed to paralyse the energies of the strongest and lay a grip upon the whole town. Many months of the winter had already gone by, and strength and spirits were beginning to flag; health and courage had worn thin, and men who had faced the bitterness of the cold with a joke when it had first set in felt it keenly now like the rest. In Good Luck Row matters were worse than anywhere else in the town; the occupants were mostly very poor, and the pressure of the high prices was sharpest upon

them. In addition to all else they had to suffer, typhoid broke out amongst them, and another horrible fear was added to the terror of the cold. In the universal gloom that hung over the city, under the mantle of darkness, want and starvation and fear and disease wrangled together, while Death walked silently and continually about the darkened streets. During all this time Katrine was about the only one who kept up her spirits and courage. She was the light and comfort of the row, there was not a cabin in it that had not been brightened and cheered by her smiles and benefited by her gifts. She was absolutely without fear herself. The quality seemed to have been left out of her composition, or perhaps it was only that her great physical health and strength made her feel unconsciously that it was impossible for any harm to come to her. She went in and out of the fever-stricken cabins all day, doing what she could for each one of the inmates, and always with her brilliant smile, which was a tonic in itself, and half the night she would sit gambling in the saloons, winning the money to spend upon her sick patients the following day.

As soon as Stephen learned that typhoid had broken out in the row, he came down to her and urged her to marry him and come away to the west gulch, if only as an asylum. But Katrine simply laughed and joked, and would not listen to him. Then he begged her to look upon herself merely as his tenant; he and Talbot would share the same cabin, and she could occupy his in perfect peace and security, and be safely away from the depressing influences of the town and its disease-laden atmosphere. Then she grew very grave, and said simply in a sweet tone that echoed through all the chambers of his heart—

"Dear Stephen, you are very good to be so anxious for me, but I'm not a bit anxious for myself. I should feel like a coward if I went away from the row now. These people are so dependent upon me, and I can do so many little things for them. I feel it's a duty to stay here, and I'd rather do it;" and Stephen had kissed her hand passionately and gone back to the gulch, more in love with her than ever.

She saw very little of him, and was too busy to think about him or note whether he came or not, having so many anxieties on her mind just then, of which the heaviest was the girl-wife Annie in the next cabin. Since the semi-crisis in her illness, over which Katrine had helped her, there seemed to be little change in her condition from day to day. That is, the change did not show itself externally; within the delicate structure, the disease, aided by the cold, the foul damp air of the town, and hopeless spirits, crept steadily and quickly on, but gave little or no outward sign, and Katrine hoped against hope that she could possibly tide her over the time till Will perhaps made a strike and could take her away. She knew how the sick woman clung to this idea. For months now she had been shut off from all communication with the outer world, she never saw a paper or a book, she could not move from her cabin, her whole sphere was bounded now by its four rough walls, and so the one idea that was left to her starved brain and heart was that Will should make a strike. And as a weed runs over a bare and neglected garden, so will one single idea completely absorb and fill a neglected brain, and grow and grow to gigantic strength. This was Annie's one idea; she brooded over it, pondered over it, nursed it, slept with it, and talked to Katrine of it with burning eyes, till the latter felt if it could only be fulfilled the joy of it would almost cure her.

And it might be fulfilled, she knew, any day. It was early days in the Klondike then, and plenty of good ground lay around waiting to be discovered. She heard from Stephen that Will was steady and energetic, had given up drink, and was set upon the idea of prospecting for land of his own. Katrine's heart beat hard with pure sympathy as she heard, and she begged Stephen as the one thing he could do for herself to facilitate Will's efforts in every way and aid him for her sake. Meanwhile, her own care was to keep the fragile creature who was living upon hope still on this side of the Great Divide. And to this end she worked night and day. She kept her cabin clean and well lighted and well warmed. She bought and made soup, and gave fabulous prices for meat and wine, and sat with her long hours cheering her with stories heard in the saloons and picked up in the streets, and scraps of news from the gulch and farther points.

The disease seemed so quiescent that Katrine began to hope more and more that she should be rewarded, and one morning a hurried note scribbled in pencil was brought in to Annie while Katrine was scrubbing the cabin floor, telling her in a few ill-spelt words that Will thought he might get in to town that night. A bright flame of colour leaped over the woman's pale face, and then the next moment faded as her hands with the note in them fell listlessly to her lap.

"He ain't made no strike yet," Katrine heard her mutter to herself.

"You don't know," rejoined Katrine, looking up flushed and warm from her hard work. "He may have some good news to tell you any way."

Annie merely shook her head and gazed out of the

window.

"He'd have told me," she murmured, and that was all.

Katrine had a long and heavy round of visits to make that day, and for two long hours she sat motionless by a dying woman's bedside, fearing to withdraw her hand, to which the poor terrified enterer into the Valley of the Shadow was clinging. In her arms, and with her tired head on Katrine's young bosom, the woman drew her last breath; and Katrine, feeling her own soul wrenched asunder and her body aching with strain and shock, came round in the afternoon to Annie. She would not say a word to her of the death-bed from which she had come. With an effort she talked of cheerful things, of the spring-time that was on its way to them, of the pleasure of seeing Will again, and so on, till her head ached. She did a few domestic offices for the girl, and then feeling she must break down herself if she stayed longer, she said she needed sleep, and if Annie could take care of herself for a time she would go and lie down. Annie noticed how heavy the lids were over her eyes and begged her to go at once, though a strange fear, like a child's of the dark, came over her.

"Will will be soon with you now—the best company," Katrine said, with a tired smile; "and if you want me, a knock on the wall here will bring me to you," and Annie was left alone.

As the afternoon closed in her cough seemed to grow more and more troublesome; the pain in her chest, too, had never been so bad; she had to keep her hand there all the time as she laboured round the room putting everything to rights, making sure that the cabin was neat and tidy against Will's return. At last she sat down in the circle of hot light round the fire,

and little Tim crawled into her lap. She put her arms round him and held him absently. She was thinking over Katrine's words. The Spring! were they really near it? "so near," she had said, "it was almost here." Her eyes looking upwards to the darkening windows caught the old and smoke-hued almanac pinned up to the wall beside it. She set the child down, and getting up walked slowly over to it and ran one trembling finger down the dates. Each one from December, when they had first hung it up, had a heavy black line against it, where she had scratched it out with eager fingers; only the last days had no mark against them. She had been too weary, too heart sick, to note them any longer. What did it matter to her when the Spring came? the almanac for her would have come to an end before that. But now a fresh gleam of hope seemed to have entered her heart, and with a feverish movement she drew the old stump of pencil from her pocket and scratched off the unmarked days, and then stood gazing at the date of that day; they were still far, far from the Spring—too far. Oh, to go back in the Spring, to escape from this prison of darkness, this country of horror and starvation and misery, to be back once more in her home in the Spring! Her mind fled away from the dreary interior of the darkening cabin. She stood once more in the rich grassy meadow with the golden sunlight of an evening summer sky warm around her, the song of the birds in her ears, the hot scent of the meadow-sweet in her nostrils, before her the little narrow path leading to the cottage that seemed to bask sleepily in the yellow glow. She made a step forward with dilated eyes, then the cough seized her, the vision dissolved and fled. Again the cabin with its blackened rafters enclosed her. She turned from the calendar. What was the Spring's

coming? It might come, but they would not go back. What right had she to think of it? They had made no strike, and had not Will sworn he would never go back without the gold? This accursed gold! If they could but have found it as others had! She put her hands to her head to drive away the thoughts, they were familiar and so useless. She had thought them over and over again so often. As she went back to the fire she noticed one of Will's woollen shirts lying on a chair. Why, that was the one she had meant to wash that morning! How could she have forgotten it? And now perhaps she would not get it done before he returned. Her heart began to beat, her limbs trembled. How weak and queer she felt this afternoon! Still, she would do it somehow. There was hot water on the fire that Katrine had put there. She lifted with an effort the great iron kettle from the fire, and with that in one hand and the shirt in the other she went into the adjoining sloping roofed compartment that served as scullery, wood-shed, pantry, and wash-house. It was many degrees colder here, and the long iron nails that kept the boards together overhead had sparkling icicles on them that glittered as the firelight from the inner room touched them, and she could hardly draw her breath. Nevertheless she walked over to the wash-tub and poured in the water, and set to work with shaking hands. "Had ever shirt seemed so large?" she wondered vaguely, and her thin arms moved slowly, lifting it up and down with difficulty. It seemed getting so dark, too. She should have lighted the candles, it wouldn't look so cheery for Will if he came back to find the cabin dark. But was this only the twilight falling? No, it was in her eyes. She leaned heavily on the edge of the wooden tub, trembling, the floor unsteady beneath her, a

strangling suffocation in her throat, a swimming darkness before her eyes. A sense of terrible loneliness pressed in upon her, and then suddenly she knew that in the chill of that dark twilight she was alone with Death. He had come for her at last.

Oh, to have had Will's strong arms round her, a human breast to lay her head down upon, and so die! A nameless terror possessed her, overwhelmed her; she started from the wash trestle. There was a sudden cry, "Will! Will!" and she fell forward on the damp flooring, a little eager scarlet stream of blood pouring out from the nerveless lips to stain the soap-suds under the trestle.

The child sitting playing in the ring of warm firelight in the adjoining room heard that last cry, and startled, dropped his toys, looking with round eyes to the blackness beyond the open door. He listened with one tiny finger in his mouth for many minutes, but no further sound came to disturb him from the wash-house, and he went on playing.

An hour passed perhaps before Will set foot in Good Luck Row, and he tramped up it with a sounding pace. There was fire in his eyes, the blood ran hard in all his veins, his rubber boots had elastic springs in their soles. Yet he carried an extra weight with him. There was something in his pocket in a buckskin bag that burned his hand as if it had been red-hot iron when he touched it. As he came to No. 14 and saw the windows dark he merely hurried his pace, and hardly stayed to lift the door latch, but just burst through the half-opened door and brought his huge burly frame over the threshold.

"Well, Annie, my girl, we've struck it at last," he shouted at the top of his voice, "and you shall come

home right away. Where are you, Annie? Didn't I say wait a bit for me?"

He had entered by the wash-house, but the darkness was thick, almost palpable, before his face and revealed nothing. He went forward to the open door, beyond which the burned-down fire gave only a faint red light, and his foot kicked something heavy on the floor. With a curious feeling gripping his heart, he stopped dead short where he stood and fumbled for a match. Then he struck it, and in its sickly glare looked down. "Annie, my dear!" he called in a shaking voice, and bent down holding the match close to the upturned face. The light played for an instant upon it and went out. "Annie!" he called again, and the word broke in his throat.

A thin wail went up from little Tim in the dusk of the inner room. Where the man stood was silence and darkness. His strike had come too late. His wife was dead.

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Half-an-hour later a man burst into the "Pistol Shot." It was between hours, and the bar-tender was just going round lighting the lamps; the place was nearly empty, only a few miners were standing at the end of the counter, talking together. The new customer staggered across the floor as if already under the influence of drink, kicking up the fresh sawdust on the ground; then he reached the counter and demanded drink after drink. He tossed the whiskies handed to him down his throat, and then retreated to a bench that stood against the wall and sat down staring stupidly in front of him. The little group of

men looked at him once or twice curiously, and then one said—

"Why, it's Bill Johnson, who's just made a strike. Come up, boys, let's congratulate him."

The men moved up to the motionless, staring figure, and one of them slapped him on the shoulder.

"Say, Bill, old man, you're in luck, and we'll all drink your health. Got any gold to show us?"

The sitting figure seemed galvanised suddenly out of its stupor. Will raised his head with a jerk, and the men involuntarily drew back from the glare of his bloodshot eyes. He put his hand to his pocket and drew out a small dirty buckskin bag. He dashed it suddenly on the ground with all his force, so that the sawdust flew up in a little cloud.

"Curse the gold!" he said, and got up and tramped heavily out of the saloon.

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# CHAPTER IV

## GOD'S GIFT

They buried Mrs. Johnson very soon. As one of the neighbours sensibly, if rather crudely, remarked, "Their cabins were too small for them to keep corpses knocking around in them." And so the second day after her death, in a flood of thin, sweet sunshine, they buried her who had so loved the light and the sun, and had longed so wearily for them through so

many days.

Katrine and Talbot stood side by side at the open grave. He had been in the town that day and met Katrine on the street, learned from her where she was going, and accompanied her. He knew something of all she had done for the dead woman, and he watched her now with interest and surprise at her composure. Katrine's face was unmoved, and her eyes were dry through it all.

"Another that gold has killed," she said to him as they turned away, and her face looked grave and grey in the flood of the cold sunlight.

Will was not present. He was down at the "Pistol Shot." He had been on a big drunk for the past two days, not even returning to his cabin at night, and the body of his wife would have lain unguarded had not Katrine brought her fur bag and slept beside it each night on the deserted hearth. Little Tim had been taken in by a neighbour, all the mothers round seeming anxious for the honour after it was known that Will had "made his strike."

They walked in absolute silence for some time up the incline. Talbot was going back to the west gulch, and Katrine said she would walk a little of the way in that direction too. The afternoon was bright and clear, and the air singularly still, so still that the intense cold was hardly realised. The rays of sunshine struck warmly across the snow banks piled on each side of the narrow path they were treading. The sky was pale blue, and the points of the straight larches on the summit of the ridges cut darkly into it like the points of lances. There was something in the atmosphere that recalled a day in late autumn in England. They were nearing the top of the ridge, and

both had their gaze bent on the narrow ascending path before them, when suddenly a tiny object darted into the middle of it and ran up the opposite bank. On the instant Katrine drew one of the pistols from her belt and fired. The little dark form rolled down the bank, dropped back into their path, and lay there motionless. It was a fine shot, for the tiny moving thing was fully thirty yards from them and looked hardly the size of a dollar. Talbot glanced at her with startled admiration. He himself never shot except for food or other necessity, and wanton killing rather annoyed him than otherwise, but here the skill and the correctness of wrist and eye were so obvious that they compelled him to an involuntary admiration.

"You are a good shot!" he exclaimed, looking at the bright, clear-cut face beside him, warmed into its warmest tints by the keen air and the continuous mounting of their steps.

"But not a good woman," she answered shortly, quickly reading the thoughts that accompanied his words. She did not look at him, but straight ahead.

"You might be both," he said, with a sudden impulse of interest and regret.

Katrine laughed.

"I don't know," she said lightly. "Good women are not usually good shots. You don't generally find them combined. But any way, what have I to do with goodness? I don't need it in my business."

He did not answer, and they walked on in silence till they came up to the little dark lump in the road. It was a small marmot. Katrine glanced at it and passed

on. Talbot stooped and picked up the scrap of blood-stained fur.

"What did you do it for?" he asked curiously.

"Practice, that's all," she answered.

"Don't you feel sorry to kill merely for the sake of practice?"

"No. I should have been sorry if I had wounded it; but it's a good thing to be dead, I think. I wouldn't have shot unless I had been almost entirely sure I should kill it."

There was another silence, and then she said suddenly, "One must keep up one's practice here, going about as I do in all sorts of places and making my living as I do. These," and she tapped her pistols, "are my great protection. Only last night a great brute leaned over me and wanted to kiss me—would have done, only he saw I should shoot him if he did."

"Would you shoot a man for kissing you?" replied Talbot in an astonished tone, elevating his eyebrows.

"Yes. Why, I'd rather be shot than kissed!" exclaimed the girl fiercely, with an angry flush on her smooth cheek.

Talbot looked at the contemptuous, curling lips, at the whole beautiful hard face beside him, and walked on in silence, wondering. Her momentary anger was gone directly, and they were good comrades all the rest of the way.

At the point where she stopped to say good-bye to him, she held out her hand: "Thank you for coming to the burial with me, it was good of you," and she pressed his hand with a grateful smile.

It was about a fortnight later on, one of those dreary grey afternoons of late winter, nearly dark already, though still early by the clock, and the mercury in the thermometers had gone out of sight and stayed there. Katrine came tripping along a side street on her way back to the row, warm in her skin coat, and her face all aglow and abloom under her fur cap. She had turned into the "Swan and Goose" saloon on her way up, had put in half-an-hour over a game, and won a fat little canvas bag stuffed with gold dust; had thinned it out somewhat in hot drinks across the bar, and now, warmed through with rum, and light-hearted, she was returning with the bag still well lined in her waist-belt.

She had recovered from the great shock of Annie's death. Her nature, though essentially kind, was not of that soft, tender stamp that receives deep and painful impressions from other's sufferings. She would exert herself strenuously for another, as she had done for Annie, but it was not in her nature to sorrow long or deeply for the irrevocable. There was a certain hardness and philosophy in her temperament that her life and surroundings and all her experience had tended to develop. And in Annie's death there was nothing striking or unusually sad in this corner of the world, so crowded with scenes of suffering, so filled with pathos of every form. There were women hoping and waiting, and longing and starving, in every street of the town, she knew; sickness and sorrow and death looked her in the eyes from some poor face at every corner. Annie had been but one poor little unit in the crowd of sufferers, but one example of the misery of the town, the plague-stricken town, the town stricken with a curse—the curse of the greed of gold.

Matters had brightened very much in Dawson lately, a new feeling of hope and fresh life had gone through the town. The weather was less severe, the days were lengthening, the skies were brighter, the sickness had died out, and people went about their work looking cheerful again; and Katrine, freed from her anxieties and nursing, felt her elastic spirits bound upwards in response to the general brightness of the camp.

She came along humming behind her closed lips, and then suddenly turning a corner, stopped dead short with a horrified stare in her eyes. She had come round by one of the lowest dens in the city. Katrine knew it both inside and out, for there was no place from hut to hut in Dawson that she was afraid to enter. The door was standing open. It opened inwards, and there was a group of men, some inside and some outside, and amongst them they were forcing into the street a drunken woman. The entry to the place was beneath the level of the ground, and reached by a few uneven, miry steps, and up these the unfortunate was blindly stumbling under a rain of blows, pushes, and curses. She was old, and her hair streamed in ragged streaks across her bloodshot eyes, her tawdry skirt was long, and got under her unsteady feet. Just as she had managed to totter to the topmost step, a young man in the group behind her struck her a heavy blow between the shoulders. She tripped in the long skirt and trod on it, tearing it with a ripping sound from the waist, and fell forward, striking her face on the uneven frozen ground. Katrine sprang forward, but before she could reach her the woman had staggered to her feet and turned to face her tormentors, the blood streaming now from her cut lips, her trembling hands vaguely grasping at her torn skirt and trying to keep it to her

waist. A roar of laughter burst from the men at the pitiful sight, and then died suddenly as they recognised Katrine. She stepped in front of the old woman, and faced them with a scorn in her eyes beyond all words. Then she turned in silence, put her arm round the helpless creature's waist, and supported her frail, tottering steps over the slippery, uneven ground. For an instant the men stood abashed and ashamed, then when the spell of those great fearless, scornful eyes was removed, their natures reasserted themselves, and a general laugh went round.

"Birds of a feather!" shouted one, mockingly, as the two retreating figures disappeared in the gathering darkness. Katrine heard it, and winced; but she did not relax the hold of her supporting arm, and by gentle and repeated questioning managed to elicit from the helpless old being where she lived. Katrine turned her steps in the given direction, and drawing out her handkerchief wiped the blood from the old woman's face, and smoothed her straggling grey hair back behind her ears. When they reached her cabin at last, Katrine saw that the stove was black and empty. There was no light of any sort in the place, and the freezing darkness of the interior chilled her through. She would not leave the old woman until she had lighted a fire and candle for her and got her to bed; then, without waiting to listen to the mumbled and incoherent thanks showered upon her, she went out gently and on to her own place. She felt in a very serious mood as she made her cup of coffee and cooked herself a plate of bacon, and then sat down in the red glow of her well-tended hearth to her solitary meal.

"Birds of a feather!" that hateful sentence echoed

round her, until the silent walls themselves seemed taunting her. Was she not, after all, really akin to that old woman, and might she not some day end like her? What was all her own drinking and card-playing and knocking about in the saloons to end in? She shivered, and threw a frightened glance round her. This girl, who would have laughed all sermons, advice, and admonitions scornfully aside, was almost startled now into a sudden reformation by the chance object-lesson of this afternoon. She could not forget it, and in the silence the whole scene rose up vividly before her. She began to long for Stephen to come and break the silence, and glanced impatiently at the clock many times. He was coming in to town that night, she knew. It was a relief such as she had never experienced when at last he arrived, and she had not her own company only any longer.

She was unusually silent all the evening. Stephen did not try to force her into conversation; he was content to sit on the opposite side of the hearth and let his eyes rest upon her in silence. She was paler, he thought, as he watched the orange light from the flames play over the oval face and throw up its regular lines. She was sitting sideways to him, gazing absently into the heart of the glowing coals, and her shadow, formed by the lamp between her and Stephen, fell strongly and clearly outlined upon the opposite wall. Stephen sat in his corner and gazed at it through half-closed eyes. He had been working hard all day, and in the keen, biting air; the warmth and the rest were grateful to him. The silence in the room had lasted so long that he began to feel drowsy under the influence of this quiet warmth. He watched the shadow sleepily, and dreamy fancies floated across his brain. The clean-cut, delicate profile was magnified to colossal proportions on the

blank wall. So it seemed to Stephen that beautiful presence would dominate his life, fill in completely the blank of his colourless existence, as the large shadow filled the wall. Then, as his gaze followed its outlines, he saw what his eyes had not found before: a huge upright line of shade, formed by her chair back, ran up beside and mingling with the other lines. It seemed to curve over towards her shoulder, and then a few seconds more, and to Stephen's drowsy gaze, the harsh line expanded into a hideous grotesque figure. Out of those few shades upon the wall there leaped a picture to his eyes: the girl, and at her side, bending over her, a hideous devil, a strange vampire, hovering nearer or farther, in blacker or lighter shades, as the flames in the fire rose and fell. Stephen watched in a fascinated stupor, and then suddenly, as the light died down in the grate and the shade leaped out nearer and blacker, he started to his feet with a sudden exclamation.

The girl started too, and looked up. "What is it?" she asked.

Stephen pointed to the wall. Katrine turned, the blaze sprang up on the hearth, the shadows were gone, the illusion vanished.

"What is it?" she said again, wonderingly.

"Oh, nothing—a hideous shape on the wall," stammered Stephen. "I was watching your shadow, and another seemed to come up and threaten it. Imagination, I suppose—perhaps I had fallen into a dream," he added hurriedly, fearing she would laugh at him.

But Katrine did not laugh: she looked at him gravely and in silence. In her mind she was pondering a

question, hesitating, half fearing to speak to him, half impelled to, and half held back, and the equal opposite forces acting on her mind kept her silent.

Stephen, unused to her present mood, felt perhaps she was annoyed or wearied, and drew out his watch. It was past ten.

"I will say good-night," he said, rising.

Katrine got up too. Her face paled yet more, her bosom rose and fell quickly. "Take me away from here," she said abruptly and suddenly.

She had been thinking all the evening how she would approach the subject with him, and then at last his leave-taking had startled away all her circuitous phrases and left her only the crudest words at her command to express her meaning.

Stephen was startled and confused, but his voice was very tender as he took her hand in his and said, "I don't understand, dear; what do you mean?"

He felt her hand tremble in his. She looked up at him appealingly. Her eyes seemed frightened and uncertain. She was more womanly at this moment than she had ever been. To Stephen she was infinitely more fascinating than she had ever been. Accustomed to her bright, fearless independence, admire that as he might, in this weakness, whatever its cause, she was irresistible.

"Well, I mean," she said, speaking nervously, but with an effort to control her excitement, "the other day you spoke of our being married, and I said I couldn't stand a quiet life. Stephen, I will marry you now, and go anywhere with you. I will be content with any life, any monotony—only take me from

here at once! I loathe this place, this life." She stopped suddenly, and a wave of crimson blood swept over the white face. "I want to be taken away," she repeated.

Stephen looked at her a moment in silence, with a sense of apprehension and alarm. He could not do as she asked; he was not free—his claim held him.

"I don't know quite what you mean," he said, a little stiffly, though he felt he did know. "It would be quite impossible for me to go away now; my whole heart's in the work, and I've sunk all I had in it."

"Yes; and your soul too," said Katrine suddenly, looking at him with shining eyes and a calm face. "You're a slave now to your gold, the same as we all are here—a community of slaves," and she laughed.

Stephen grew red, and looked confused, alarmed, and angry, all at the same time.

"Nobody would go now," he said, remonstratingly, "and leave ground like that. It would be insanity. Ask Talbot, ask anybody if they would."

"Talbot!" repeated Katrine, scornfully; "he's the worst slave of all; but then he never preached about his soul, and wanting to reform people."

"No one can reform you if you won't reform yourself," replied Stephen, coldly; and there he spoke the truth.

"Who was it who has put in our prayer, 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil'? Here I live in temptation: I am always thrown into evil. If I were not—" Her voice was very quiet, and had a strange pathetic note in it. It ceased, and then there was

silence.

Stephen felt as if a hand were laid on his lips and crushed down the voice that kept struggling from his heart. A second more, and then the girl laughed suddenly.

"Oh, I was stupid! I did not know what I was saying, did not mean it anyway. It's quite right for you to stick to your claim and the idea you started with, and so on. You will make a great success if you do, and that is all you want!"

Her tone was jesting and cynical as ever now—the usual hardness had come back to her face. The moment of submission, of confidence, of repentance, had passed—a moment when she could have been moved and won to any life he wished, and he had lost it. He felt it. Yet how could he have done otherwise?

"Forget what I said—quite," she added; "and go now. It's getting late, and I want to get down to the saloons."

A thrill of horror went through Stephen, as she knew it would. He gazed at her blankly with a horrible feeling, as if he were murdering somebody, clutching at his heart.

"What are you waiting for?" she said, impatiently. "Why don't you hurry back to your claim?"

"Katrine ... I—" he stammered, staring at her, but even as he looked a great wall of gold seemed to rise between them and shut her from him. "Forgive me," he muttered brokenly; "I can't give it up now."

"Good-night," said Katrine, and he turned and

fumbled for the door handle and went out.

When he was gone Katrine turned to her small square of looking-glass that hung beneath the lamp on the wall.

"What a fool I was to-night!" she said, looking at the sweet reflection and smiling lips.

A few minutes after Stephen had gone, a slight figure, muffled up to the eyes, slipped out of No. 13 and hurried with quick steps down the uneven footway of Good Luck Row.

That night Stephen climbed to his cabin with his head on fire and a singing in his ears. A terrific struggle was going on in his breast. He felt the path of duty was clear to him now, and equally that he did not want to follow it. He had tried to shut his eyes to it; tried to believe that it was not clear, that he did not know what was right or necessary to do, and therefore that he might be excused if he did not do it, but he could close his eyes no longer. They had been dragged open to-night, and he could not wilfully close them again. As he strode up the narrow little snow path leading to his cabin he felt that he knew his duty, and he groaned out aloud in the silent icy night.

To leave now meant to endanger, perhaps to sacrifice, the million dollars that he felt in a month or two he could take out of his claim; and to stay meant to endanger, perhaps to sacrifice, a human soul! A million dollars, a human soul! These two ideas possessed him. A million dollars, a human soul! the two thoughts rang alternately through his brain until it seemed as if voices were crying them out upon the soundless air. According to his religion,

spirits combated for the soul of man, and it seemed to Stephen that night as he mounted the solitary path under the far-seeing eyes of the frosty stars above him, that spirits really fought around him, good and evil, for the victory. "A million dollars!" shouted the evil ones, "do not throw them away." "A human soul!" wailed the others, "do not let it fall into evil." His sensitive, excitable mind trembled before the crisis. His own soul shuddered and sickened, for he seemed to see the hosts of greed of gold, and they were stronger than the hosts of light. And Stephen himself now was badly equipped for the conflict. He felt and recognised with dismay he had not the strength and the fervour now that had brought him through former battles. He was as a warrior that has fallen asleep and awakened to find his arms grown rusty while he has been sleeping.

Gradually for the last six months the lust for gold had been eating into his spirituality and destroying it. You cannot serve God and mammon: had he not entered into the services of mammon, and been held there by the rich rewards?

He thought of the rich pans he had been getting out. There was no claim like his in the camp. There was no man more envied nor considered more lucky than he. Yes, mammon had paid him well in the six months he had served it, showered upon him more than God had done in six-and-twenty years; and here was God's gift, a human soul, a sweet human life, he could save and make his own—and Stephen groaned again, for he felt that the gold was dearer to him. How could he have so changed, he wondered. A year ago he would have laughed at the idea of a million dollars being a bribe for him to sin. He looked into his heart now and found there was nothing there but

a passion for gold, gold! It was a yellow rust that had eaten into his Christian's sword.

Then his thoughts strayed to the girl he had just left, and her bright fresh face seemed to sway before him as he walked. His excited fancy painted it upon the snow banks at his side. She was so young, she seemed so fresh and lovely, it was impossible to think of her as tainted already with vice and sin. It was only if she were kept in this snow-bound prison, this mournful land of darkness and suffering, where, as she said, she had no place nor aim, that she would fall as those bright meteors were falling now far in the distant darkness. He could be her deliverer, her saviour, if—if he could.

In the icy cold of that arctic night, great drops of sweat broke out hotly on Stephen's forehead as his brain was wrenched to and fro in the struggle. He tried to bribe even himself, tried to let his thoughts dwell on his passion for the girl, tried to think of the mere human sweetness that would go hand in hand with his victory over evil. If he won that bright clean soul for God, would he not also win that loved human form for himself? But even the voice of passion was drowned in the clamour of the greater greed.

The next morning, as soon as it was light, Stephen went out to his claims. None of his men had come up to work yet. Stephen stood and looked over the stretch of ground beneath which he believed his fortunes lay. A light covering of snow had fallen on it during the night and lay about a foot deep in one unbroken sheet, not even the mark of a bird's foot disturbed its blank evenness: the claims looked very cold and drear in the dull dusky grey light of the

dawn under that leaden sky. But Stephen's heart beat quickly as he gazed upon them. What did it matter that cold, dreary, surface, when the gold lay glowing underneath!

Stephen felt as only a man of his sensitive conscience could feel his defeat of the previous night. His heart, all his better nature was crushed under a sickening load of mortification, and he sought desperately to find relief and justification for himself in contemplating the treasure for whose sake he had accepted it. As in other circumstances a man would solace himself for all sacrifices by gazing on the face of a mistress for whom he had relinquished worldly ambitions, and find excuses for himself in her beauty, telling himself a hundred times she was worth it all; so Stephen now gazed upon his claims, for which he had given up his scruples, his principles, his conscience, and his God, and tried to hug to himself the comfort that they were worth it. After a few seconds he tramped across the frozen snow to the line marked out by the banks of gravel where they had been at work the previous day.

That evening he could not stay in his cabin, he felt restless and ill at ease. A nervous sense of anxiety hung over him. He seemed to himself to be expecting some misfortune. His nerves, weakened by the lonely life he had been living for the past months, and exhausted by the sleepless hours of the previous night, kept presenting picture after picture of possible ills. He looked over both his revolvers, to make sure they were in good order for defence if he were attacked that night. Then he drew his fur cap tightly down on his forehead and went out. The stillness of his own cabin and the clamour of his own thoughts were unbearable. The night was still and

starlit, the air keen and thin as a knife-blade. Stephen strode along the narrow frosty path, and took the road down into the town. On his way he passed Talbot's cabin. It was lighted up. The little window made a square of yellow light in the darkness; the blind over it was drawn only half-way down. Stephen stepped up over the bank of frosted snow and looked in. The great fire lighted up the whole of the small interior, and threw its red light up to the cross logs in the roof. In the centre of the room, at a table. Talbot sat working. There were some sheets of paper before him, and he held a pen in his hand with which he was checking off some figures. His face was turned to the window; it looked pale and tired, but there was a curious expression of extreme tranquillity upon it—a settled, serene patience that struck the onlooker. He sat there working on steadily, motionless, calm as a figure in stone; and poor Stephen, torn in the struggle of his desires, slipping into the cold slough of self-condemnation, and burnt with the fever of greed, groaned aloud as he stood outside. Then he turned from the window and plunged back through the snow to the path that led to the town. He wanted to see Katrine, and yet he hated the thought of facing her after their parting of last night. What must she think of him? With her quick mental perceptions she would have seen through and through his miserable mind; seen that the gold had got hold of him, held him now, and that his boasted religion had no power against it. No, he thought, he could not face her—he was still some distance from the town; then as he drew nearer, the unappeasable desire to see her and hear her fresh bright voice came over him. When he reached Good Luck Row he went straight to No. 13. He might have saved himself the trouble of his

decisions. Katrine had decided for him whether he should see her that night or not. The window was dark; he tried the door, it was fastened; she was evidently not there. A chill ran over Stephen from head to foot, and then he recognized how much he had really wanted to see her. He stood outside the door a long time; the row was quiet, there were few passers. He waited, hoping to see her come up each minute—perhaps she had only gone out on some errand; but the minutes passed and he grew cold standing there, still she did not come. At last Stephen moved away from the door and wandered disconsolately down the row. He went on mechanically, not heeding where his footsteps took him, and found suddenly that he had reached the main street down by the river. There was no darkness nor quiet here, all the stores had their windows wide open, and the light from them poured out upon the black slippery mass of ice and melted snow that lay over the frozen ground. The saloons were in full blast, brilliantly lighted and filled with noisy crowds of miners. The dance halls, of which there were some dozen along the street, seemed doing a good business. A shooting gallery that had been fixed up in a tent was not only filled inside, but a crowd of men and some women were gathered round the tent entrance, pushing and pressing each other in their efforts to get in; the glare from the flaming lights inside fell on their faces, and Stephen glanced eagerly over them to see if Katrine was amongst them. He passed on, disappointed. There was another tent a little farther on, where a cheap band was playing, and a board outside announced in pen-and-ink characters the attraction of a "Catherine Wheel Dance." The crowd here was even larger, and lights were fixed outside flaring merrily in the frosty

air. Stephen walked on, past the stores and warehouses, past the noisy crowded saloons, past the brilliant dance halls and the variety show tents. It was to him all a hideous, tawdry, glaring mockery of merriment; and on the other side of him was the sullen blackness of the frozen river. He walked on until he had outwalked the town front, outwalked the straggling tents, till he had left the noise, and light, and laughter behind him. When he glanced round he saw he had nothing but the river and a waste of darkness beside him. There was an old log in his path; he sat down upon it and looked back to the mist of light that hung over the town, then his gaze wandered back disconsolately and rested on the ice-bound river.

Katrine had passed that day wretchedly too. She had been down idling in one of the saloons through the afternoon, but the old resorts seemed to have lost their charm. The old pleasure had gone, and the stimulus would not come back. The cards looked greasy and dirty and revolted her, and the drink seemed to turn to carbolic acid in her mouth. She left at last, and went home to her lonely cabin and flung herself down in the dark in the chimney corner and tried to sleep, but horrible faces danced before her, and women with grey hair and wrinkles, with her own face, stared at her from the walls.

She was still lying face downwards on the skins, half dozing now after that long conflict with horrible visions, when a light and very timid tap came on the door outside. She got up and went straight to it; her face was flushed and tear-stained, and her hair ruffled and in disorder, but she never thought to go first to the little square mirror that hung in the corner to improve her appearance before admitting

visitors. As she threw open the door, the stream of hot light showed Stephen upon the threshold white as a spectre, chilled almost to death by his vigil at the river, with a strained smile on his lips and a great hunger in his eyes. His conscience reproached him: he knew he had not come bravely with his hands full of the sacrifice, having conquered himself, and ready to lay down all for her sake; but like a coward, still in the thrall of his money-lust and yet longing to attain her too, unable to give her up. He knew all this, and stood timidly as the friendless dogs will gaze through an open hut-door, wistfully, expecting to be driven away with blows; but Katrine met him with neither harsh words nor looks, she just simply put out both her warm hands and drew him in over the threshold. The welcome, the smile, the warm touch overcame him.

"Katrine," he muttered suddenly, as she closed the door and barred it, "if I—if—I gave—up," and then the words died, strangled in his throat. Katrine held up her hand.

"Don't begin to talk about anything like that," she said, gently pushing him down on the chair by the hearth, "till you are warm again. Where have you been freezing yourself like this?"

She was busy lighting the lamp and setting her little old blackened coffee-pot over the flames. Stephen told her of his long lonely tramp by the river, and watched her with keen eager eyes as she made the coffee and poured him out a cup.

"Now drink it all quick," she said imperatively, handing him the boiling mixture, from which the steam came furiously.

"It's like the ordeal by fire," answered Stephen, meekly taking the cup. With a heroic effort he swallowed three parts of it, and colour began to come back to his face.

Katrine observed this, and sat down contentedly on the floor in front of the ambitious fire, that seemed trying to leap up the chimney through the roof.

"Stephen," she said very slowly and gently after a minute, "it was selfish of me to ask you to leave your claims. I've been thinking of it all day. I won't do it, and I will come and help you work them."

Stephen felt the room whirl round him as he heard. Was he not in some rich, warm dream that would dissolve and leave him suddenly? His claims, those golden claims! and Katrine too—he seemed to see her dressed in gold, framed in gold, gold in her eyes and hair. Her movement, as she turned to look at him, brought him back to realities.

"Do you mean it?" he said, stooping over her and catching her hands almost roughly in his. She met his feverish eyes with a bright, tranquil smile. He looked at her keenly for an instant, and involuntarily an exclamation broke from his lips: "Katrine! it's too much happiness for any man!"

Perhaps the gods above, who eye jealously the lives of mortals, here made a note of this remark in their pocket-books.

Katrine knitted her brows angrily. "I don't think so," she said. "You had better hear what sort of girl I am."

Stephen turned pale, and leaned down over her as she sat on the hearth, her head against his knees. The cabin was full of the warm red firelight, that leaped

over the walls and up to the rough blackened rafters above them. It glistened on the silky dark hair beneath his hand, and fell ruddily over the smooth oval face turned up to him. Stephen looked down at her and felt content.

"No, no," he said hastily; "never mind anything in the past; we will efface it all; we make a fresh start from to-night." He would have stooped and silenced her with a kiss, but an arrogant look came over her pale face, and she pushed him back with her hand.

"No, I don't like that idea. We must have things cleared up and tidy before we marry. You must know the truth from me, and then you will know how to meet any one who comes to you with talk about me afterwards; and they may come, for I'm known in all the saloons of Dawson."

Stephen shuddered.

"If they keep to the truth about me, you must just accept it; if they tell lies, you'll just shoot them."

Again a cold thrill passed through her lover. To talk of shooting—taking a human life—murder—as though it were no more than a snapping of the fingers! His mind flew on a sudden bound of remembrance back to the little school teacher in the village of Arden, who could not bear the sight of a rabbit's blood on the trap, and whose quiet days were spent between the village schoolroom and the village church; yet he knew he had never loved that little teacher as he loved Katrine, that she could never rouse him as this woman did whom he believed to be an epitome of evil, who, as she lay now in the firelight by his feet, reminded him of the emblem of sin that crept into man's Eden. Yet it was

a pleasure—what pleasure to be near her, to touch that smooth skin! But what was this pleasure?—was it also evil? What was this passion? His thoughts flew onward feverishly, and then Katrine's voice struck across them and brought him back to outer consciousness again.

"Listen," she was saying, "while I tell you all, and *then* we can start afresh, as you say."

Stephen put his hand over his eyes, and waited in silence. He dreaded unspeakably what he thought he was going to hear, and with a man's moral cowardice would have deferred her confession, slurred over and tried to forget her wrong-doing, rather than hear and forgive it. They had changed places since he had asked her that morning in his cabin to confide in him.

"Well, to begin with," went on her clear, soft voice, "I drink—I like drinking. You think it wrong to drink anything but water; I like wine and spirits, anything that excites me, and I can drink with any man in town. But I have never been drunk, Stephen, you understand that. Then I like all kinds of gaiety, and like to spend all my time dancing and laughing, and what your friend Talbot calls 'fooling.' And I gamble," Katrine paused a second before she said the decisive words, and then went on rapidly, "oh, Stephen, you don't know, I haven't told you, but I love the tables. I can sit up all night and play with the boys; I love excitement, I love the winning and raking in the gold dust. I spend all my nights playing; it's what I live for in this awful place."

There was silence, then Katrine's voice broke it again —

"Now you think that so wicked, I bet you don't want to marry me now."

There was a half laugh with a sad ring in it as she looked up to his covered face. Now Stephen heard, but the words fell on his ears dully; he was waiting in strained painful tension for what was to come. It was true he loathed gambling as a hated vice, and but for the apprehension that gripped his mind her confession so far would have been horrible to him. Still it was as a Christian that he abhorred these things. What he expected to hear he would have abhorred as a man and a lover; and the former abhorrence is considerably milder than the latter.

"Go on," he said at last, in a stifled voice.

"There is nothing more," returned Katrine, dejectedly.

She thought she was being condemned and despised, and to none is that a cheering feeling. Stephen sat up suddenly, and then bent over, clasping his hands round her waist, lithe and supple even in her rough clothing, and drew her up to him.

"Is there nothing?" he whispered eagerly in her ear. "Have you nothing more to confess to me?"

Katrine gave herself up to his embrace, a delicious sense of peace and protection and warm comfort stealing over her such as she had never known.

"Nothing," she murmured, with her soft lips close to his ear and her silky curls touching his neck. She felt Stephen grasp her close to him, and a tremor ran through his whole frame.

"Have you never lain like this in a man's arms before? never felt a kiss on your lips?" he persisted,

holding her to him with a fierce intensity of growing passion.

"Never, never," Katrine answered, opening her calm dark eyes and looking straight up to his.

Stephen met their gaze for one long second, a proud, tranquil, fearless look that sunk deep into his soul and poured balm into every wound she had ever made there. The next moment she felt a torrent of hot kisses on her face, a pressure that almost stifled her on her breast, a murmur of "Darling, my darling," and knew nothing very clearly any more except that she was loved and very happy.

# CHAPTER V

## GOLD-PLATED

The next afternoon, when Stephen returned to the west gulch and Talbot heard his news, he said he was glad, and meant it. Life at the gulch was very desolate and dreary, and such a bright glad presence as the girl's would alleviate the monotony and disperse the gloom.

For the following week both men were busy preparing Stephen's cabin for her reception and trying to impart to it a bridal appearance. The hands were left to do the work on the claims, and Talbot and Stephen were too busy indoors to even oversee them. The cabin was large and well built. It stood looking across the gulch, and half-way down it, over the tops of the dark green pines and facing towards the western horizon, where the pink lights played and the little sundogs gambolled in the fall of the short grey snowy afternoons. Stephen was down in town once in the week, and came back with his pony laden with mysterious packages, and when Talbot came in in the evening he found Stephen on his knees, tacking down strips of carpet by the bed in the inner room. Narrow curtains had also been nailed up beside the window, and altogether the cabin presented a luxurious appearance.

"This is quite magnificent," remarked Talbot, strolling about with an admiring air.

"D'ye think so?" replied Stephen in a pleased tone,

lifting a flushed face from his tacks and sitting back on his boot heels. "She's awfully handsome, isn't she? Say, it's strange to come to a hole like this and meet the handsomest girl you've ever seen!"

"She is very handsome," assented Talbot, sitting down by the stove and stretching out his frozen feet before it. He was in the other room, but close to the open door leading into the bedroom, and facing Stephen as he sat on the floor with the screw of tacks by his side that had been paid for in gold.

"And good, too, eh? good at heart, don't you think? Only not exactly religious, of course," he continued.

"No, she's not very religious," returned Talbot, with the dry, hard tone in his voice that his subordinates knew and hated.

"But it's not every one who says, 'Lord, Lord, that shall enter the kingdom of heaven,'" quoted Stephen; "you remember, Christ said that," he pursued in an anxious tone, peering up at the other for encouragement.

Talbot gave his slight, quiet laugh.

"You've got the handsomest girl in the place," he said, "and a very nice, charming one, too. I don't see what more you want."

To his strong, determined character this perpetual straining after a religion that was cast to the winds first at the temptation of gold, and then at a saloon-keeper's daughter's smile, was rather contemptible.

"And 'there's more joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth,' etc.," Stephen continued, anxious to persuade himself into a comfortable frame of mind.

"Has Miss Poniatovsky repented?" asked Talbot, still more dryly.

"Why, yes; I told you all she said. She won't gamble any more."

Talbot was silent; through his mind was running a line of Latin to the effect that wool once dyed scarlet can never recover its former tint, but he said nothing.

It did not take Katrine long to prepare for her wedding. There was no such thing as buying a trousseau in Dawson. She gathered together her coarse woollen underclothes, her stout short dresses, and thick boots, and packed them in two flat cases, such as can be strapped to a burro's side, and these were to be all she would take up to the cabin in the gulch besides her wealth of natural beauty. She did go to many of the stores around, buying trifles such as might happen to find themselves there and suit her: a small looking-glass here, a ribbon or a piece of lace there, and as she leaned across the rough trestle counter she generally remarked to the storekeeper, "I'm going to be married." She said it in the shyest, happiest tone imaginable, and a little blush stole over her smooth cheeks. In this way the news got round to Katrine's old friends and associates. She would have liked to have told them herself, but the old hunting grounds were forbidden to her now, and Stephen's wishes made a barrier between her and the entrance of all the saloons. He had tried to make her give him a solemn promise never to enter one again, but this Katrine would not do.

"I can't be tied like that," she had said. "Something might occur to make it necessary for me to go into one of those places; and if I had promised you in this

way, I could not. You have said you don't wish me to go; I have said I won't. Isn't that enough?" And Stephen had looked into the clear dark eyes and had said "Quite."

The day of Stephen's marriage, the day when Katrine was to arrive as a bride at the west gulch, was calm and still. There was no wind and no snow falling. The sky stretched black and gloomy above the plains of snow; it was a day of the Alaskan winter, but still a good day for that. Stephen had gone down the previous day, and slept the night in Dawson. Talbot was waiting at the cabin to receive them on their return. As he stood at the little window that overlooked the trail, waiting for the first glimpse of them, and staring across the dismal waste that ran into grey and dreary mist in the distance, a great revolt stirred in his usually calm and philosophic breast—a sudden longing swept over him for the blue skies and warm air of the lands he was accustomed to, and a wilder longing still for a glimpse of the sunlight held in two eyes that were fairer than any sky. He shut his teeth hard, and his hand closed tightly on the window frame. "Only a little longer," he muttered to himself, and then far in the distance came a soft silvery tinkle of bells. Recalled to himself, he relaxed his face in a pleasant smile, and went to the door and opened it. In a second or two they came in sight, riding single file up the narrow trail, the girl first and Stephen following. She wore a large skin coat of some shaggy fur which concealed her figure, though not its splendid upright pose, and on her head was a small fur cap of some light colour, white fox or rabbit. Beneath showed her dark glossy hair curling upwards over the brim, and her glowing face rich and fresh as a Damascus rose.

Talbot was greatly struck. The realisation of her beauty came home to him very forcibly in this cold, envious light of open day. "Stephen's not such a fool, after all," was his inward comment as he went forward to meet them. As he lifted her from her pony and bade her welcome to the cabins and the west gulch, she smiled down upon him. What a mysterious, magic thing human beauty is, and the human smile! It seems to light the dreariest sky, people the loneliest landscape. Where there is a human smile to reflect one's own, not even a desert seems desolate, not even a prison cell seems cold. Talbot felt this very strongly in that moment. As the warm, bright, laughing, youthful face looked into his, the sun seemed to have suddenly burst out upon that dreary snowy plain, and as the two men escorted her over the threshold it seemed to both that they were throwing open the door not only to her concrete self but to the abstracts, warmth and light, and gaiety and laughter, and that these all flowed in with her into the simple rough interior, transforming and illumining it.

Katrine was delighted with her new home; she walked about examining every detail and showing her joy and pleasure in each little trifle that had been prepared for her. She had a very soft voice and manner when she chose,—she was too young yet for her gambling, drinking, and rough associates to have spoiled,—and Stephen stood in the centre of the room, flushed and silent with the fulness of his pleasure, following her eagerly with his eyes. After all, in this world of ours, everything stands in such close relation to its surrounding objects and circumstances that there is no absoluteness left. Or you may consider it the other way, that the feelings are absolute and always the same. A millionaire

bridegroom could not receive more pleasure from the pleasure of his bride when viewing the mansion he had prepared for her, than Stephen did now from Katrine's approval of his log hut, and her thanks and smiles were as sweet over a little wooden shelf tacked against the wall, as if a two thousand dollar chandelier had called them forth.

Then Stephen took her arm and drew her into the next room, and here she was so shy and nervous she could not look about at all. Stephen took off her cloak and all her outer wraps, and then made her come and see her reflection in a little square looking-glass that he had obtained for her at quite a high price; but Katrine could not face the mirror, and hid her blushing cheeks and downcast eyes on his shoulder instead. Stephen put his arm round her. "You don't regret what you have done?" he asked in alarm, pressing her close to him.

"No, oh no, dear Steve, only it's all so strange; let's go back to the other room."

They returned, as she wished, and found that Talbot had laid the dinner for them,—a dinner he had spent all the morning in preparing,—and they sat down to it with a gaiety that made up for the shortness of supplies. After dinner they drew close round the fire and prolonged the roasting and eating of chestnuts and drinking whisky throughout the afternoon,—for whisky was there, strongly as Stephen objected to see her drink it; still it was their wedding day, and he let it pass. As darkness came down a whirling snow-storm swept through the gulch; they could see the thin sharp flakes fly past the window on the cutting wind, and hear the whistling roar of the storm as it struck and beat upon the cabin. They only flung

more logs into the stove, and gave a backward glance over their shoulders from time to time towards the window. By nine in the evening, when Talbot was leaving them to go to his own cabin, it had calmed down a little, though the wind still moaned in the hollows of the gulch.

Stephen and Katrine stood at the window a second after he had gone, looking out into the curious misty whiteness and blackness commingled of the night.

"I am sorry there should be such a storm the first day you are here, darling," said Stephen softly, putting his arm round her waist.

"Why, what does that matter? I do not mind, I have you to protect me. You will always now, Steve, won't you, from everything? I don't want ever to go back to that gambling life again."

He drew her into his arms.

"Of course, of course I will," he said, kissing her. "I will always take care of you."

Her arms were interlaced about his neck, they looked into each other's eyes, and neither knew any more whether it was a storm or a calm in the night outside.

For the first few weeks after their marriage Katrine was more than happy, and it seemed to those lonely beings, sheltered from the savage siege of Nature only by those frail little cabins built by their own hands on the edge of the snow-filled gulch, that a new life had blossomed for them suddenly—a perfect spring in winter. The girl's wonderful health and unfailing spirits were in themselves a delight, and she was possessed of such a sweet and even temper,

that it seemed to smooth out and round off the hard edges of their rough, comfortless existence. Nothing seemed to have the power to disturb her, the most irritating and annoying incident never even brought a frown to her face; it filled her with consternation for the men, and an immediate desire to smooth it over for them, if possible to prevent their being ruffled by it. For herself, she seemed above the reach of any circumstance to disconcert. One morning the men had an instance of this. They were all three living together in Stephen's cabin now. That is to say, Talbot took all his meals there, and used it as his own home in every way, except that he still went back to his cabin to sleep. It had seemed cheerless to both Katrine and Stephen for Talbot to be eating alone a few yards from them, and though it gave the girl more work, and for that reason Talbot was slow to accept the arrangement, she herself coaxed him into it. They came in late from the claims to lunch, and found her bending over the fire, with flushed cheeks and happy eyes. She was stirring a great saucepan of inviting looking and smelling stew, that she had spent the whole morning in preparing. The large handle of the pan projected from the stove some distance, and as Stephen threw off his overcoat he managed in some way to tip up the saucepan with a sudden jerk that sent the contents half into the fire, half over the girl's bare arm, from which her sleeve was rolled to the elbow. She did not utter a sound as the scalding liquid ran burning over her flesh, but Talbot saw her face grow deadly pale with the sickening pain. After a second of agony, when she found her voice, and Stephen was remorsefully spreading fat over the blistered, cracking flesh, the first thing she said, with her eyes full of disappointed tears, was, "Oh dear! how unlucky! Now you won't

get anything hot for lunch." And as soon as a bandage was twisted round her scalded arm, she was over at the cupboard collecting all the best of her cold supplies and laying them out on the table.

There was not a word of anger or reproof to Stephen for his carelessness, not a word of her own pain. The great sorrow that she was anxious to smooth over and atone for to them was that they would have to put up with a cold luncheon!

Her one idea, the sole thought that occupied her, was to make these two men happy, at any cost to herself. All day she studied how she could make their life, so hard and rough smoother for them, how she could alleviate the labour and monotony of it. She rose in the morning long before either was awake, and had the fires blazing, wood brought in, water melted out, and the coffee made by the time they came into the sitting-room, looking white and sleepy in the flare of the common candles. All the house work they had formerly found hard, when counted in addition to their outside labour, she took entirely upon herself, and insensibly they both felt the relief very great. There was no coming home now, worn out and frozen, to a cheerless cabin, and being obliged to chop wood and light fires and split ice before they could get warm and rested. A glowing hearth, a laid table, a smiling face, always awaited them. Often coming up from the dump at the lower end of the claim, they could see the square patch of red light flung out from the window on the snow, bidding them hurry in to the welcome warmth and light inside.

The daylight only lasted them now from ten to two, and for these hours the men worked out of doors.

During their absence the girl went out on shooting expeditions of her own. She had invented a modified snow-shoe, broad and short, with slightly curved-up ends, and with these strapped on to her lithe feet, her fur coat fastened up to her chin, and her fur cap drawn over her ears and to her brows, she defied the fall of the mercury, and skimmed over the snow as silently and swiftly as a shadow moving.

She enjoyed these long, lonely excursions, with her heart kept warm by the hope of discovering something she could bring down with her pistol or her shot-gun, and carry back as a surprise and a treat for the men for supper. There was not much indeed to be found; but a small breed of snow-bird was prevalent, and quite a flock of these would very often follow or precede a snow-storm, and whenever Katrine's keen eye caught sight of the little dark patch that a cluster of them made against the snow, she would glide swiftly over in that direction, and have eight or ten of them swinging at her belt to take home. They were small, but cooked as she knew how to cook them, they were a delicacy beyond price to the men who for months had tasted little but beans and hard bacon. Katrine felt quite happy if she could return through the suddenly falling gloom of the afternoon and cross the darkened threshold just as the men came back, half frozen, from the creek, and show her cluster of victims swinging by their long-necked heads from her waist.

She thought of them, planned for their comfort, and worked for them all day; while to her husband she was absolutely devoted, and one would think that for such devotion a few smiles, a kiss, and some kind words was a small price to pay. Yet after the first few weeks, and even during them, Stephen, who worked

all day to secure his mining gains, would not even exert himself to that degree to return the affection that was worth all his claims put together. One kiss given before he went out to his work in the morning would have made Katrine happy all day, one tender inquiry on his return would have amply rewarded her for all her labours, yet he invariably went out to the claims without bestowing the one, and returned without making the other. Hard work, privations, loneliness, even the absence of all the amusements she had delighted in, would not have broken her spirits; she would have accepted them all cheerfully, if her husband had only thrown over them the little light and warmth of his affection that she longed for. Each day she hoped it might be different; but no, he grew more and more absorbed by the gold fever that was eating away his heart and brain, and the girl grew more and more depressed and resentful. "It would be no trouble to him," she murmured to herself over and over again, as she stood at the wash-tub, wringing out his shirts, or knelt on the floor of the cabin scrubbing the boards, "just a kiss or a smile."

She did not in the meantime relax any of her attention to him. Her smile for him was always as sweet when he returned, her efforts to please him as untiring, but in her heart her thoughts turned more and more constantly day by day to the idea of leaving him, of returning to her own life, where at least she had not been tormented by this perpetual hope and expectation and disappointment.

Stephen never dreamed that the girl's thoughts were as they were; though if he had done so, he probably would not have altered his own course—for Katrine in several angry outbursts had appealed to him, had

told him how she hungered after, not great and difficult proofs of his love, but the little ones, the trifles, how he was starving and killing her love for him by his neglect of it, and he either could not, or would not, understand. But that she contemplated ever leaving him never crossed his brain, any more than the conception of the passionate hate she felt for him at times when he left undone some trifling thing, that if done, would have roused an equally passionate access to her love. He, jaundiced with this mental yellow fever, thought his rich claims, his great wealth, had probably had some influence on the daughter of the Polish Jew when she accepted him. He relied, in fact, on his wealth, and on the material advantages she would gain by clinging to him, to hold her to him. And with Katrine this was a rope of sand. She cared no more for Stephen's wealth and for his claims than if they had been ash heaps. There was not a touch of avarice, of calculating greed, in her whole character, and to gratify her own impulse she would have cast all material advantages aside. From Stephen she wanted love, and that only, and this was the only chain that could hold for an instant her proud, independent, reckless will.

There were the makings of a splendid character in the girl, all the foundations of all the best qualities in her: a little care, a little culture bestowed on them, and she would have developed into a fine and noble woman; but Stephen's eyes were blinded by the glare of the gold he saw in his visions, and the far greater and more wonderful treasure, the living human soul, that chance had given over to his care, unfolded itself slowly before him in all its beauty, and he could no longer see it. To Talbot it seemed incredible that Katrine through her mere physical beauty did not obtain a greater hold upon him, that she seemed

so unable to absorb him, that she could not triumph over him by the road of the senses. Talbot himself was absorbed in his work, but even he, the onlooker, the outsider, felt the influence of this brilliant young presence that had come suddenly into their sordid life, like the sun rising in radiant majesty over a barren plain. The common table at which they sat seemed no longer the same now that she was at the head, with her beautiful figure rising above it, and her laughing, lovely nineteen-year-old face looking down it. To him, those liquid flashing eyes, and arching brows, and curled red lips seemed to light, positively light, the small and common room. But the eye grows accustomed to beauty and ceases to heed it, just as it grows accustomed to, and ceases to heed, ugliness and deformity, especially where there is no standard, no measure for it, no comparison with other objects. Just as any shortcoming, any mental or physical defect that a man hardly notices in a woman he loves, when alone with her, becomes painfully apparent to him when he sees her surrounded by others, so does her beauty strike him when reflected in other eyes, and pass unheeded when seen only by his own. Katrine was alone, there was no other woman's face to either rival or be a foil to hers, and after the first six weeks her beauty ceased to sting and surprise Stephen's senses. She, as it were, became the standard, since there was no other. And there is no absoluteness about beauty, nor our admiration for it. When we say we admire a woman because she is beautiful, we mean we admire her because she is more beautiful than other women. If all others were the same as she, she would cease to be called a beautiful woman, and if there were none others than she, then she would simply be a woman for us. We could not know whether she was beautiful

or not. Man's senses are made not to perceive, but to compare, and he cannot judge except by comparison. Talbot knew all this, and he could not help feeling sorry that a girl such as this should be so isolated with them, and that the man who possessed her should realise his good fortune so little. He suggested often, for the girl's sake, excursions down into the town; but Stephen, partly from his religious views, and more from his anxiety not to waste a minute of his literally golden time, always frowned down the question, and though the girl looked at him wistfully she never complained against his decisions. She seemed to have completely accepted the idea that her marriage meant the renunciation of all the things she had delighted in, and if her marriage had given her more of what she had hoped for, she would have been contented with the change.

One evening, when Stephen was out in the shed at the back of the cabin stacking up some wood by the light of a candle stuck in a chink of the logs, Talbot and the girl were sitting idle on each side of the stove, and somehow, though Talbot seldom opened his lips on such matters, seldom in his life offered opinion or advice to others, they had now been speaking of her marriage, and Stephen's attitude towards her.

There were tears in her great eyes, and her under lip quivered and turned downwards like a wet rose-leaf.

"He is so *very* wrapped up in all this digging business, why did he want to marry me at all?" she said, in a sort of helpless childish wonder.

Talbot was silent, looking at her, and then instead of answering her question, said—

"Why don't you make him notice you more? why can't you appeal to him?"

"Appeal to him!" she repeated; "it's no use. Why, he is gold-plated—eyes, ears, touch, everything, all plated over; you can't reach him through it."

"Have men nothing like affection in them?" she said, after a minute. "Have they nothing between their mad bursts of passion and a cold incivility? What do they do with all the charming ways they have before they possess a woman? Stephen was so gentle, so nice, so interested, when he used to visit me down town; and now you see how rude and hateful he is very often. Why do they change? I have not changed. I am still as attentive, as eager to please him, more so, than when he came to my cabin. Oh," she added, after a minute, "I'm getting so tired of it all, I feel I'd like to throw it all up and go back to my own life and freedom. All the men are so civil and so nice and so devoted as long as a woman does nothing for them," she said simply, not fully realising perhaps the terrible ironical truth she was half-unconsciously uttering.

"I could love him immensely," she added, stretching out her arms; "oh, he could have such a love from me, if he wanted it; but as it is, I don't see much use in my staying with him. I feel I'd like to go back to my own life and forget I ever married him."

"Oh, you must not do that," said Talbot, startled out of his usual calm, and fixing his eyes on her; "pray don't think of such things."

"Do you think he would care?" she said, opening her eyes in her turn.

"I'm sure he would," Talbot answered, with so much emphasis and decision that the girl sat silent and impressed for some seconds.

"Why is he not more amiable then?" she asked.

"It's men's way," returned Talbot, not knowing exactly what to say, and accidentally hitting the truth completely.

"They're fools," replied Katrine, angrily, while the hot tears fell thickly into her lap.

Stephen came in at the moment, and though Katrine made no attempt to conceal the fact that she was crying, he took no notice of her, but began talking to Talbot about the wood.

"We shall have to take the sleigh to-morrow and go up the gulch and get some more wood somehow, if we can. There's only a few bundles left," he said, blowing out the candle and dragging some heavy logs over to the fire.

"Can I come with you?" asked Katrine, looking at him with her soft pathetic eyes, still brimming with tears.

"Why—yes—I suppose so," returned Stephen, slowly opening the stove and looking in.

"I shall enjoy it so much," answered Katrine, her face beginning to sparkle with its accustomed smiles. "We have not had a sleigh ride together once, have we? I'd like to go with you better than anything. You'll like it too, won't you?"

"I don't know; it's a confounded nuisance having to leave the claims a whole afternoon, I think."

Katrine got up suddenly from where she was sitting

and walked into the next room without a word. Her tears were dried, her smiles killed.

The following day was clear and bright, and a cold, pinky-looking winter sunlight filled the air. Katrine and Stephen started early, and Talbot did not expect them back till dark. He was out on the claims all the morning, and came in to his lunch late and did not go out again immediately. It was a day for a half-holiday, and all his men left early; the claims were deserted, and Talbot found himself in solitary possession of the gulch. He felt restless and unsettled, and walked about his little bare room in an aimless way quite unusual to him, and the early part of the afternoon had passed away before he realised it.

In one of his walks he went up to the window and stood looking out. The gulch always impressed him; it had a solemn melancholy majesty and desolate grandeur that is not easy to define in words: an icy splendour by moonlight, and a horrible gloomy beauty towards the fall of the day. It was at this time that Talbot stood looking out at its rugged edges and the snow-drifts turning grey as the sunlight left them, and listening with a sort of mechanical tension to the unbroken and oppressive stillness round him, when his eye caught sight of a man's figure, moving slowly towards the house. It had appeared so suddenly where for hours there had reigned unbroken silence and loneliness, that Talbot started a little with sheer surprise; and then another appeared, and another. They were coming, one behind the other, singly, round the corner of the house, and as they emerged into view on the level platform in front of it Talbot looked them over and saw at a glance to what order they belonged.

"As tough a crowd of claim-jumpers as I have seen," he murmured to himself as he watched their movements. They did not seem very decided or certain, nor well agreed amongst themselves. There were six in all, and they advanced towards the house in a loitering way, pausing once or twice to talk with each other, and glancing over the cabin. They were all dressed alike, in large slouch hats, thick boots and high leggings, and short coats with a belt round the waist, from which depended their enormous six-shooters. As they finally, in their loitering fashion, neared the door, Talbot walked to it, threw it wide open, and asked them what they wanted. They hung back from the door a little and looked at each other, and then one said he had a lease on the claims from General Marshall.

"I am the only person who has power or authority to give a lease on these claims," returned Talbot in a short, hard voice.

The men hesitated. Talbot looked pretty tough himself as he stood there facing them, clothed in buckskin from head to foot, his head nearly touching the lintel of the doorway above him, his revolver on his side, and behind him looming the tunnel, a gaping mouth of blackness.

The men shuffled their feet on the snow and grinned at each other uneasily. It did not seem they could work the game of bluff here that they had thought out in the town.

"Well, that's your opinion," returned the leader in a bantering tone, while the others closed in nearer the threshold in a jeering circle; "but a lease from General Marshall's good enough for us, and I guess we're coming in."

"You'd better try it," returned Talbot, and he slammed to the heavy door in their faces, and fastened it on the inside.

He expected them to force it, and he hastily dragged together some sacks of rich dirt that were lying in the tunnel and piled them up, forming quite a respectable barricade. Behind these he took his stand, his revolver in his hand. With six against one he felt they must win in the end, but he thought he could put a bullet through half of their number as they advanced, and he'd sell his claim and his life dear.

He waited some moments, but nothing happened. There was silence outside, and after a second or two he stepped back to his sitting-room and looked out of the window. A council of war was taking place seemingly. The men had all withdrawn to a little distance, where there was some old tin piping. They had seated themselves on this, and were now in earnest conversation. Talbot stood at the window and watched them with a dry smile. He could tell their talk almost from their expressions and their gestures. It was one thing to come up and bluff a man out of his property, and walk in and take it as he walked out; and another to force a narrow tunnel against the straight, steady fire of a fearless devil like this. They could overpower him in the end, there was no doubt of that; but then when they walked in it would be over his dead body, that was clear, and several others besides him, for he was known to be the quickest, straightest shot in the district, and could certainly get away with some of them. It was this part they did not like, for each man felt he might be the one to be picked off and stretched stiff in the tunnel. So there was considerable parleying and

hesitation amongst them, and Talbot stood motionless at the window watching them as they sat there, and noting the length of their six-shooters that dangled down the sides of their legs. At last there was a concerted movement amongst them: they got up with one accord, and without another glance at the cabin walked slowly away across the plateau in front of the house and round the corner of it towards the town trail, the way they had come. Talbot watched them disappear in the grey light of the gulch with surprise, and then drew a deep breath. He hardly knew whether he felt relieved or disappointed. His blood was up then, and he would have liked to send a bullet through a few of them. He roamed about restlessly for some time, and went to the back of the house to a little square window, and from there watched the last of them mount the trail and disappear from the gulch. Then all was silence and solitude again, in the swiftly falling darkness. He turned into his sitting-room, and stirred the fire into a blaze and lighted up the lamps—his lamps always burned well and brightly, being kept scientifically clean and trimmed with his own hands,—then he flung himself into a chair and sat there gazing into the flames, his revolver beside him on the table. He half expected the men to return, and his ears remained attentive to the slightest sound without. But there was nothing, absolute stillness reigned all around him; not a crackle of the frosted snow nor the fall of a leaf broke the grave-like silence.

When the other two came in, he told his afternoon's adventure in the quietest, simplest way possible, and the fewest words. The girl listened with flushing cheeks and sparkling eyes.

"What fun!" she said at last when he had finished,

and kicking off her snow-laden boots as she sat by the stove. "And you held off six men by the 'power of your eye?' what a convenient eye that is! I don't see you've any need to carry a six-shooter! I wish they'd come back to-night, we'd give them something of a reception."

Talbot laughed, and looked pleased at the praise from her bright young lips. Stephen only looked anxious.

That night they sat up rather later than usual, and Katrine was quite in a pleased state of expectation. No visitors made their appearance, however, and at last Talbot left to go to his own cabin.

"Now, if they come in the night," remarked Katrine, laughing, as she said good-night, "don't slay them all with your eye, mind, but give me a chance."

Talbot promised to use his eye mercifully, and Katrine and Stephen put their lights out and went to bed.

It seemed to Katrine she had been asleep some time, when she awoke suddenly and put her hand on her husband's arm. "Steve, I hear steps."

"Nonsense," murmured Stephen, drowsily; "it's your fancy. Go to sleep."

But Katrine's ears were like those of a wild animal, quick and not to be deceived.

"Go to sleep yourself, if you can," she retorted, and sprang up in the darkness, found her day clothes, and hustled them on. There was silence now outside, but Katrine hurried all she could, and then with one revolver in her belt and one in her hand went into

the other room. Suddenly, and without the slightest warning, there was a crash, a sound of tearing and splitting wood, and the door was crushed inward, letting in a blast of icy air. There was pitch darkness within and without. Katrine answered immediately by two shots fired in succession; there was a heavy groan, a muttered curse, and some shuffling of feet outside. Katrine, standing flat against the wall to avoid offering a mark for wandering shots, chuckled inwardly and waited. A second later a shot came in return, but the bullet went high. Katrine heard it whizz into the wood somewhere between the wall and roof.

She stood motionless, listening. Just in front of her, on the other side of the room, was the stove, and in this there still glowed an unextinguished portion of log, making one small spot of blood red in the surrounding darkness. Katrine fixed her eye on this glowing spot. To enter farther into the cabin the men must pass between it and her. She raised one of her revolvers into a line with it. When that spot was obliterated, she would know, however silently they moved, the enemy had advanced, and in that second she meant to fire; the stove was high, and a man passing in front of it would have that red spot in a line with his heart.

With her heart beating fast with exultation, and not a tremor in her steady fingers, she waited motionless as a statue against the wall. She was not a girl of a cruel nature, but her husband lay behind that slim partition on her right, and unarmed, for Stephen would never carry a pistol, and she would have shot unhesitatingly each man in succession that tried to pass her to him. There seemed to be some talking outside and a trampling of feet on the broken wood

of the door, and then suddenly the soft red fire spot was eclipsed in the total darkness around, and on the instant Katrine's finger had pulled the trigger. There was no groan this time after the shot, only a heavy thud and a crash as a falling body struck some fire-irons by the stove. The red spot glowed out of the darkness again and stared Katrine cheerfully in the eyes. There was a confusion of voices outside: Katrine could hear the thick oaths and one man apparently enjoining another to come out of there and have done with the business. Katrine smiled as she heard. She guessed that the man addressed was the one that lay now between her and the stove, and his ears were for ever closed. In the same moment she heard the inner door open, and for an instant Stephen appeared, pale and in his night clothes and with a flaring candle in his hand. With a spring like a leopard Katrine had reached him and put her hand over the flame of the candle, crushing it out beneath her palm. The darkness she knew was their only shield. By their voices and their footsteps she could tell the men without numbered not less than four or five. Once let a light reveal to them that the house was held only by a single girl, they could overpower her in a few seconds. It was only that horrible pitchy darkness, out of which those deadly shots came ringing with such precision and promptness, that filled them with the idea that the cabin was protected by a body of desperate and straight-shooting miners. It was the fears of the besiegers now simply that was protecting the besieged.

"Go back," she said, with her lips on his ear, "unless you can find a pistol, and be ready to shoot," and she pushed him within the door again.

She stood as before, in an even line with the red

bull's-eye of the stove, and listened; there was still a scraping of feet and muttering of voices outside, but not so near the door, and she wondered if the enemy were going round the cabin to attack it from another side. Suddenly a shot rang out in the stillness outside, then another, and the ball came through the window behind her and passed over her shoulder; there seemed to be a rush and stampede towards the door. She turned and faced it, raising both revolvers, and as she heard the wood of the fallen door split under the trampling feet, her fingers had almost drawn the triggers to welcome the incomers, when out of that cold blackness beyond the door came a slight cough. Katrine's hand dropped to her side, a sick, cold horror came over her as she realised what she would have done in the next instant. That was Talbot's cough. One second more of silence, one more step forward, and her shot would have found his heart. She reeled where she stood, against the wall, with the sickness of the thought. She could not shoot again now: he was there outside amongst them —and Stephen, was he there too, or inside? Talbot, she supposed, roused by the noise, had come out and attacked them between the two cabins. Then what she had said to Stephen recurred to her. Suppose he had searched and found a gun, and should come out from the inner room, he would not count upon Talbot's presence any more than she had done; he would naturally shoot at the first who crossed the threshold, as she herself had done; he would shoot in the dark, by her orders. The thoughts flashed quicker than lightning through her brain. The horror of the situation, this uncertainty, this killing blindly in the confusion and the darkness, was too great to be borne. The danger now was greater than even the light could bring. She dropped the pistols on to a

stool beside her, drew a match from her pocket, and heedless of the perfect mark she herself offered now, struck it and held it over her head. In a second, the body across the hearth, the wrecked door, and two pale faces looking in at her from the opening, leaped into sight; the enemies, the living ones, were gone. A pool of blood beyond the threshold, and blood on the splintered wood, and their dead companion, only remained. For a moment the three faces, all pale with fear and anxiety, not for themselves, but for each other, stared nervously into each other's eyes in silence. Then Katrine broke it with a laugh, and brought down the match from over her head and put it to the lamp on the table.

"Oh, you frightened me so," she said, as she turned up the wick and made it burn, and the men stepped over the door and came in. "I thought I might kill you."

She looked up at them both in the lamplight, as if to reassure herself they were really there alive.

Talbot laid his six-shooter on the table.

"You frightened me," he returned, jestingly. "I wouldn't come under that straight fire of yours for anything. The men outside were easier to deal with, they got so scared with you shooting in here and me shooting in their rear; they thought we were a band of a dozen at least."

"I'd no idea you were there," murmured Katrine, shuddering still, as she moved from the lamp to the fire, and began drawing the half-burnt logs together.

"Stephen climbed out of the back window and came round to me, but the first shot had already wakened

me; I was getting my clothes on when he came," answered Talbot, walking over to where the dead man lay between the hearth and the door, and surveying him. "Some of your good work, I see," he said, after a minute. "This is one of the lot that came up yesterday afternoon. Tough-looking chap, isn't he? Well, you see I did not kill them all. I gave you the chance you asked for," he added, looking at her with admiring eyes.

"And haven't I made the most of it?" she returned, lifting her flushed face, sparkling with smiles, from the fire.

Stephen had crept in, pale-faced as the corpse itself, and stood now staring at it in a dumb horror. He could not understand how Talbot and his wife could laugh and jest with that terrible object lying motionless between them. Had the danger and excitement turned her brain, he wondered, and looked at her apprehensively, but Katrine gave no sign of mental or physical collapse. She looked smiling and well pleased with herself, and was stirring the fire and settling the coffee-pot over the flames as if nothing the least startling or disconcerting had occurred, as if no cold body was lying stretched there by the threshold. Stephen, reassured for her, let his eyes travel to the corpse, and then, with a sort of groan of horror, sank back on a chair with his face covered in his hands. Katrine looked up quickly from the fire, and then went over to him, putting an arm softly round his neck.

"What is it, Steve, dear? you weren't hurt, were you?"

"Oh, to have killed him! to have killed a man, how horrible!" muttered Stephen, without lifting his head.

Katrine looked amazed. "Well, but he would have killed us if he could," she answered. "You kill a mosquito if it annoys you, and that's right. You only kill a man if he tries to kill you, that's quite fair."

"But a murderer!" and Stephen shuddered. She felt the shiver of horror under her hand.

"Isn't it better to be a murderer than murdered?" she asked, with a little smile, feeling she had an unanswerable argument.

"Murdered, your body is killed, murderer, your soul," came back in the same stifled voice.

Katrine was silent. She was thinking what a nuisance it was to have a soul that needed so much looking after, never seemed to do any good, and was always obtruding itself and spoiling your best moments of fun in this life.

"We'll take him away," she said softly, after a minute, noticing that Stephen kept his fingers closely locked over his eyes, as if to shut out some fearful sight. "Talbot, let's take him out," she said to their companion, who stood with his back to the fire watching them. Stephen made no sign.

Talbot and the girl walked over to the body. It was stiffening rapidly, and the wide-open eyes glared up glassily to the black rafters of the cabin.

"Might this be useful?" said Talbot, stooping over the man and half drawing the second large revolver from his belt.

"No, take nothing," answered Katrine, hastily; "we want nothing."

Talbot let the weapon slide back to its place, and

they both bent down and lifted the corpse between them. Talbot walked backwards over the cabin door behind him. It was dark outside—a thick, pitchy darkness, with only a grey glare close to the ground from the snow.

"Let's take him to the gulch," whispered Katrine, "and send him down it; it will worry Stephen so if he sees him again."

It was only a few yards to the edge of the ravine; they moved towards it cautiously and stopped upon the brink.

"Are you ready?" Talbot asked in a low tone, and Katrine whispered back "Yes." There was a heavy thud, then a soft rolling sound, and then silence, as the drift snow in the bottom of the gulch received and closed over its gift. They waited a second, then Talbot stretched out his hand towards her, found her arm in the darkness, and they both walked back together.

"It's a pity Steve is so sensitive," said Katrine, plaintively. "I just saved him, and his house, and his precious gold, and everything, to-night, and he does not like me a bit for it."

"I think you are a very brave little girl," said Talbot, softly.

"Do you?" returned Katrine, in a pleased voice; and Talbot felt that she turned her face and looked up at him in the darkness. "Steve and I don't fit very well, do we?" she added, with a sigh; "and he does not fit this life. Somehow, I don't believe we shall ever leave this place alive—I have a presentiment we shan't. You will—you'll make a success and go back; but we

shan't."

Talbot did not answer, as they were at the cabin.

Stephen met them at the door as they came in, with a white stricken face. "Where have you put it?" he asked in an awed, trembling whisper.

"Down the gulch," replied Katrine, composedly. "Now, Steve, you're not to worry about it any more—it was a necessity."

She glanced round the room and saw that Stephen had been too much shaken to think of putting it in order. The coffee-pot stood where she had left it, and the coffee was boiling over and wasting itself in the fire. She ran to it, took it off, and began pouring it into the cups on the table; as she did so the men noticed blood dripping from her wrist into one of the saucers.

"Oh, yes," she said indifferently, in answer to Stephen's startled exclamation, "I thought I felt my sleeve getting very damp and sticky; there's a graze on the shoulder, I think, and the blood has been crawling slowly down my arm, tickling me horribly. Let's see how it looks!"

She unfastened her bodice and took it off, seemingly unconscious of Talbot's presence. He stood silently by the hearth watching her, and thought, as he saw her bare white arms and full, strong white neck, how well she would look in a London ball-room. Stephen, all nervous anxiety, was examining her shoulder. A bullet had gone over it, leaving a furrow in the flesh, where the blood welled up slowly. Katrine turned her head aside and regarded it out of one eye, as a bird does. Stephen bent over her and kissed her,

murmuring incoherent words of remorseful sorrow. Katrine flung her arms round him and laughed.

"Why, I am delighted! it's been quite worth it, the fun we've had to-night. That's all right—it will be healed in a couple of days; just tie it up with your handkerchief."

It was an easy place to bind, by passing the bandage under the arm, and this, by Katrine's directions, Stephen did, with trembling fingers. Talbot had turned away from them, and occupied himself by fixing up the door and stuffing the chinks where the wood had broken. When this was done and the bandaging finished, Stephen brought a shawl from the other room and wrapped it round the girl's shoulders, and they all drew in round the fire in a close circle with their cups in their hands.

Their common danger and the sudden realisation of how much they were, each of this lonely trio, to the other; how easily any one of them might have been taken from the circle that night, and how irreparable would have been the loss, drew them all closely together as they had never been before—that delicious chord of sweet human sympathy that lies deep down, but ever present, in the human breast, vibrated strongly in their hearts, and they sat round the cheery blaze, talking and laughing softly, and looking at one another, and then smiling as their eyes met, for mere lightheartedness.

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# CHAPTER VI

## MAMMON'S PAY

This little excitement quite delighted and pleased Katrine. She had spoken just the truth when she said she wished something like it would happen every day; and the only thing that spoilt the fun of it was Stephen's dejection and the persistently depressed way he looked and felt over it. After a day or two the pleasant sense of life having something worth living for passed away again, and the time seemed heavier and slower than ever. Day followed day in a dreadful monotony, and the girl visibly lost health and spirits. She changed a good deal, and both men noticed it. She lost her wonderful sweetness and evenness of temper and her bright smiles, and became fretful and irritable, discontented, and sharp in her replies. In the long winter mornings now she would not spring up in the early darkness as formerly, but try to fall asleep again after waking, and put her arm across Stephen and tell him there was no use of getting up, that the day was long enough anyway, and it was too dark to do anything; and then she would abuse him if he insisted on getting up in spite of her, and let the breakfast wait so long, that after a time the men drifted into the habit of having it alone, and going out without seeing her. Katrine had grown to hate the day, to hate every minute in fact when she was not sleeping, and to try to make the night last as long as possible. Stephen noticed all this, and spoke to Talbot about it in distress. Talbot merely said, "Perhaps it's her health; you'd better ask her." Stephen did so, and found there was a reason for her apparent illness, which delighted and consoled him; but when Katrine flew into a passion, declared it was detestable, that it would take away her freedom and her power to ride and enjoy herself, Stephen was

shocked and grieved, and said he was disappointed in her; whereupon Katrine replied she hated him, and Stephen quoted scripture texts to her till she ran out of the cabin and rushed across to Talbot's in a passion of sobs and tears. At least, she knew he would not quote texts to her. Talbot did all he could to smooth out matters between the two, and after that Katrine spoke very little; she took refuge in a dejected silence, and grew paler each day. It was only when the men had gone out to work, and she was left alone with a great pile of things to mend, work which she hated, that she would go to the door and stand looking out over the grey waste under the snow-filled lowering sky, with the tears rolling silently down her checks. From where she stood she could see, through the greyish air, the men working far down at the other end of the claims, and the long line of trenches and the banks of frozen gravel; sometimes, in the light fog, made of the tiny sharp snow-flakes, sifting through the air, they would look misty, like ghosts or shadows; and sometimes the dulled click and scrape of the spades would reach her.

"Slaves, slaves, just like slaves," she would think, watching the muffled-up figures continually bending over their work; "and they're digging graves, graves." And she would think of Annie, and the grave Will had been digging for her while he dug for gold. A red sun, dull as copper, hung above them, and sometimes the great Northern Lights would send up a red flame behind the horizon; and to Katrine it seemed like a blood-covered sword held up by Nature to warn them off a land not fit for men. One afternoon, when the sun looked more sullen and the sky more threatening than ever, and the men moving at the end of the claim looked no more than mere blots in

the cold mist, she stood watching the steady red blade shoot up in the ashen sky, and began comparing its colour to other things. "It's as red," she said to herself softly, "as Hearts and Diamonds;" and then her thought wandered to the cards themselves, and she thought of the hot saloons at nights crowded with faces, and the tobacco smoke in the air, and the jabber of voices, and the laughter of the miners, and their oaths and jokes and stories, and their friendly ways to her, and the admiration on their rough and sometimes honest faces, and the long tables and the spat, spat of the falling cards as they were dealt, and the chink of the glasses and the hot spirits burning your throat, and then the feeling of jollity, and then the warmth and life and cheeriness of it all. Her eyes brightened and her chest heaved a little as she leaned against the lintel. If she could have one night of it again! And here, what would it be when the men came back? Supper, and then Talbot and Stephen talking of their work, and the probable value of the claims, and the pans they could make, and what the dirt would run to, and then dismissing the whole subject as impossible to decide till the spring came and they could wash the gravel, and then having so dismissed it, they would fall to speculating again what the spring would show them the dirt was worth, and so on all over again from the beginning. Oh, she had heard it so often, nothing, nothing but the same topic night after night, and after that, cups of coffee, of which she was sick, or water, and then reading a chapter of the Testament, and then going to bed, and Stephen too dead tired to give her a good-night kiss. If they had had a game of cards in the evening now, all together, and become interested in that and forgotten to talk of their claims, and some good whisky after it, or cleared out

one of the cabins and had a dance there with some of the hands who lived near, and a man to whistle tunes for them if there was no other orchestra; but no! Stephen thought that cards were wrong and wouldn't have them in his house, and whisky too, and dancing worst of all, and only the sin of avarice and the lust of gold was to be connived at there. As she stood there, the thought slipped into her mind quite suddenly, so suddenly that it surprised herself, "Why not go down to town and have a good time as she used?" Her heart beat quickly, and the old colour came into her cheek. She glanced at the dull, coppery sun growing dimmer and dimmer behind the thickening snow fog, and the pink light flickering on the horizon, at the dim figures of the men and the grey wastes on every side. There was a thick silence, broken only by a faint far-off click of a shovel from the trenches. There would be half-an-hour's more daylight, half-an-hour before the men returned to miss her. She would get a good start anyway. She turned into the cabin again, her face aglow and her eyes sparkling. She knew that Stephen would be fearfully angry with her—she had not been once to the town since her marriage—but she had a stronger nature than Stephen's, and felt no fear of his anger.

"He thinks I am a reformed character," she muttered contemptuously to herself, as she put on her thick rubber boots. "Well, I told him there was only one chance to reform me, and that was to take me away from here, and he wouldn't do it."

She built up the fire in an enormous bank, and left the men's slippers and dry socks beside it. Then she slipped into her long skin coat, and crushed the fur cap down on her eyebrows and pulled it over her ears. As she went out she took a long look at the

claims—the men were still busy there. "Slaves," she muttered. She closed the door with a sharp snap and left the key hanging on it, as was usual when she was inside. Then she turned her face to the town trail, and set off at a long steady stride through the dead silent air. The town was within easy walking distance for her, and though it would be dark before she reached it, that mattered very little, her eyes were strong and almost as good as a wild cat's in the dark. On every hand the sky seemed to hang low and threatening over the earth, and the air had the grip of iron in it, but Katrine pushed on at the same even pace without even an apprehensive glance round. Her spirits rose as she walked. She felt the old sense of gladness in her youth and strength and health, and in her freedom, and she bounded along over the hard, glittering snow, full of a mere irresponsible animal pleasure, such as moves the young chamois in his bounds from rock to rock. Darkness had come like a blot upon the earth before she had done half the distance, but now she had the twinkling lights and the reddish haze of Dawson before her. Her own eyes brightened as she caught sight of them, and she hastened her steps. By the time night had fairly settled down she came into the side streets of the town. Dawson is an all-night town, and things were in full blast—saloons, shooting-galleries, dance-halls, and dog-fights going on just as usual. She noted with satisfaction that nothing seemed to have altered a little bit since she saw it last, and as she turned into Good Luck Row, to walk down it for old acquaintance' sake, a big, disreputable old yellow dog she had fed through last winter, came bounding up and leaped all over her in delighted recognition. Katrine was pleased at this welcome, and spent quite a time at the corner with him, asking how many dog-

fights he had had lately, and being answered with short triumphant barks that she took to mean he had demolished all the small dogs of that quarter. Then she went on and passed her own former house, and saw to her surprise it was vacant, and so was Annie's next it. That looked as if Dawson was not pressed for space. As she was turning out of the row she saw ahead of her another old acquaintance, this was a human one, and Katrine felt as if she had quite slipped back into her own life as she hailed him.

"Sam!" she called gently. "Hello, Sam!"

The miner turned, and as soon as he saw her a broad, genial smile overspread his countenance and stretched his mouth from one edge of his fur ear-flaps to the other.

"Why, Kate, you down here again; you've cut the parson fellow, eh?"

"Oh, no," said Katrine hastily, reddening a little; "I'm just in town for a day or so. How's your wife?"

"Well," answered Sam slowly, as he put himself at her side and slouched heavily along the side-walk with her. "She's all right—leastways I reckon she ought to be; she's in 'eaven now."

"Oh, Sam!" said Katrine, in a shocked voice, "is she dead? How did she die? when?"

"Why, I reckon it was the cold like, she kind of froze to death. When I got home one night the fire was out, and she was just laying acrost the hearth; the room was awful cold, and there warn't no food neither—I 'spect that helped it. I'd bin away three or four days, and the food give out quicker than I thought, and the firin'. I arst a doctor here wot it

was, and he said it was sincough or sumthin'."

"Syncope?" suggested Katrine.

"Yes, that's what 'e said; but I sez it was just the cold a ketchin' of her heart like, and stopping it."

"What were you doing?" asked Katrine.

"Why, I was out arter gold, o' course."

Katrine shivered. They passed the "Sally White" at that moment, with its flaring lights and noise of merriment within.

"Let's go in, Sam, and get a drink. Your tale has pretty near frozen me."

They turned in, and as Katrine pushed open the door there was a shout of recognition and welcome from the men round the bar. The door fell to behind them, shutting out the icy night.

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When the light failed, and the night had come down on the claims like a black curtain let fall suddenly, the men left the ground, and stiff with cold, their muscles almost rigid, plodded slowly and silently back to the cabin. The hired men dispersed in different directions, some going down town and some to their cabins near. When Stephen and Talbot entered they found the fire leaping and crackling as if it had just been tended, and both men sat down to change their boots in the outer room. The door into the bedroom was shut, and they supposed Katrine was within. They were too tired and frozen to speak, and not a word was exchanged between them. After

a time Stephen got up and went into the inner room; there was no light in it, and the door swung to behind him. Talbot, with a white drawn face, leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

When Stephen entered he thought Katrine was probably asleep upon the bed, and crossed the room to find a light. When the match was struck and a candle lighted, he stared round stupidly—the room was empty. He looked at the bed, Katrine was not there; then his eyes caught a little square of white paper pinned on to the red blanket. He went up to it, unpinned it slowly, and read it with trembling fingers. Talbot, waiting in the other room, hungry and thirsty, got up after a time and began to lay the supper. This done, he made the coffee, and when that was ready and still Stephen had not reappeared, he rapped at the door. There seemed a muffled sound from within, and Talbot pushed the door a little open. Inside, he saw Stephen sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the paper in his hand.

"What's the matter?" said Talbot.

Stephen handed him the paper in a blank silence, and Talbot took it and held it near the candle. This is what he read:—

"I have gone down to the town to get a little change and to relieve the dreadful monotony of this life. Don't follow me; just leave me alone, and I'll come back in a day or two. There's no need to be anxious. You know I can take care of myself."

Talbot laughed quietly, and walked back into the sitting-room.

"Well, she gives you good advice," he said; "I should

follow it. Let her have a day or two to herself—a day or two of liberty. She'll come back at the end all the better for it."

Stephen followed him into the firelight; his face was the colour of wood ash, and his eyes looked haggard and terrified. With all his faults he really loved his wife, in his own narrow, limited, selfish way, intensely.

"Oh, Talbot! to think she's gone back to it all! How awful!"

Talbot gave a gesture of impatience. He understood the girl so much better than Stephen ever had that his methods seemed unreasonably foolish to him. And now he was excessively tired and cold and hungry, and his supper seemed of more importance than a world full of injured husbands.

"You can't wonder at it, old man," he said. "This life must be intolerable for a girl like that."

"Why? how?" questioned Stephen, blankly.

"Oh, so quiet; no excitement."

"But women ought to like quiet, and excitement's sinful," returned Stephen hotly, becoming the Low Church missionary school-teacher at once.

Talbot merely laughed and shrugged his shoulders, but his laugh was not friendly, and there was an angry light in his eyes.

"What am I to do?" asked Stephen mechanically, still standing, the pallor and the horror of his face growing each minute.

"I've told you. Let her have the few days' enjoyment

she asks for; then her heart will reproach her, and she will come back to you."

"But she might think me indifferent," murmured Stephen, his voice almost choked in his throat.

"I shouldn't leave her long. If she does not return the day after to-morrow, then you might go; but if you go now and attempt to force her back, you'll probably make a mess of it."

"But think—my wife—"

"That's all right," returned Talbot, looking at him and understanding what he was thinking of. "In one way, at least, you know she is a good girl. She will only gamble a little and drink and get very jolly, and she'll come back to you in a day or two with no harm done —what are you doing?" he broke off suddenly, as Stephen began to tear off his slippers and socks and get his thick wet boots on.

"I'm going after her," he said sullenly, in a thick voice, "to bring her back home here—alive or dead."

"It will be dead probably, and you'll be exceedingly sorry," returned Talbot in a cutting tone.

Stephen made no answer, but continued fastening his boots.

"You'd better have your supper before you go out again," remarked Talbot, sarcastically.

Stephen made no reply. When he had his boots on he put an extra comforter inside his fur collar, put his cap on, and walked over to the door. There he hesitated and looked back. Talbot sat unmoved by the fire, his profile to the door. Stephen stood for an instant, then came back to the hearth.

"Talbot!" he said, standing in front of him.

The other looked up. "Well?"

"Come with me. Help me to find her and bring her back."

Talbot compressed his lips.

"Aren't you capable of managing your own 'wife yourself?" he asked.

"You have so much influence with her," said Stephen, pleadingly.

"I suppose I only have that influence because I am not quite a fool," returned Talbot angrily, commencing to pull off his slippers.

He was angry with Stephen, and feeling excessively wearied and disinclined for further effort. He hated to turn out again, and his whole physical system was craving for food and rest. But he was not the man to resist an appeal in which he saw another's whole soul was thrown, and angry and annoyed as he was with Stephen, he still disliked the idea of letting his friend go out alone in the Arctic night on such an errand. It seemed to him supremely ridiculous for Stephen to have to call in another man's aid in these personal matters, but then he was more than twice Stephen's age, and had got into the habit of making excuses for him. So, tired and exhausted though he was, he dragged on his frozen boots again, and prepared to accompany Stephen.

"You'd better have some of this first," he said, pouring out a cup of the coffee he had made, which stood ready on the stove.

They each took a cup standing, and then turned out

of the cabin, locking the door behind them. The atmosphere and aspect, the whole face of the night, had changed since the girl started. The fog had lifted itself and rolled away somewhere in the darkness. The air was now clear and keen as the edge of steel. The stars were of a piercing brilliance, and all along the black horizon flickered and leaped a faint rosy light. The two men, stiff, tired, and aching, took much longer to accomplish the distance than the girl had done with her light, eager feet, and when they got down to the town the night was well on its way. At the bottom of Good Luck Row, which is, as explained already, one of the first streets you come to, on the edge of the town, they halted and took counsel as to where they would be most likely to find the object of their search.

"Perhaps she's gone up to the 'Pistol Shot,'" suggested Stephen. "We'd better go up to old Poniatovsky."

"She hasn't come down to see her father, I should imagine," remarked Talbot, in his dryest tone.

But Stephen persisted she might be there, and so they tramped straight across towards the main street and turned into the "Pistol Shot." They pushed their way unheeded through the idle, lounging, gossiping crowd within, found their way behind the bar, and asked for Poniatovsky. The little Pole came out of his back parlour and met them in the passage. He listened to their story, his long pipe in one hand, his mouth open, and his own vile whisky obscuring and clouding his brain.

"Wot! she haf run away?" he exclaimed, as Stephen paused; "and who is de cause? Is it this shentleman here?" and he stared up at Talbot's slight, tall figure, imposing in its furs, and at the finely-cut, determined

features that presented such a contrast to Stephen's weak boyish face.

"No, no," said the latter angrily; "she hasn't run away at all. She has only come down here for an hour or so. I thought she might have come here to see you."

"No," replied the Pole deprecatingly, shrugging his shoulders and spreading out his hands, "I haf not seen her. If she come here, I shut the door upon her. I say, 'I vil haf no runaway wives here.' My fren, before you vos marrit did not I say, a truant daughter make a truant wife. She haf left me first, now she haf left you."

He had taken Stephen by the front of his coat, and was pushing in his words by the aid of a dirty forefinger.

Talbot abandoned Stephen to argue the matter out with his drunken father-in-law, and strolled back through the passage, through the bar-room, and then stood, with his gloved hands deep in his fur-lined pockets, at the saloon door, looking up and down the street. Presently one of the wrecks of the night came drifting by, a girl of nineteen or so, with her cheeks blue and pinched in the terrible cold under their coat of coarse paint. He signalled to her, and she drifted across to him, and stood, with her hands thrust up her sleeves, in the light from the "Pistol Shot."

"I expect you've seen the inside of most of the drinking-houses to-night," he said, speaking in a kind voice, for the pitiful, cold face of the girl touched him; "have you seen anything of Katrine Poniatovsky, a girl who used to live here?"

"Wot's she like?" the girl asked sullenly. She was so

hoarse that she could hardly make the words audible.

"A tall girl, dark, and very handsome."

"Yes, I seed her, not more'n an hour ago, in the 'Cock-pit.' She's a-makin' more money in there than I can make if I walk all night. Curse her! She sits there, and the devil sits behind her, a-playing for her, I know; but she'd better look out—you don't play with that partner long."

"The 'Cock-pit.' That's on the other side, isn't it, away from the river?" Talbot's heart sank a little as he recognized the name of the worst den for gambling in the whole town.

"Go down here, and turn to your left. Any one will tell you where the 'Cock-pit' is," said the girl, with a hollow laugh.

Then she lingered in the light, and looked at Talbot wistfully. He put some money into her hand. "Go into the warmth," he said kindly, "and get yourself something."

Then he turned back into the saloon to find Stephen. He met him, having broken away at last from the fatherly advice of the Pole, and brushing the front of his coat down with his hand. He was very flushed and angry.

"You'd better waste no more time," remarked Talbot, calmly. "She is down at the 'Cock-pit,' playing."

Stephen gasped. "How did you find out that?" he asked.

"I've just been told by one of the habitués. Come along at once." Both the men went out, and Talbot,

following the girl's directions, marched on decidedly, scarcely noticing Stephen's questions, which he could not answer.

"I don't know," he said, for the fiftieth time, to Stephen's last absurd query as to how long she had been there.

The houses became poorer and shabbier as they walked. Even in log-cabins there is a great difference marked between the respectable and the disreputable. And the figures that passed them from time to time, though more rarely here in this quarter, looked of the toughest, most cut-throat class.

"How can she like to come here alone?" exclaimed Stephen, with a shudder. "I wonder she is not afraid. I'm surprised she has not come to some harm long ago."

Talbot smiled to himself inside his fur collar and said nothing. The girl's absolute fearlessness was the point which he admired most in her character, and the immunity from danger seemed in her case, as in others, the natural accompaniment of it. Fortune is said to favour the brave. Misfortune certainly seems to spare them.

"I think this is the place," said Talbot at last, and they stopped before a large, but old and dirty-looking cabin. It was sunk beneath the usual level of the ground, and reached by some crooked, slippery steps. At the foot of these steps was a sort of yard, which you had to cross before reaching the cabin door itself. What was in the yard, or what its condition was, it was too dark to see, but a sickening smell came from it as the men descended the steps, and the ground seemed slippery or miry in places

above the frozen snow. The windows of the cabin in front gave out no light whatever, but that there was light inside, and very bright light, was evidenced by that which burst through the chinks all over it.

"I shouldn't wonder if I stumbled over a corpse next," muttered Talbot, as he slipped and almost fell in the darkness on a slimy something under his feet that reminded him of blood. They got up to the door and tried the latch. It would not yield; then they thumped on it with their gloved fists.

The latch was drawn back by some hand inside, and the door opened just wide enough to admit them, and was pushed to again. Stephen and Talbot found themselves in a crowd of loiterers inside the door, who apparently took no notice of them beyond a sodden stare.

It was a long, low room that they entered, so low that it seemed to Talbot the ceiling was almost upon their heads. The atmosphere was stifling, evil-smelling beyond endurance, and so clouded with tobacco smoke that they could not see the farther end.

A long table covered with green cloth took up the centre of the room, and all round the walls were ranged smaller ones. The place was full when the two men entered, all space at the centre table was occupied, the side tables were filled, and men standing up between blocked the way up the room. The windows at the end were barred and shuttered, not a breath of outer air could enter. The cheap lamps nailed at intervals along the grimy walls were mostly black and smoking, adding their acrid fumes to the thick atmosphere. There were very few women present, some painted, worn, unhappy-looking

creatures, hovering like restless phantoms round the tables where the thickest crowds were, that seemed all. Stephen looked round on every side with haggard face and anxious eyes. She was nowhere near the door, and after a hurried survey of all those lower tables they forced and pressed and pushed their way towards the other end. At last they caught sight of her. She was sitting at a small table, with her face turned towards the room, intent upon the game. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement. She had flung her fur cap aside, and her ruffled black hair lay loose upon her forehead. The collar of her bodice was open and turned back a little from her round white neck. She looked, with her soft young face, like a fresh flower dropped by chance into this evil, tainted den. Talbot gave her a keen scrutiny as they approached, and understood Stephen's infatuation. As for Stephen himself, his heart went out to her, and he was filled with a bitter self-reproach and sudden resolutions. His love and his darling! How could he have let her be found here! His claims and his gold, they might all go. He would take her away in safety at once. He would not hesitate again.

When they reached the table they saw there was a large stake on the cloth between the two players. Her companion was a youngish man, seemingly a miner, dressed in the roughest clothes. Neither looked up till both men were close by them and between them and the lights. Then Katrine raised her eyes and started violently as she recognised them. Her face flushed deeper, and her eyebrows contracted with annoyance. Stephen went round to the back of her chair and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Come away; oh pray, come away," he said, in an imploring tone. It was all he seemed able to

articulate.

"I'm just in the middle of a game," she answered petulantly. "You mustn't interrupt me."

"But it isn't safe for you to be here."

"Stuff! I used to be here every night before I married you!"

A death-like pallor overspread the man's face as he heard. He could not believe her, could not realise it. Had she indeed been here night after night?

"Why do you come here and interfere?" she continued pettishly, looking up from Talbot to his companion. "I always have such luck, and I'm likely to lose it if you worry me."

The young miner sat back in his chair, thrust both hands in his pockets, and stared rudely at the intruders. He did not mind the interruption as much as she did, since he was losing, and had been steadily ever since he sat down to play with Katrine, and doubts and angry questionings of his opponent's methods began to stir in his dull, clouded brain, as toads stir the mud in some thick pool.

"You ought not to be here at all," said Stephen hotly.

"Well, why shouldn't I make money as well as you?" returned the girl quickly, with a flash of scorn in her dark eyes, and Stephen whitened and winced.

"Haven't you made enough for one night, in any case?" interposed Talbot quietly.

"Yes, I think I have," she answered, with a glance at the glistening pile on the cloth. "I'll come," she added suddenly, "if Jim's no objection. What do you say,

Jim?" she asked, looking across to the young fellow, who had been a sulky, silent spectator of the whole scene. "Shall we quit for to-night?"

"If you give me back my money," he answered. "That's mine," he said, pointing to the pile. "It's my money, gentlemen; she's been winning all the evening."

"Yes, I always do have luck," retorted Katrine. "I told you so when we began."

"You may call it luck; I don't," muttered the miner, his face turning a dusky purple.

"And what do you call it?" returned Katrine, white with anger in her turn at the insinuation, while Talbot, who saw what was coming, tried to draw her away.

"What does it matter? Come away; leave him the money."

No one in the room noticed what was going on in their corner. The others were all too busy with their own play, absorbed in their own greed; besides, squabbles over the tables were of such common occurrence, they ceased to excite any curiosity.

"I shan't," returned Katrine, shaking herself free.

The oily, smoky light from above fell across her face; it seemed to bloom through the foul, dusky air like a rose.

"It's my money—I won it."

"Yes, by cheating," shouted the miner, forgetting everything but the approaching loss he foresaw of the shining pile.

"You lie," said Stephen, hoarsely. "She has not cheated you."

The miner staggered to his feet, and before any of them realised it he had drawn his pistol and fired. His hand was unsteady from drink and rage, and the ball passed over Stephen's shoulder and went into the wall behind him. Talbot tried to draw Stephen to one side. The miner, blind with anger, half conscious only of what he was about, and drawing almost at random, turned his revolver on Talbot. Like a flash Katrine interposed between them, and Jim's bullet found a lodgment in her lungs. She had fired also. The shots had been simultaneous, and the miner fell, without a groan, without a murmur, forward across the table, carrying it with him to the floor. The gold pile scattered amongst the filthy sawdust on the ground. Katrine sank backwards into Talbot's arms, and her head fell to his shoulder like that of a tired child falling to sleep.

In an instant they were surrounded by an eager inquiring throng. All the tables, with some few exceptions, were deserted; the players all crowded up to the end of the room, and Stephen and Talbot were carried back to the wall by the pressing crowd. Some of the men raised the body of the miner; he was dead. The people pressed round, and one glance at the set face told them. A momentary awe spread amongst them, and the men who had raised the body carried it to a bench and laid it there. Stephen, pallid as the dead man himself, looked round in desperation on the staring crowd.

"Is there a surgeon or a doctor here?" he asked.

Katrine heard him, and raised herself a little in Talbot's arms; he was standing against the wall now.

She turned her eyes towards Stephen and stretched out her hand.

"It's no use, Steve, dear," she said; "I'm done for. Don't worry with a doctor. I shall be gone in five minutes."

Stephen dropped on his knees and seized the little soft brown hand extended to him, covering it with kisses.

"Oh no, no, don't say it," he said in a voice suffocated with anguish, heedless of the staring faces around. Some of the mob looked on with interest, some turned back to their own tables, others went down on their hands and knees to scrape up the scattered gold dust that had mixed in the trampled sawdust.

"Lay me a little flatter," she murmured to Talbot, and he sank on one knee and so supported her, her head resting on his arm.

"If we could get her to the air," Stephen exclaimed.

"No, the moving pains me; let me be," she replied. "I tell you I'm dying."

Stephen groaned.

"Pray then, pray now. Oh, Katie dear, pray before it is too late. Aren't you afraid to die like this, in this place?"

Katrine shook her head wearily. "No, I don't think I've ever been afraid," she murmured.

"Did I kill him?" she asked a second later, opening her eyes.

Talbot looked down and nodded. Stephen's voice was

too choked for utterance.

"I'm glad of that," she murmured, letting her eyes close again; "I never missed a shot yet."

"Oh, Katie, Katie," moaned Stephen. The room was black to him; it seemed as if he saw hell opening to swallow up for ever his beloved one.

Katrine opened her eyes at his agonised cry.

"Now, Steve, it can't be helped; I'm dying, and it's all right. I only don't want you to worry over it. Nothing is worth worrying for in this world. And I guess we'll all meet again very soon in a warmer place than Alaska."

Stephen, utterly broken down, could only sob upon her hand.

Talbot felt a sort of rigor passing through the form he held, and thought she was dying. He was stirred to the innermost depths of his being by her act. She had stepped so calmly between him and death, given up her life with the free generous courage of a soldier or a hero.

"Why did you come between us?" he asked, suddenly bending over her; "why did you do it?"

The calm light eyes looked down into the dark passionate depths of the dying girl's pupils, and a long gaze passed between them. What secrets of her soul were revealed to his in that instant when they stood face to face with only Death between? Then Katrine turned her head wearily.

"I don't know," she answered faintly; "mere devilry, I think." And she laughed.

The laugh shook the wounded lung. Her face turned from white to grey, her teeth clenched. There was a spasm as of a sudden wrenching loose from the body, then it sank back, collapsed, motionless, against Talbot's breast.

The two men carried her out between them. The crowd made way for them, standing on either side in respectful silence. Such incidents were not uncommon, and excited nothing more than a dull and transient interest. They took her out, and the gold for which two lives had been sacrificed was left unheeded, scattered in the dust. They went out the way they had come, through the noisome court, up the narrow flight of rotten, slippery stairs into the pure icy air.

Stephen turned to Talbot and took the girl's body wholly into his arms.

"I want to carry her up to my cabin," he said in a choking voice, and the other nodded.

The night was glorious with the deadly glory of the Arctic regions; the air was still, and of a coldness that seemed to bite deep into the flesh; but overhead, in the impenetrable blackness of the sky, the stars shone with a brilliance found only in the north, throwing a cold light over the snowy ground. To the south and east, low down, burned two enormous planets, like fiery eyes watching them over the horizon.

Slowly the two men walked over the hard ground. Not another living being was within sight.

Stephen walked first with heavy, uneven steps, and his breath came quickly in suppressed and sobbing

gasps. Talbot followed closely, deep in painful thought. All had happened so suddenly. The whole horrible tragedy had swept over them in a few minutes; she had passed away from them both for ever. His brain seemed dazed by the shock. He could not realise it. He saw her dark head lying on Stephen's shoulder. It seemed as if she must lift it every second. He could not believe that she was lifeless, lifeless, this creature who had always been life itself, with her gay smiles, and light tones, and quick movements. Now, she and they were blotted out for all time. She had died against his breast, and for him. That was the horrible thought; it came into his brain after all the others, suddenly, and seemed as if it must burst it. And why, why should she have done it? Her last words rang in his ears, "mere devilry." So she had always been; reckless, open-handed, generous, she had often risked her life for another, and now she had given it for him. And in her last words she had tried to minimise her own act, tried to relieve him of the burden of a hopeless gratitude. But for all that he would have to bear it, and it seemed crushing him now. That she should have given her life, so young, less than half his own, so full of value and promise, for his! It seemed as if a reproach must follow him to the end of his days.

He walked as in a dream. He had no sense of the distance they were going, hardly any of the direction, except that he was following mechanically Stephen's slow, uneven, halting footsteps, and watching that little head that lay on his shoulder. Once when Stephen paused, he stretched out his arms and offered to take the burden from him, but Stephen repulsed him fiercely, and then the two went on slowly as before, how long he did not know, it seemed a long time. Suddenly, in the middle of the

narrow pathway before him, Talbot saw Stephen stagger, fall to his knees, and then sink heavily sideways in the snow, his arms still tightly locked round the rigid body of the girl. Talbot hurried forward and bent over him, feeling hastily in his own pockets for his flask. Stephen's eyes were wide open and gazed up at him with a hopeless, despairing determination that went to Talbot's heart and chilled it.

"I can't go any farther, not another step," he muttered.

Talbot had been searching hurriedly through all his pockets for the flask he always carried.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, "I haven't got it; I must have dropped it coming up here, or they stole it in that hell down town."

Stephen feebly put up his hand.

"Don't trouble, I don't want it. I am just going to lie here and wait with her. Was she not lovely?" he muttered to himself, raising himself on his knees and laying the body before him on the snow.

The sky above them arched in pitchy blackness, but the starlight was so keen and brilliant that it lighted up the white silence round them. Stephen, on his hands and knees, hung over the still figure and gazed down into the marble face. The short silky black hair made a little blot of darkness in the snow, the white face was turned upward to the starlight. Talbot, looking down, caught for an instant the sight of its pure oval, its regular lines, and the sweet mouth, and the passionate, reasonless face of the man crouching over it, and then looked desperately up and down

the narrow lonely trail. They were five miles from the town, a little over three from the cabins. Glistening whiteness lay all around, till the plains of snow grew grey in the distance; overhead, the burning, flashing, restless stars; and far off, where the two planets guarded the horizon, the red lights of the north began to quiver and flicker in the night.

The man on the ground noticed them, and straightening himself suddenly, looked towards them.

"The flare of hell!" he muttered, with staring, straining eyes; "it's coming very near."

Talbot saw that his reason had gone, failed suddenly, as a light goes down under a blast; he was delirious with that sudden delirium born of the awful cold that seizes men like a wolf in the long night of the Arctic winters.

For a second the helplessness of his situation flashed in upon Talbot's brain—alone here at midnight on the frozen trail, with a madman and a corpse!

He saw he must get help at once, and the cabins were the nearest point where help could be found. He could get men who would carry Stephen by force if necessary, but would he ever live in the fangs of this pitiless cold till they could return to him? He stood for one moment irresolute, unwilling to leave him to meet his death, and that horrible fear that he read in those haggard eyes watching the horizon, alone; and in that moment Stephen looked up at him and met his eye, and the madness rolled back and stood off his brain for an instant. He beckoned to Talbot, and Talbot went down on his knees beside him on the snow.

"My claims," muttered Stephen; "those claims will be yours now, do you understand? I've arranged it all with that lawyer Hoskins, down town. They were to be hers if anything happened to me, but we shall both go to-night, and they will be yours. She said I had sunk my soul in them, Talbot; she was right. The gold got me, I neglected her; I let her slip back into evil; I've murdered her for the claims. They are the price hell paid me. But you keep them. All turns to good in your hands. They can't harm you. Keep them. They are my grave."

"Stephen, rouse yourself! You are alive! you've got to live," said Talbot desperately, shaking him by the shoulder. "I am going now to bring men back with me to help you home. You've got to live till I return, do you hear?"

Stephen had turned from him again and put his arms round the motionless form before them.

"They are coming nearer," Talbot heard him mutter; "but they shall burn through me first, little one;" and he stretched himself across the corpse as if to shield it from the approaching flames, and far off the red eyes of the planets sank nearer the horizon, but still seemed to watch them across the snowy waste.

Talbot felt the only one thin thread of hope was to go as fast as his fatigue-clogged feet could move up to the cabins, and he rose and faced the homeward trail. He felt the hope of saving Stephen was just the least faintest flicker that ever burned within a heart; still there was the chance—the chance that, even should he be already in the sleep that ends in death when he returned, they could rouse him from it and drag him into life again. He forced his heavy feet along, and with a great effort started into a run. His

limbs felt like lead, and all his body like paper. The long hours of cold and fatigue, the excitement, the rush of changing emotions he had gone through, had been draining his vitality, but he called upon all that he had left and put it all into the effort to save his friend. He knew that any one second lost or gained might be the one to turn the balance of life or death, and he urged himself forward till a dull pain filled all his side, and his temples seemed bursting, and the great lights before him swam in a blood-red mist.

Stephen, left alone, raised his head and gazed round him once, then he laid his cheek down on the cold cheek, pressed his lips to the cold lips, and his breast upon the cold breast just over where the bullet had ploughed its way through the flesh and bone. The night gripped him tighter and tighter, and slowly he sank to sleep.

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## *L'ENVOI.*

Noontide in June. A sky of the clearest, palest azure, and a rollicking, swelling, tumbling sea, full of smooth billowy waves chasing each other over its deep green surface—waves with their white crests blown backwards, throwing their spray high in the air and seeming to laugh and call to each other in gurgling voices; and between sea and sky the liquid golden sunlight filling the warm, throbbing air, spreading itself in dazzling sheets upon the water, and glinting in ten thousand glittering points on the flying spray thrown up by a steamer's screw. It was

the steamer *Prince*, homeward-bound from Alaska, carrying passengers and a cargo as rich and yellow as the sunshine. And as if it knew of its precious and costly charge, the steamer cut proudly through the turbulent water, cleaving its straight passage homeward, homeward. On the deck of the boat, leaning back idly in a long chair, his calm, grey eyes fixed on the receding shores, where the golden sunshine seemed palpitating on their perilous loveliness, Talbot was sitting, with the freshening breeze stirring his hair and bringing to him the breath of a thousand spring flowers on the land. He was returning, and returning successful, with his work accomplished, his toil over, his aim achieved, and amongst all the lines of pain stamped on his pale and quiet face there was written a certain triumph, that yet perhaps was not so much triumph as relief. It was just four months since that terrible night when he had lost both his comrades, just a little less than four months since he had seen them both laid side by side in their lonely grave in the west gulch; and those four months would ever be a blot of horrible blackness on his life. Should he ever be able to forget the blank desolation that had closed in upon him night after night as he sat by his lonely hearth or paced the floor, his steps alone breaking the awful stillness? Yet he had forced himself to stay and face it, had continued his work and his method of life unchanged. His men had noted little difference in him. He had stayed the time he had appointed for himself, had accomplished his self-appointed task, and at last, when the summer burst in upon the gulch and loosened all Nature's fetters, he found himself also free; and now, like a black curtain rent in twain and torn from the bright face of a picture, the clouds of the past seemed falling away, leaving

his future clear to his gaze. It stretched before him bright as the laughing sunlit sea beneath his eyes. If they could but have shared his joy, if they could have had their home-coming, his fellow-toilers, his fellow-prisoners! and the salt tears stung his lids until he closed them, shutting out the vivid yellow light, as he thought of the desolate grave in the gulch.

The fresh, cool air fanned his face and the sun smiled upon him, a loose piece of canvas of an awning near him flapped backwards and forwards with a monotonous musical sound, the plash and gurgle of the tumbling waves fell soothingly on his ears. Gradually sleep came over him gently, and enwrapped his strained, wearied body, his sore bruised mind.

When he opened his eyes again it was afternoon. The steamer was still flying onward, but the sea was quiet and smooth, and lay still on every side in the sun's rays as a pool of liquid gold, and the shores of Alaska had vanished, lost in a burnished haze of light.

**THE END.**

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A GIRL OF THE KLONDIKE ***

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