The Fighting Shepherdess



CAROLINE LOCKHART

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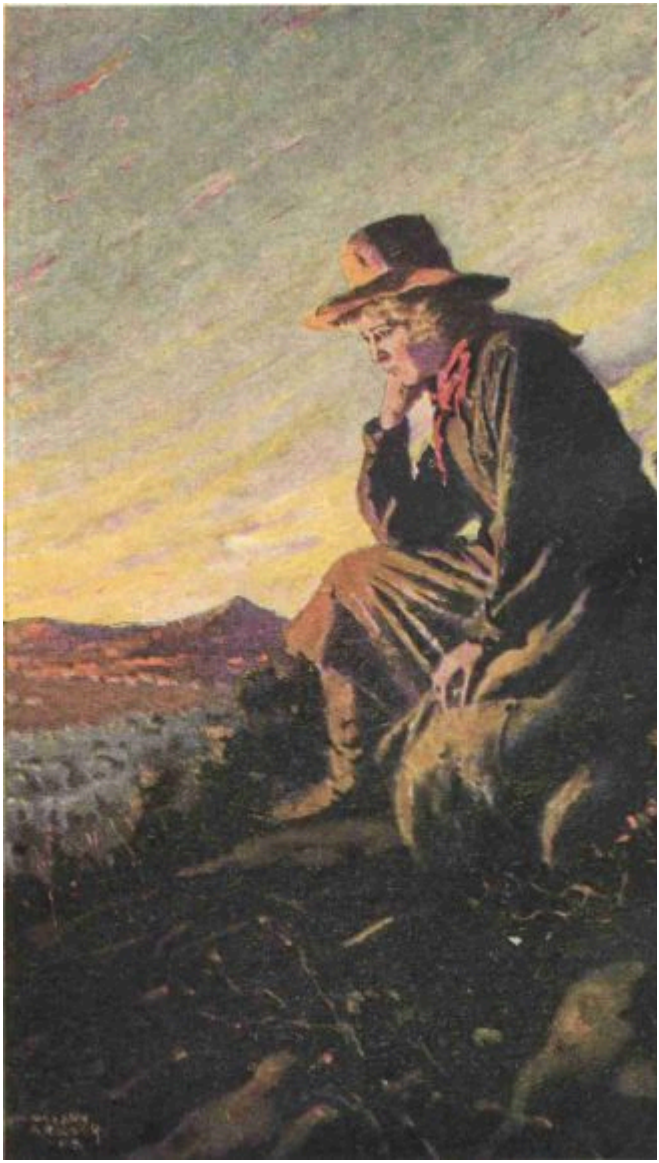
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Kate was sitting on a rock--a dark picturesque silhouette agai
See page 235.

LINK TO FULL-RESOLUTION IMAGE

The Fighting Shepherdess

By CAROLINE LOCKHART



WITH FRONTISPIECE
By M. LEONE BRACKER

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THE FIGHTING SHEPHERDESS

CHAPTER I

THE SAND COULEE ROADHOUSE

A heavily laden freight wagon, piled high with ranch supplies, stood in the dooryard before a long loghouse. The yard was fenced with crooked cottonwood poles so that it served also as a corral, around which the leaders of the freight team wandered, stripped of their harness, looking for a place to roll.

A woman stood on tip-toe gritting her teeth in exasperation as she tugged at the check-rein on the big wheelhorse, which stuck obstinately in the ring. When she loosened it finally, she stooped and looked under the horse's neck at the girl of fourteen or thereabouts, who was unharnessing the horse on the other side. "Good God, Kate," exclaimed the woman irritably; "how many times must I tell you to unhook the traces before you do up the lines? One of these days you'll have the damnedest runaway in seven states."

The girl, whose thoughts obviously were not on what she was doing, obeyed immediately, and without replying looped up the heavy traces, throwing and tying the lines over the hames with experienced hands.

The resemblance between mother and daughter was so slight that it might be said not to exist at all. It was clear that Kate's wide, thoughtful eyes, generous mouth and softly curving but firm chin came from the other side, as did her height. Already she was half a head taller than the short, wiry, tough-fibered woman with the small hard features who was known throughout the southern half of Wyoming as "Jezebel of the Sand Coulee."

A long flat braid of fair hair swung below the

girl's waist and on her cheeks a warm red showed through the golden tan. Her slim straight figure was eloquent of suppleness and strength and her movements, quick, purposeful, showed decision and activity of mind. They were as characteristic as her directness of speech.

The Sand Coulee Roadhouse was a notorious place. The woman who kept it called herself Isabel Bain—Bain having been the name of one of the numerous husbands from whom she had separated to remarry in another state, without the formality of a divorce. She was noted not only for her remarkable horsemanship, but for her exceptional handiness with a rope and branding iron, and her inability to distinguish her neighbors' livestock from her own.

"Pete Mullendore's gettin' in." There was a frown on Kate's face as she spoke and uneasiness in the glance she sent toward the string of pack-horses filing along the fence.

The woman said warningly, "Don't you pull off any of your tantrums—you treat him right."

"I'll treat him right," hotly, "as long as he behaves himself. Mother," with entreaty in her voice, "won't *you* settle him if he gets fresh?"

Jezebel only laughed and as the gate of the corral scraped when Mullendore pulled it open to herd a saddle horse and pack ponies through, she called out in her harsh croak:

"Hello, Pete!"

"Hello yourself," he answered, but he looked at her daughter.

As soon as they were through the gate the pack ponies stopped and stood with spreading legs and drooping heads while Mullendore sauntered over to Kate and laid a hand familiarly on her shoulder.

"Ain't you got a howdy for me, kid?"

She moved aside and began stripping the harness from the horse for the quite evident purpose of avoiding his touch.

"You'd better get them packs off," she replied, curtly. "Looks like you'd got on three hundred pounds."

"Wouldn't be surprised. Them bear traps weigh twenty poun' each, and green hides don't feel like feathers, come to pack 'em over the trail I've come."

Kate looked at him for the first time.

"I wisht I was a man! I bet I'd work you over for the way you abuse your stock!"

Mullendore laughed.

"Glad you ain't, Katie—but not because I'd be afraid of gettin' beat up."

He looked her up and down with mocking significance, "Say, but you'll make a great squaw for some feller. Been thinkin' I'd make a deal with your mother to take you back to the mountings with me when I go. I'll learn you how to tan hides, and a lot of things you don't know."

The girl's lip curled.

"Yes, I'd *like* to tan hides for *you*, Pete Mullendore! When I get frost bit in August I'll go, but not before."

He replied easily:

"You ain't of age yet, Katie, and you have to mind your maw. I've got an idee that she'll tell you to go if I say so."

"A whole lot my mother would mind what you say!" Yet in spite of her defiance a look of fear crossed the girl's face.

She slipped her arm through the harness and started towards the shed, Mullendore following with his slouching walk, an unprepossessing figure in his faded overalls, black and white mackinaw coat and

woolen cap.

The trapper was tall and lank, with a pair of curious, unforgettable eyes looking out from a swarthy face that told of Indian blood. They were round rather than the oblong shape to be expected in his type, and the iris a muddy blue-gray. The effect was indescribably queer, and was accentuated by the coal-black lashes and straight black brows which met above a rather thick nose. He had a low forehead, and when he grinned his teeth gleamed like ivory in his dark face. He boasted of Apache-Mexican blood "with a streak of white."

While Kate hung the harness on its peg, Mullendore, waited for her outside. "My! My! Katie," he leered at her as she came back, "but you're gettin' to be a big girl! Them legs looked like a couple of pitchfork handles when I went away, and now the shape they've got!"

He laughed in malicious enjoyment as he saw the color rise to the roots of her hair; and when she would have passed, reached out and grasped her arm.

"Let me be, Pete Mullendore!" She tried to pull loose.

"When you've give me a kiss." There was a flame in the muddy eyes.

With a twist she freed herself and cried with fury vibrating in her voice, "I hate you—I hate you! You —" she sought for a sufficiently opprobrious word —"nigger!"

Mullendore's face took on a peculiar ashiness. Then with an oath and a choking snarl of rage he jumped for her. Kate's long braid just escaped his finger tips.

"Mother! Mother! Make him quit!" There was terror in the shrill cry as the girl ran towards the

freight wagon. The response to the appeal came in a hard voice:

"You needn't expect me to take up your fights. You finish what you start."

Kate gave her mother a despairing look and ran towards the pack ponies, with Mullendore now close at her heels. Spurred by fear, she dodged in and out, doubling and redoubling, endeavoring to keep a pony between herself and her pursuer. Once or twice a fold of her skirt slipped through his grasp, but she was young and fleet of foot, and after the game of hare and hounds had kept up for a few minutes her pursuer's breath was coming short and labored. Finally, he stopped:

"You little——!" He panted the epithet. "I'll get you yet!"

She glared at him across a pony's neck and ran out her tongue. Then, defiantly:

"I ain't scart of you!"

A drawling voice made them both turn quickly. "As an entirely impartial and unbiased spectator, friend, I should say that you are outclassed." The man addressed himself to Mullendore. The stranger unobserved had entered by the corral gate. He was a typical sheepherder in looks if not in speech, even to the collie that stood by his side. He wore a dusty, high-crowned black hat, overalls, mackinaw coat, with a small woolen scarf twisted about his neck, and in his hand he carried a gnarled staff. His eyes had a humorously cynical light lurking in their brown depths.

Mullendore did not reply, but with another oath began to untie the lash rope from the nearest pack.

"Wonder if I could get a drink of water?" The stranger turned to Kate as he spoke, lifting his hat to disclose a high white forehead—a forehead as fine as

it was unexpected in a man trailing a bunch of sheep. The men who raised their hats to the women of the Sand Coulee were not numerous, and Kate's eyes widened perceptibly before she replied heartily, "Sure you can."

Jezebel, who had come up leading the big wheel horse, said significantly, "Somethin' stronger, if you like."

The fierce eagerness which leaped into the stranger's eyes screamed his weakness, yet he did not jump at the offer she held out. The struggle in his mind was obvious as he stood looking uncertainly into the face that was stamped with the impress of wide and sordid experiences. Kate's voice broke the short silence, "He said 'water,' Mother." She spoke sharply, and with a curt inclination of her head to the sheepherder added, "The water barrel's at the back door, Mister. Come with me." Apparently this made his decision for him, for he followed the girl at once, while Jezebel with a shrug walked on with the horse.

Kate handed the stranger the long-handled tin dipper and watched him gravely while he drank the water in gulps, draining it to the last drop.

"Guess you're a booze-fighter, Mister," she observed, casually, much as she might have commented that his unkempt beard was brown. Amusement twinkled in his eyes at the personal remark and her utter unconsciousness of having said anything at which by any chance he could take offense, but he replied noncommittally:

"I've put away my share, Miss."

"I can always pick 'em out. Nearly all the freighters and cow punchers that stop here get drunk."

He looked at her quizzically.

"The trapper you were playing tag with when I came looks as if he might be ugly when he'd had too much."

He was startled by the intensity of the expression which came over her face as she said, between her clenched teeth:

"I hate that 'breed'!"

"He isn't just the pardner," dryly, "that I'd select for a long camping trip."

Her pupils dilated and she lowered her voice:

"He's ornery—Pete Mullendore."

As though in response to his name, that person came around the corner with his bent-kneed slouch, giving to the girl as he passed a look so malignant, and holding so unmistakable a threat, that it chilled and sobered the stranger who stood leaning against the water barrel. The girl returned it with a stare of brave defiance, but her hand trembled as she returned the dipper to its nail. She looked at him wistfully, and with a note of entreaty in her voice asked:

"Why don't you camp here to-night, Mister?"

The sheepherder shook his head.

"I've got to get on to the next water hole. I have five hundred head of ewes in the road and they haven't had a drink for two days. They're getting hard to hold."

Kate volunteered:

"You've about a mile and a half to go."

"Yes, I know. Well—s'long, and good luck!" He reached for his sheepherder's staff and once more raised his hat with a manner which spoke of another environment. Before he turned the corner of the house an impulse prompted him to look back. Involuntarily he all but stopped. Her eyes had in them a despairing look that seemed a direct appeal

for help. But he smiled at her, touched his hat brim and went on. The girl's look haunted him as he trudged along the road in the thick white dust kicked up by the tiny hoofs of the moving sheep.

"She's afraid of that 'breed,'" he thought, and tried to find comfort in telling himself that there was no occasion for alarm, with her mother, hard-visaged as she was, within call. Yet as unconsciously he kept glancing back at the lonely roadhouse, sprawling squat and ugly on the desolate sweep of sand and sagebrush, the only sign of human habitation within the circle of the wide horizon, he had the same sinking feeling at the heart which came to him when he had to stand helpless watching a coyote pull down a lamb. It was in vain he argued that there was nothing to do but what he had done—go on and mind his own business—for the child's despairing, reproachful eyes followed him and his uneasiness remained with him after he had reached the water hole. While the sheep grazed after drinking he pulled the pack from the burro that carried his belongings. From among the folds of a little tepee tent he took out a marred violin case and laid it carefully on the ground, apart. A couple of cowhide paniers contained his meager food supply and blackened cooking utensils. These, with two army blankets, some extra clothing and a bell for the burro, completed his outfit.

The sheep dog lay with his head on his paws, following every movement with loving eyes.

The sheepherder scraped a smooth place with the side of his foot, set up his tepee and spread the blankets inside. Then he built a tiny sagebrush fire, filled his battered coffee pot at the spring in the "draw," threw in a small handful of coffee, and, when the sagebrush was burned to coals, set it to

boil. He warmed over a few cooked beans in a lard can, sliced bacon and laid it with great exactness in a long-handled frying pan and placed it on the coals. Then unwrapping a half dozen cold baking-powder biscuits from a dish towel he put them on a tin cover on the ground near a tin cup and plate and a knife and fork.

The man moved lightly, with the deftness of experience, stopping every now and then to cast a look at the sheep that were slowly feeding back preparatory to bedding down. And each time he did so, his eyes unconsciously sought the road in the direction from which he had come, and as often his face clouded with a troubled frown.

When the bacon was brown and the coffee bubbled in the pot, he sat down crosslegged with his plate in his lap and the tin cup beside him on the ground. He ate hungrily, yet with an abstracted expression, which showed that his thoughts were not on his food.

After he had finished he broke open the biscuits which remained, soaked them in the bacon grease and tossed them to the dog, which caught them in the air and swallowed them at a gulp. Then he got to his feet and filled his pipe. He looked contemplatively at a few sheep feeding away from the main band and said as he waved his arm in an encircling gesture:

“Way ’round ’em, Shep! Better bring ’em in.”

The dog responded instantly, his handsome tail waving like a plume as he bounded over the sagebrush and gathered in the stragglers.

By the time the herder had washed his dishes and finished his pipe the sun was well below the horizon and the sky in the west a riot of pink and amber and red. The well-trained sheep fed back and dropped

down in twos and threes on a spot not far from the tepee where it pleased their fancy to bed. Save for the distant tinkle of the bell on the burro, and the stirring of the sheep, the herder might have been alone in the universe. When he had set his dishes and food back in the paniers and covered them with a piece of "tarp," in housewifely orderliness, he opened the black case and took out the violin with a care that amounted to tenderness. The first stroke of the bow bespoke the trained hand. He did not sit, but knelt in the sand with his face to the west as he played like some pagan sun-worshiper, his expression rapt, intent. Strains from the world's best music rose and fell in throbbing sweetness on the desert stillness, music which told beyond peradventure that some cataclysm in the player's life had shaken him from his rightful niche. It proclaimed this travel-stained sheepherder in his faded overalls and peak-crowned limp-brimmed hat another of the incongruities of the far west. The sagebrush plains and mountains have held the secrets of many Mysteries locked in their silent breasts, for, since the coming of the White Man, they have been a haven for civilization's Mistakes, Failures and Misfits.

While he poured out his soul with only the sheep and the tired collie sleeping on its paws for audience, the gorgeous sunset died and a chill wind came up, scattering the gray ashes of the camp fire and swaying the tepee tent. Suddenly he stopped and shivered a little in spite of his woolen shirt. "Dog-gone!" he said abruptly, aloud, as he put the violin away, "I can't get that kid out of my thoughts!" Though he could not have told why he did so, or what he might, even remotely, expect to hear, he stood and listened intently before he stooped and disappeared for the night between the flaps of the

tent.

He turned often between the blankets of his hard bed, disturbed by uneasy dreams quite unlike the deep oblivion of his usual sleep.

"Oh, Mister, where are you?"

The sheepherder stirred uneasily.

"Please—please, Mister, won't you speak?"

The plaintive pleading cry was tremulous and faint like the voice of a disembodied spirit floating somewhere in the air. This time he sat up with a start.

"It's only me—Katie Prentice, from the Roadhouse. Don't be scart."

The wail was closer. There was no mistake. Then the dog barked. The man threw back the blanket and sprang to his feet. It took only a moment to get into his clothes and step out into a night that had turned pitch dark.

"Where are you?" he called.

"Oh, Mister!?" The shrill cry held gladness and relief.

Then she came out of the blackness, the ends of a white nubia and a little shoulder cape snapping in the wind, her breath coming short in a sound that was a mixture of exhaustion and sobs.

"I was afraid I couldn't find you till daylight. I heard a bell, but I didn't know where to go, it's such a dark night. I ran all the way, nearly, till I played out."

"What's the row?" he asked gently.

She slipped both arms through one of his and hugged it convulsively, while in a kind of hysteria she begged:

"Don't send me back, Mister! I won't go! I'll kill myself first. Take me with you—please, please let me go with you!"

"Tell me what it's all about."

She did not answer, and he urged:

"Go on. Don't be afraid. You can tell me anything."

She replied in a strained voice:

"Pete Mullendore, he—"

A gust of wind blew the shoulder cape back and he saw her bare arm with the sleeve of her dress hanging by a shred.

"—he did this?"

"Yes. He—insulted—me—I—can't—tell—you—what—he—said."

"And then?"

"I scratched him and bit him. I fought him all over the place. He was chokin' me. I got to a quirt and struck him on the head—with the handle. It was loaded. He dropped like he was dead. I ran to my room and clum out the window—"

"Your mother—"

"She—laughed."

"God!" He stooped and picked up the little bundle she had dropped at her feet. "Come along, Partner. You are going into the sheep business with 'Mormon Joe.'"

CHAPTER II

AN HISTORIC OCCASION

The experienced ear of Major Stephen Douglas Prouty told him that he was getting a hot axle. The hard dry squeak from the rear wheel of the "democrat" had but one meaning—he had forgotten to grease it. This would seem an inexcusable oversight in a man who expected to make forty miles before sunset, but in this instance there was an extenuating circumstance. Immediately after breakfast there had been a certain look in his hostess's eye which had warned him that if he lingered he would be asked to assist with the churning. Upon observing it he had started for the barn to harness with a celerity that approached a trot.

Long years of riding the grub-line had developed in the Major a gift for recognizing the exact psychological moment when he had worn out his welcome as company and was about to be treated as one of the family and sicced on the woodpile, that was like a sixth sense. It seldom failed him, but in the rare instances when it had, he had bought his freedom with a couple of boxes of White Badger Salve—unfailing for cuts, burns, scalds and all irritations of the skin—good also, as it proved, for dry axles, since he had neglected to replenish his box of axle grease from that of his host at the last stopping place.

He leaned from under the edge of the large cotton umbrella which shaded him amply, and squinted at the sun. He judged that it was noon exactly. His intention seemed to be communicated to his horses by telepathy, for they both stopped with a suddenness which made him lurch forward.

"It's time to eat, anyhow," he said aloud as he recovered his balance with the aid of the dashboard, disentangled his feet from the long skirts of his linen duster and sprang over the wheel with the alacrity of a man who took a keen interest in food.

Unhooking the traces, he led the team to one side of the road, slipped off the bridles and replaced them with nose bags containing each horse's allotment of oats—extracted from the bin of his most recent host. Then he searched in the bottom of the wagon until he found a monkey-wrench which he applied to the nut and twirled dextrously. Canting the wheel, he moistened his finger tip and touched the exposed axle.

"Red hot!"

He left it to cool and reached under the seat for a pasteboard shoe-box and bore it to the side of the road, where he saw a convenient rock. Both the eagerness of hunger and curiosity was depicted on his face as he untied the twine which secured it. He was wondering if she had put in any cheese. The Major especially liked cheese and had not failed to mention the fact when his hostess had let drop the information that a whole one had come in with the last freight wagon from town. He removed the cover and his smile of anticipation gave place to a look of astonishment and incredulity. It was difficult to believe his eyes! Not only was there no cheese, but that chicken wing and back which had been left on the platter last night, and which he had been as sure of as though he had put them in himself, were not in the box. He felt under the paper as though hoping against hope that the box contained a false bottom where the chicken might be concealed. There was no deception. He saw all there was.

"Sinkers!" His voice expressed infinite

disappointment and disgust. He prodded one of the cold soda biscuits with his finger, took it out and set the box on the ground beside him. He was hungry, therefore, insulted as he felt, he had to eat, but he looked over his shoulder in the direction from which he had come, and said aloud, “Them Scissor-bills’ll know it when I stop there again!” The declaration was in the nature of a threat. While he munched the dry biscuit, which contained but a trace of butter between the two halves, he gazed off at the vista of nothing in particular that stretched out before him.

On his left the sand and sagebrush, cacti and sparse bunch-grass was bounded by the horizon; behind him, in front of him, it was the same; only on the right was the monotony broken by foothills and beyond, a range of purple snow-covered peaks. From the slight elevation or “bench” upon which he sat he looked down upon a greasewood flat where patches of alkali gleamed dazzling white under the noon-day sun. The flat was quarter-circled by a waterless creek upon whose banks grew a few misshapen and splintered cottonwoods.

The countless millions of nearly invisible gnats that breed in alkali bogs sighted the Major and promptly rose in swarms to settle upon his ears and in the edges of his hair. He fanned them away automatically and without audible comment. Perhaps they served as a counter-irritant; at any rate, the sting of the indignity put upon him by what he termed a “hobo lunch” was finally forgotten in more agreeable thoughts.

In the distance there was an interesting cloud of dust. Was it cattle, loose horses, or some one coming that way? The Major’s eyesight was not all it had been and he could not make out. Since they were coming from the opposite direction he was sure to

have his curiosity gratified. His roving eyes came back to the greasewood flat and rested there speculatively. Suddenly his jaw dropped and a crumb rolled out. He looked as though an apparition had risen before his bulging eyes. Involuntarily he sprang to his feet and cried, “My Gawd—what a great place to start a town!”

The idea came with such startling force that it seemed to the Major as if something broke in his brain. Other ideas followed. They came tumbling over each other in their struggle to get out all at once. A panorama of pictures passed so swiftly before his eyes that it made him dizzy. His eyes gleamed, the color rose in his weather-beaten cheeks, the hand with which he pointed to the greasewood flat below trembled as he exclaimed in an excitement that made his breath come short:

“The main street’ll run up the creek and about there I’ll put the Op'ry House. The hotel’ll stand on the corner and we’ll git a Carnegie Libery for the other end of town. The High School can be over yonder and we’ll keep the saloons to one side of the street. There’ll be a park where folks can set, and if I ain’t got pull enough to git a fifty thousand dollar Federal Buildin’—”

Then came the inspiration which made the Major stagger back:

“I’ll git the post office, and name it Prouty!”

He felt so tremulous that he had to sit down.

It seemed incredible that he had not thought of this before, for deep within him was a longing to have his name figure in the pages of the history of the big new state. Tombstones blew over, dust storms obliterated graves, photographs faded, but with a town named after him and safely on the map, nobody could forget him if he wanted to.

The Major's assertion concerning his "pull" was no idle boast. There were few men in the state with a wider acquaintance, and he was a conspicuous figure around election time. The experience he had acquired in his younger days selling Indian Herb Cough Syrup from the tailboard of a wagon, between two sputtering flambeaux, served him in good stead when, later, he was called upon to make a few patriotic remarks at a Fourth of July Celebration. His rise was rapid from that time, until now his services as an orator were so greatly in demand for cornerstone layings and barbecues that, owing to distance between towns, it kept him almost constantly on the road.

The Major sold an occasional box of salve, and in an emergency pulled teeth, in addition to the compensation which he received for what was designated privately as his "gift of gab." But the Major, nevertheless, had his dark moments, in which he contemplated the day when age should force him to retire to private life. Since the wagon containing his patent leather valise was his home, the Major had no private life to retire to, and his anxiety concerning the future would seem not without cause. Now in a flash all his worries smoothed out. He would capitalize his wide acquaintance and his influence, gain independence and perpetuate his name in the same stroke. At the moment he actually suffered because there was no one present to whom he could communicate his thoughts.

The cloud of dust was closer, but not near enough yet to distinguish the moving objects that caused it, so he set himself energetically to applying White Badger Salve to the axle, replacing the wheel and tightening the nut. When he straightened a horseman who had ridden out of the creek bed was scrambling

up the side of the "bench." He was dressed like a top cowpuncher—silver-mounted saddle, split-ear bridle and hand-forged bit. The Major was familiar with the type, though this particular individual was unknown to him.

"Howdy!" The cowboy let the reins slip through his fingers so his horse could feed, and sagged sidewise in the saddle.

"How are you, sir?" There was nothing in the dignified restraint of the Major's response to indicate that his vocal cords ached for exercise and he was fairly quivering in his eagerness for an ear to talk into. There was a silence in which he removed a nose bag, bridled and shoved a horse against the tongue.

"Back, can't ye!"

"Nooned here, I reckon?"

The Major thought of his chickenless handout and his face clouded.

"I et a bite."

"Thought maybe you was in trouble when I first see you."

"Had a hot box, but I don't call that trouble." He added humorously:

"I can chop my wagon to pieces and be on the road again in twenty minutes, if I got plenty of balin' wire."

The cowboy laughed so appreciatively that the Major inquired ingratiatingly:

"I bleeve your face is a stranger to me, ain't it?"

"I don't mind meetin' up with you before. I've just come to the country, as you might say."

The Major waited for further information, but since it was not forthcoming he ventured:

"What might I call your name, sir?"

The cowboy shifted his weight uneasily and hesitated. He said finally while the red of his shiny

sun-blistered face deepened perceptibly: “My name is supposed to be Teeters—Clarence Teeters.”

As a matter of fact he *knew* that his name was Teeters, but injecting an element of doubt into it in this fashion seemed somehow to make the telling easier. Teeters was bad enough, but combined with Clarence! Only Mr. Teeters knew the effort it cost him to tell his name to strangers. He added with the air of a man determined to make a clean breast of it:

“I’m from Missoury.”

The Major’s hand shot out unexpectedly.

“Shake!” he cried warmly. “I was drug up myself at the foot of the Ozarks.”

“I pulled out when I was a kid and wrangled ’round considerible.” Teeters made the statement as an extenuating circumstance.

“I took out naturalization papers myself,” replied the Major good-humoredly. “My name is Prouty—Stephen Douglas Prouty. You’ll prob'ly hear of me if you stay in the country. The fact is, I’m thinkin’ of startin’ a town and namin’ it Prouty.”

“Shoo—you don’t say so!” In polite inquiry, “Whur?”

“Thur!”

Mr. Teeters looked a little blank as he stared at the town site indicated.

“It seems turrible fur from water,” he commented finally.

“Sink—drill—artesian well—maybe we’ll strike a regular subterranean river. Anyway, ’twould be no trick at all to run a ditch from Dead Horse Canyon and get all the water we want.” He waved his arm at the distant mountains and settled that objection.

“Wouldn’t them alkali bogs breedin’ a billion ‘no-see-’ems’ a second be kind of a drawback?” inquired Teeters tentatively.

"That'll all be drained, covered with sile and seeded down in lawns," replied the Major quickly. "In two year that spot'll be bloomin' like the Garden of Eden.

"I've got to be movin'," the Major continued. "I'm on my way from a cornerstone layin' at Buffalo Waller to a barbecue at No Wood Crick. I'm kind of an orator," he added modestly.

"And I got about three hundred head of calves to drag to the fire, if I kin git my rope on 'em," said Teeters, straightening in the saddle.

The Major asked in instant interest:

"Oh, you're workin' for that wealthy eastern outfit?"

"Don't know how wealthy they be, but they're plenty eastern," Teeters replied dryly.

"I was thinkin' I might stop over night with 'em and git acquainted. The Scissors Outfit can't be more'n fifteen mile out of my way, and it'll be a kind of a change from the Widder Taylor's, whur I stop generally."

The cowboy combed the horse's mane with his fingers in silence. After waiting a reasonable time for the invitation which should have been forthcoming, the Major inquired:

"They're—sociable, ain't they?"

"They ain't never yit run out in the road and drug anybody off his horse," replied Teeters grimly. "They charge four bits a meal to strangers."

"What?" Surely his ears had deceived him.

Inspired by the Major's dumbfounded expression, the cowboy continued:

"They have their big meal at night and call it dinner, and they wash their hands at the table when they git done eatin', and Big Liz has to lope in from the kitchen when she hears the bell tinkle and pass

'em somethin' either one of 'em could git by reachin'." He lowered his voice confidentially, "Most any meal I look fur her to hit one of 'em between the horns."

The Major stared round-eyed, breathless, like a child listening to a fairy tale which he feared would end if he interrupted.

"In the evenin' the boss puts on a kind of eatin' jacket, a sawed-off coat that makes a growed man look plumb foolish, and she comes out in silk and satin that shows considerable hide. Have you met this here Toomey?"

"Not yet; that's a pleasure still in store for me."

"Pleasure!" exclaimed Teeters, who took the polite phrase literally. "More like you'll want to knock his head off. Old Timer," he leaned over the saddle horn, "seein' as you're from Missoury, I'll tell you private that you'd better keep on travelin'. Company ain't wanted at the Scissor Outfit, and they'd high-tone it over you so 'twouldn't be noways enjoyable."

"There is plenty of ranches where I am welcome," replied the Major with dignity. "I kin make the Widder Taylor's by sundown."

"Miss Maggie plays good on the pianner," Teeters commented, expectorating violently to conceal a certain embarrassment.

"And the doughnuts the old lady keeps in that crock on the kitchen table is worth a day's ride to git to." The Major closed an eye and with the other looked quizzically at Teeters, adding, "If it wa'nt for Starlight—"

"Starlight is shore some Injun," replied the cowboy, grinning understandingly.

"Now what for an outfit's that?"

The moving cloud of dust which the Major had

forgotten in his keen interest in the conversation was almost upon them. “A band of woolies, a pack burro, one feller walkin’, and another ridin’.”

The cowboy’s eyes were unfriendly, though he made no comment as they waited.

“Howdy!” called the Major genially as, with a nod, the herder would have passed without speaking.

The stranger responded briefly, but stopped.

“Come fur?” inquired the Major sociably.

“Utah.”

“Goin’ fur?”

“Until I find a location. I rather like the looks of this section.”

“Sheep spells ‘trouble’ in this country,” said the cowboy, significantly.

“Think so?” indifferently.

Seeing Teeters was about to say something further, the Major interrupted:

“What might I call your name, sir?”

“Just say ‘Joe,’ and I’ll answer.”

The Major looked a trifle disconcerted, but in his rôle of Master of Ceremonies continued:

“I’ll make you acquainted with Mr. Teeters.”

The two men nodded coldly.

To break the strained silence the Major observed:

“Got a boy helpin’ you, I notice.”

“Girl,” replied the sheepherder briefly.

“Girl? Oh, I see! Them overalls deceived me. Daughter, I presume.”

“Pardner,” laconically.

The Major looked incredulous but said nothing, and while he sought for something further to say in order to prolong the conversation they all turned abruptly at the rattle of rocks.

“The boss,” said Teeters sardonically from the corner of his mouth, and added, “That’s a young

dude that's visitin'."

Toomey was perfectly equipped for a ride in Central Park. He looked an incongruous and alien figure in the setting in his English riding clothes and boots. The lad who accompanied him was dressed in exaggerated cowboy regalia.

Toomey used a double bit and now brought his foaming horse to a short stop with the curb. He vouchsafed the unimportant "natives" in the road only a brief glance, but addressed himself to Teeters.

"Where have you been?" he demanded in a sharp tone.

"I ain't been lost," replied Teeters calmly. "Where would I be 'cept huntin' stock?"

"Why didn't you follow me?"

"I think too much of my horse to jam him over rocks when there ain't no special call for it. I kin ride on a run 'thout fallin' off, when they's need to."

Toomey's brilliant black eyes flashed. Swallowing the impudence of these western hirelings was one of the hardest things he had to endure in his present life. But even he could see that Teeters thoroughly understood cattle, else he would have long since discharged him.

"I've ridden about ten extra miles trying to keep you in sight."

"If you'd let them sturrups out like I told you and quit tryin' to set down standin' up, ridin' wouldn't tire you so much." Teeters looked at the English pigskin saddle in frank disgust.

Toomey ignored the criticism and said arrogantly:

"I want you to follow me from now on."

An ominous glint came in the cowboy's eye, but he still grinned.

"I wa'nt broke to foller. Never was handled right when I was a colt. Don't you wait fer me, feller, you

jest sift along in and I'll come when I git done."

Judging from the expression on Toomey's face, it seemed to the Major an opportune time to interrupt.

"Since nobody aims to introduce us—" he began good-naturedly, extending a hand. "My name is Prouty—Stephen Douglas Prouty. You've heard of me, like as not."

"Can't say I have," replied Toomey in a tone that made the Major flush as he shook the extended hand without warmth.

To cover his confusion, the Major turned to the sheepherder whose soft brown eyes held an amused look.

"Er—Joe—I'll make you acquainted with Mr. Jasper Toomey, one of our leadin' stockmen in these parts."

The introduction received from Toomey the barest acknowledgment as he directed his gaze to the grazing sheep.

"Where you taking them?" he asked in a curt tone.

"I really couldn't tell you yet."

Toomey glanced at him sharply, attracted by the cultivated tone.

"I wouldn't advise you to locate here; this is my range."

"Own it?" inquired the herder mildly.

"N-no."

"Lease it?"

"N-no."

"No good reason then is there to keep me out?"

"Except," darkly, "this climate isn't healthy for sheep."

"Perhaps," gently, "I'm the best judge of that."

"You'll keep on going, if you follow my advice." The tone was a threat.

"I hardly ever take advice that's given unasked."

"Well—you'd better take this."

The sheepherder looked at him speculatively, with no trace of resentment in his mild eyes.

"Let me see," reflectively. "It generally takes an easterner who comes west to show us how to raise stock from three to five years to go broke. I believe I'll stick around a while; I may be able to pick up something cheap a little later."

A burst of ringing laughter interrupted this unexpected clash between the strangers. It was clear that the lack of harmony did not extend to their young companions, for the lad and the girl seemed deeply interested in each other as their ponies grazed with heads together. The immediate cause of their laughter was the boy's declaration that when he came to see the girl he intended to wear petticoats.

When their merriment had subsided, she demanded:

"Don't you like my overalls?"

He looked her over critically—at her face with the frank gray eyes and the vivid red of health glowing through the tan; at the long flat braid of fair hair, which hung below the cantle of the saddle; at her slender bare feet thrust through the stirrups.

"You'd look pretty in anything," he responded gallantly.

She detected the evasion and persisted:

"But you think I'd look nicer in dresses, don't you?"

Embarrassed, he responded hesitatingly:

"You see—down South where I come from the girls all wear white and lace and ribbon sashes and carry parasols and think a lot about their complexions. You're just—different."

The herder waved his arm. "Way 'round 'em,

Shep," and the sheep began moving.

"Good-bye," the girl gathered up the reins reluctantly.

"You didn't tell me your name."

"Katie Prentice."

"Mine's Hughie Disston," he added, his black eyes shining with friendliness. "Maybe I'll see you again sometime."

She answered shyly:

"Maybe."

Toomey started away at a gallop, calling sharply:

"Come on, Hughie!"

The boy followed with obvious reluctance, sending a smile over his shoulder when he found that the girl was looking after him.

"Hope you make out all right with your town," said Teeters politely as, ignoring his employer's instructions, he turned his horse's head in a direction of his own choosing.

"No doubt about it," replied the Major, briskly, gathering up the lines and bringing the stub of a whip down with a thwack upon each back impartially. "S'long!" He waved it at the girl and sheepherder. "I trust you'll find a location to suit you."

"Pardner," said Mormon Joe suddenly, when the Major was a blur in a cloud of dust and the horsemen were specks in the distance, "this looks like home to me somehow. There ought to be great sheep feed over there in the foothills and summer range in the mountains. What do you think of it?"

"Oh—goody!" the girl cried eagerly. "Isn't it funny, I was hoping you'd say that."

He looked at her quizzically.

"Tired of trailing sheep, Katie, or do you think you might have company?"

She flushed in confusion, but admitted honestly: "Both, maybe."

CHAPTER III

PROUTY

Major Prouty hung over the hitching post in front of the post office listening with a beatific smile to the sound of the saw and the hammer that came from the Opera House going up at the corner of Prouty Avenue and Wildwood Street. The Major's eyes held the brooding tenderness of a patron saint, as he looked the length of the wide street of the town which bore his name.

"Sunnin' yourself, Major?" inquired Hiram Butefish jocularly as he passed; then paused to add, "I'm lookin' for a big turn-out at the Boosters Club to-night."

"I trust so, Hiram."

Aside from himself, no one person had contributed more to Prouty's growth than the editor of the *Grit*.

Mr. Butefish had arrived among the first with the intention of opening a plumbing shop, but since the

water supply was furnished by a windmill the demand for his services was not apt to be pressing for some time to come.

Therefore, with true western resourcefulness he bought the handpress of a defunct sheet and turned to journalism instead. Though less lucrative, moulding public opinion and editing a paper that was to be a recognized power in the state seemed to Mr. Butefish a step ahead.

The Middle West had responded nobly to his editorial appeals to come out and help found an Empire. The majority of the optimistic citizens who walked with their heads in the clouds and their eyes on the roseate future were there through his efforts. Appreciative of this fact, the Major's eyes were kindly as they gazed upon the editor's retreating back.

His expression was benignity itself as his glance turned lovingly to the Prouty House and the White Hand Laundry—the latter in particular being a milestone on the road of Progress since it heralded the fact that the day was not far distant when a man could wear a boiled shirt without embarrassing comment. Three saloons, the General Merchandise Emporium, and "Doc" Fussel's drug store completed the list of business enterprises as yet, but others were in contemplation and a bottling works was underway. Oh, yes, Prouty was indelibly on the map.

The Major's complacent smile changed to a slight frown as a man in a black tall crowned hat stopped to rest his back against the post of the Laundry sign.

It had reached the Major's ears that Mormon Joe had said that Prouty had no more future than a prairie dog town. He had been in his cups at the time but that did not palliate the offense.

Now, there—there was the kind of a man that

helped a town! The Major's brow cleared as Jasper Toomey swung round the corner by the Prouty House and clattered down the main street sitting high-headed and arrogant in a Brewster cart. Spent money like a prince—he did. A few more people like the Toomeys and the future of the country was assured.

In the meantime Toomey had brought the velvet-mouthed horse to its haunches in front of the laundry where he tossed a bundle into the sheepman's arms, saying casually;

"Take that inside, my man."

Without a change of expression, Mormon Joe caught it, rolled it compactly and kicked it over the horse's back into the street.

"There's no brass buttons sewed on my coat—take it yourself!" Mormon Joe shrugged a shoulder as he walked off.

Walter Scales of the Emporium dashed into the street and recovered the laundry with an apologetic air as though he were somehow responsible for the act.

"You have to make allowances for the rough characters that swarm into a new country," he said, as he delivered the bundle himself.

"I'll break that pauper sheepherder before I quit!" A vein under Toomey's right eye and another on his temple stood out swollen and purple.

"People like him that send away for their grub and never spend a cent they can help in their home town don't benefit a country none." Mr. Scales did not attempt to conceal his pleasure at the foot-long list Toomey handed him. He added urgently, "Wisht you'd try and stay in for the Boosters Club to-night, Mr. Toomey. We'd like your advice."

Toomey refused curtly.

"Get that order out at once," he said peremptorily, as he drove off.

No invitation cordial or otherwise was extended to Mormon Joe, so it was upon his own initiative that he stumbled into the room where the Boosters Club was in session that evening. Unmistakably drunk, Joe sat down noisily beside Clarence Teeters who was the only one who made room for him.

The purpose of the meeting was to consider ways and means to build a ditch that should bring water from the mountains in sufficient quantity not only to supply the town but to irrigate the agricultural land surrounding it.

Mr. Abram Pantin, a man of affairs from Keokuk, Iowa, in the vicinity with a view to locating, had been called upon for a few remarks and was just closing with the safe and conservative statement that an ample water supply was an asset to any community.

He was followed by the chairman, Mr. Butefish, who pleaded eloquently for the construction of the ditch by local capital, and having aroused the meeting to a high pitch of enthusiasm ended with a peroration that brought forth a loud demonstration of approbation.

"Gentlemen," declared Mr. Butefish, "back there in the mountains is a noble stream waitin' to irrigate a thirsty land. For the trifling sum of twenty thousand dollars we can turn this hull country into a garden spot! The time is comin' when we'll see nothin' but alfalfa field in purple bloom as fur as the eye can reach! We're as rich in natural resources as any section on God's green earth. We're lousy with 'em, gentlemen, and all we gotta do is to put our shoulders to the wheel and scratch!"

Mr. Butefish sat down and dried the inside of his collar with his handkerchief midst tumultuous applause.

The evening had been a veritable love-feast without a jarring note and everybody glowed with a feeling of neighborliness and confidence in a future that was to bring them affluence.

“Mr. Chairman, may I have a word?”

There was a general turning of heads as Mormon Joe, thick of tongue, lurched over the back of the seat in front.

“Kindly make it brief,” replied Mr. Butefish reluctantly. “We still have important business to transact.”

“I only want to say that this country hasn’t any more natural resources than a tin roof and when Prouty got any bigger than a saloon and a blacksmith shop it overreached itself.” There was a tightening of lips as the members exchanged looks, but Mormon Joe went on, “One third of the work that you dry farmers put in trying to make ranches out of arid land,” he addressed a row of tousled gentlemen on the front seat, “would bring you independence in a state where climatic conditions are favorable to raising crops.

“As for your ditch, there never was an irrigation project yet that did not cost double and treble the original estimate. If you try to put it through without outside help, you’ll all go broke. In other words,” he jeered, “you haven’t one damned asset but your climate, and you’re wasting your time and energy until you figure out a way to realize on that.”

Shabby, undersized, distinctly drunk, Mormon Joe made an unheroic figure as he stood swaying on his feet looking mockingly into the frowning faces of the Boosters Club, and yet, somehow, his words cast a

momentary depression over the room.

He stood an instant, then staggered out, indifferent to the fact that he had committed the supreme offense in a western town—he had "knocked"—and that henceforth and forever he was a marked man—a detriment to the community—to be discredited, shunned, and, if possible, driven out.

The invitation composed and printed by Mr. Butefish after much mental travail, requesting the pleasure of the Toomeys' company at a reception and dance in the Prouty House to celebrate the third year of the town's prosperity and progress was one of the results of this meeting of the Boosters Club.

Toomey's thin lips curled superciliously as he glanced at it and tossed it across the breakfast table:

"Here, Hughie, why don't you take this in?"

"You'll go, won't you?" the lad asked eagerly after reading it.

"We never mingle socially with the natives." As Mrs. Toomey shook her head her smile and tone expressed ineffable exclusiveness. Seeing that the boy's face fell in disappointment she urged, "But you go, Hughie."

"If I knew some one to ask—"

"There's Maggie Taylor," Mrs. Toomey suggested.

"And Mormon Joe's Kate," Toomey added, laughing.

"Who's she?" the boy asked curiously.

"Do you remember the day when you were here before that we met those people driving a band of sheep—a man and a barefooted girl in overalls?"

Hughie's eyes sparkled:

"They stopped here, then?"

Toomey scowled.

"Yes, confound 'em! I've had more than one 'run in' with 'em since over range and water. But," he

urged, “don’t let that hinder you. They live with their sheep back there in the foothills like a couple of white savages, and she’s some greener than alfalfa. Go and ask her. You’ll get some fun out of it. I dare you! I’ll bet you a saddle blanket against anything you like that you haven’t got the sand to take her.”

“Done!” Hughie Disston’s eyes were dancing. “If my nerve fails me when I see her, you are in a new Navajo.”

It was a great lark to Disston, now a tall boy of nineteen, handsome, attractive, with the soft drawl of his southern speech and the easy manners of those who have associated much with women-folk. He was in high spirits as, one morning early, he and Teeters turned off from the main road and took the faint trail which led up Bitter Creek.

They rode until they saw two tepees showing white through the willows.

“We’re in luck to catch them home at this hour,” said Teeters, as they heard a faint tinkle from the corrals on the other side of the creek. “They’ve got the sheep inside—must be cuttin’ out. Yes,” as they forded and drew closer, “there’s Kate at the dodge gate.”

The corral was a crude affair, built at the minimum of expense, of crooked cottonwood poles, willow sticks and brush interlaced. It was divided into three sections, with a chute running from the larger division into two smaller ones.

Kate was standing at the “dodge gate” at the end of the chute separating the sheep as they came through by throwing the gate to and fro, thus sending each into the division in which it belonged. It was work which required intense concentration, a trained eye and quick brain, and even Disston and Teeters, who knew nothing of sheep, could

appreciate the remarkable skill with which the girl performed the task.

"Let 'em come, Uncle Joe!" she called in her clear confident voice.

Mormon Joe flapped a grain sack over the backs of the sheep and having started a leader the rest went through the chute on the run.

When the last one was through Kate's aching arm dropped limply to her side and she called in a tired but jubilant voice:

"I don't believe I've made a single mistake this time."

Mormon Joe's expression was not too friendly when he saw strangers but it changed upon recognizing Teeters.

"Maybe you don't remember this here gent," said that person, indicating Disston with his thumb after he and Mormon Joe had shaken hands. "He's growed about four feet since you saw him."

"I remember him very well." Mormon Joe's tone and manner had the suavity and polish which was so at variance with his general appearance.

Hughie, leaving Teeters and Mormon Joe to a conversation which did not interest him, rode up to see Kate at closer range.

Busy in one of the pens, the girl was still unaware of visitors, so he had had ample opportunity to observe her before she saw him.

She, too, had grown since their meeting, being now as tall and straight and slim as an Olympian runner. Her hair swung in a thick fair braid far below her waist as she darted hither and thither in pursuit of a lamb. The man's blue flannel shirt she wore was faded and the ragged sleeves had been cut off at the elbow for convenience. Her short skirt was of stiff blue denim and a pair of coarse brown and white

cotton stockings showed between the hem and the tops of boys' shoes which disguised the slenderness of her feet. Yet, withal, she was graceful as she ran and somehow managed to look picturesque.

The boy's face was an odd mixture of expressions as he watched her—amusement, astonishment, disapproval, and grudging admiration all in one.

Finally, catching the lamb by the hind leg she threw it by a twist acquired through much practice and buckled a bell around its neck.

As she turned it loose and straightened up, she saw Disston. When he smiled she knew him instantly and the color rose in her face as she walked towards him, suddenly conscious of her clothes and grimy hands. She was soon at her ease, however, and when he told her his errand the radiance that leaped into her face startled him.

"Would I like to go?" she cried joyously. "There's nothing I can think of that I would like better. I've never been to a dance in all my life. I've never been anywhere. It's so good of you to ask me!"

"It's good of you to go with me," he said awkwardly, shamed by her gratitude, remembering the wager.

"But I don't know how to dance," she said almost tearfully.

"You don't?" incredulously. He had thought every girl in the world knew how to dance. "Never mind," he assured her, "I can teach you in a few lessons."

So it was settled, and they talked of other things, laughing merrily, frequently, while Mormon Joe and Teeters discussed with some gravity the fact that it had been several months since the latter had been able to get his wages from Toomey.

"I think he's workin' on borried capital and they're shuttin' down on him," Teeters conjectured.

“His 'Old Man,'” he nodded toward Hughie, “has got consider'ble tied up in the Outfit, I’ve an idea. Anyhow, if I git beat out of my money after the way Toomey’s high-toned it over me—” He cast a significant look at a fist with particularly prominent knuckles.

“You hang on a while,” Mormon Joe cautioned. “You may be boss of the Scissor Outfit yet—stranger things have been waiting around the corner.”

Teeters shifted his weight in the saddle.

“Say,” he confessed in some embarrassment, “a sperrit told me somethin’ like that only day 'fore yisterday. I was settin’ in a circle over to Mis’ Taylor’s and an Injun chief named ‘Starlight’ spelled out on the table that all kinds of honor and worldly power was comin’ to me. It makes me feel cur'ous, hearin’ you say it—like they was somethin’ in it.”

Mormon Joe smiled quizzically but made no comment; perhaps he suspected that the privilege of touching fingers with Miss Maggie Taylor while waiting for the spirits to “take holt” had as much to do with Teeters' interest in the unseen world as the messages he received from it. He asked:

“You remember what I said at the Boosters’ Club the other night?”

“I ain’t apt to fergit it anyways soon,” replied Teeters, dryly, “seein’ as ‘Tinhorn’ riz and put it to a vote as to whether they should tar and feather you or jest naturally freeze you out.”

“The truth is acid,” he laughed. “It’s a fact though, Teeters, that this country’s chief asset is its climate, and,” with his quizzical smile, “this Scissor Outfit would make a fine dude-ranch.”

Kate did not tell Mormon Joe of her invitation until the sheep were bedded for the night, the supper dishes out of the way and they were sitting, as was

their custom, on two boxes watching the stars and talking while Mormon Joe smoked his pipe.

"Our company this morning made me forget to tell you how well you handled the gate; it was a clean cut." Mormon Joe added in obvious pride, "You're the best sheepman in the country, Katie, bar none."

"Then I wish you'd listen to me and buy some of those Rambouillets and grade up our herd."

"We're doing all right," he returned, indifferently.

"Anybody would know you didn't like sheep."

"They're a means to an end; they keep me in the hills out of mischief and furnish a living for us both."

"I wonder that you haven't more ambition, Uncle Joe."

"That died and was buried long ago. The little that I have left is for you. I want you to have the benefit of what I have learned from books and life; I want you to be happy—I can't say that I'm interested in anything beyond that."

She threw him a kiss.

"You're too good to be true almost." Then, with a quite inexplicable diffidence she faltered, "Uncle Joe, that—that boy asked me to go to a dance."

He turned his head quickly and asked with a sharp note in his voice:

"Where?"

"In Prouty."

"Do you want to go?"

"I can't tell you how much!" she cried eagerly. "I can hardly believe it is me—I—invited to a dance. I've never been out in the evening in all my life. I don't know a single woman and may be I'll never have such a chance again to get acquainted and make friends."

"I didn't know that you had been lonely, Katie,"

he said after a silence.

"Just sometimes," she admitted.

"You said you didn't want to go to Prouty again because the children bleated at you the last time you were in."

"But that was long ago—a year—they wouldn't do that now—they're older, and, besides, there are others who have sheep. We're not the only ones any more. But," with a quaver in her voice, "don't you want me to go, Uncle Joe?"

"I don't want you to put yourself in a position to get hurt."

"What—what would anybody hurt me for?" she asked, wide-eyed.

His answer to the question was a shrug. Then, as though to himself, "They may be bigger than I give them credit for."

He had not refused to let her go, but he had chilled her enthusiasm somewhat so they were silent for a time, each occupied with his own thoughts.

As Mormon Joe, with his hands clasped about his knee, his pipe dead in his mouth, sat motionless in the starlight, he ceased to be conscious of the beauty of the night, of the air that touched his face, soft and cool as the caress of a gentle woman, of the moist sweet odors of bursting buds and tender shoots—he was thinking only that the child who had run into his arms for safety had come to be the center of the universe to him. He could not imagine life without her. He had mended her manners, corrected her speech, bought her books of study to which she had diligently applied herself in the long hours while she herded sheep, and nothing else in life had given him so much pleasure as to watch her mind develop and her taste improve.

Anybody that would hurt her! Instinctively his

hands clenched. Aloud he said:

"Go to your party, Katie, and I hope with all my heart it will be everything you anticipate."

CHAPTER IV

DISILLUSIONMENT

It was the most ambitious affair that had been attempted in Prouty—this function at the Prouty House. The printed invitations had made a deep impression; besides, wild rumors were flying about as to the elaborate costumes that were to be worn by the socially prominent.

It was whispered that Mrs. Abram Pantin, wife of the wealthy capitalist from Keokuk, now "settled in their midst," was to be seen in electric blue silk with real lace collar and cuffs; while Mrs. Sudds, wife of a near-governor, who had moved to Prouty from another part of the state, was to appear in her lansdowne wedding dress. Mrs. Myron Neifkins, too, if report could be believed, was to be gowned in peach-blow satin worked in French knots.

He was a dull clod indeed who could not feel the tremors in the air that momentous Saturday and by

night there was not tying space at any hitching rack.

If the ball loomed so large to the townfolks, it may be assumed that Kate's anticipation was no less. As a matter of fact, she could scarcely sleep for thinking of it. She did not know much about God—Mormon Joe was not religious—but she felt vaguely that she must have Him to thank for this wonderful happiness. It was the most important happening since she had run, terrified, from home that black night three years ago.

There had not been a night since Hughie had given her the invitation that she had not lain awake for hours staring at the stars with a smile on her lips as she visualized situations. She saw herself dividing dances as belles did in books, taking her part in lively conversations, the center of merry groups. Oh, no, life would never be the same again; she was certain of it.

Hughie had kept his word and ridden over several times to teach her the steps, and they had practised them on the hard-trodden ground in front of the cook tent, where the dust could be kept down by frequent sprinkling. If the waltz and the polka and schottische sent her blood racing under such adverse conditions, what must it be like on a real floor with real music, she asked herself ecstatically. These dancing lessons were provocative of much merriment and teasing from the Toomeys. While Hugh did not resent it or defend Kate, he did not join in their ridicule of her. She was "green," he could not deny that, yet not in the sense the Toomeys meant. Naïve, ingenuous, he felt were better words. She knew nothing of social usages, and she was without a suspicion of the coquetry that he looked for in girls before they had begun to do up their hair. She spoke with startling frankness upon subjects which he had

been taught were taboo. He admired and was accustomed to soft, helpless, clinging femininity, and it grated upon him to see Kate at the woodpile swinging an axe in a matter-of-fact way.

"It's because there's no one else around," he told himself, to explain the eagerness with which he rode over while he was teaching Kate to dance.

The boy was intelligent enough to recognize the fact that, however unschooled Kate might be in the things that counted in the outside world, she was not ignorant when it came to those within her ken. She knew the habits and peculiarities of wild animals and insects, every characteristic of sheep, and she was a nearly unfailing weather prophet through her interpretation of the meaning of wind and sky and clouds. Her knowledge of botany was a constant surprise to him, for she seemed to know the name and use of the tiniest plant that grew upon the range.

But, after all, he demanded of himself, what did a girl want to know such things for? He would have liked better to see her in the shade with an embroidery hoop.

Restraining their trembling haste, yet fearing that they might miss something, the initiated townfolks managed to stay away from the Prouty House until the fashionably late hour of eight, but the simpler rural guests having eaten at six were ready and holding down the chairs in the office before "the music" had arrived. There was a flutter of puzzled inquiry among the Early Birds when Mrs. Abram Pantin, Mrs. Sudds and Mrs. Myron Neifkins with an air of conscious importance stationed themselves in a row at the door opening into the dining room, which was now being noisily cleared of tables and chairs.

Mrs. Pantin, as gossip had surmised, wore electric

blue with collar and cuffs of lace that presumably was real, while angular Mrs. Sudds looked chaste, if somewhat like a windmill in repose, in her bridal gown. Mrs. Neifkins, too, came up to expectations in her peach-blow satin.

For a while the ladies of the receiving line found their position somewhat of a sinecure, for nobody knew what they were standing there for until Mrs. Rufus Webb, the wife of Prouty's new haberdasher, arrived. Mrs. Webb had been called home to her dying mother's bedside, but fortunately had been able to return from her sad errand in time for the function at the Prouty House. When she laid aside her wrap it was observed that she had gone into red.

Kate was an unconscionable time in dressing, Hugh thought, as he waited in the office, considering that the flour sack tied behind her saddle had seemed to contain her wardrobe easily enough.

His attention was focused upon Mrs. Neifkins, whom he had last seen in a wrapper and slat sunbonnet, when a lull in the hubbub that became a hush caused him to look up. His eyes followed the gaze of every other pair of eyes to the head of the stairs that came down from the floor above into the office. He saw Kate—dreadful as to clothes as a caricature or a comic valentine! She had a wreath of red paper roses in her hair and a chain of them reached from one shoulder nearly to the hem of her skirt on the other side. The dress itself was made without regard to the prevailing mode and of the three-cent-a-yard bunting bought by sheepmen by the bolt to be used for flags to scare off coyotes in lambing time. The body of the dress was blue, trimmed with the same material in red. The sleeves were elbow length, and she wore black mitts. But the crowning horror, unless it was the wreath, was the

string of red wild-rose seed pods around her neck.

Kate had cut out her gown without a pattern and with no mirror to guide her, the skirt was several inches shorter behind than in front, and a miscalculation put the gathers chiefly in one spot.

She was not recognized at first, for her visits to Prouty had been made at too long intervals for her to be known save by a few. Then, quickly—"Mormon Joe's Kate!" was whispered behind hands and passed from mouth to mouth.

The girl's eager glowing face was the one redeeming thing of her appearance. Half way down the stairs she stopped involuntarily and looked with an expression of wondering inquiry into the many staring eyes focused upon herself. Then a titter, nearly inaudible at first, grew into a general snicker throughout the room.

They were laughing at her! There was no mistake about that. Kate shrank back as though she had been struck; while the radiance faded from her face, and it turned as white as the wall at her back.

What was the matter? What had she done? Wasn't she all right? she asked herself, while her heart gave a great throb of fear. She gripped the bannister while her panic-stricken eyes sought Hughie in the crowded office. Where was he? Did he mean to leave her alone? It seemed minutes that she stood there, though it was only one at most.

In spite of his worldly air and social ease, Disston was only a boy after all, with a boy's keen sensitiveness to ridicule, and this ordeal was something outside the experience of his nineteen years. The worst he had expected was that she would be frumpish, or old-fashioned, or commonplace like these other women standing about, but it had not occurred to him that she might be conspicuously

grotesque.

There was a moment of uncertainty which seemed as long to the boy as it did to Kate, and then the chivalry of his good southern blood responded gallantly to the appeal in her eyes. His dark face was dyed with the blood that rushed to the roots of his hair, and his forehead was damp with the moisture of embarrassment, but he rose from his seat and went to meet her with a welcoming smile.

"Oh, Hughie!" she gasped tremulously in gratitude and relief as she ran rather than walked down the remaining stairs.

The grinning crowd parted to let them pass as, self-conscious and stiffly erect, they walked the length of the office towards the dining room. Figuratively speaking, Prouty stood on tip-toe to see what sort of reception they would meet from the receiving line. It was tacitly understood that lesser social lights would take their cue from them.

Of its kind, it was as thrilling a moment as Prouty had experienced. Mrs. Myron Neifkins had recognized Kate immediately and passed the word along to Mrs. Pantin who, although a comparative stranger, had been properly supplied with information as to the community's undesirables. "Mormon Joe's Kate," the daughter of the notorious Jezebel of the Sand Coulee Roadhouse, naturally was included in the list.

Hugh, who had met these ladies previously and found them as amiable as any one could wish—particularly Mrs. Pantin, who had regarded him as somebody to cultivate because of his connection with the exclusive Toomeys of the Scissor Ranch—now had something of the sensation of a person who had stepped into the frigid atmosphere of a cold storage plant.

Mrs. Pantin's eyes had all the warm friendliness of two blue china knobs and her thin lips were closed until her mouth looked merely a vivid scratch. Yet, somehow, the boy managed to say with his manner of deferential courtesy:

"Mrs. Pantin, do you know Miss Prentice?"

Ordinarily, a part of Mrs. Pantin's society manner was a vivacious chirp, but now she said coldly between her teeth:

"I haven't that pleasure." She gave Kate her extreme finger tips with such obvious reluctance that the action was an affront.

Disston glanced at Mrs. Sudds in the hope of finding friendliness. That lady had drawn herself up like an outraged tragedy queen. No one would have dreamed, seeing Mrs. Sudds at the moment with her air of royal hauteur, that in bygone days she had had her own troubles making twelve dollars a week as a stenographer.

His glance passed on to Mrs. Neifkins, who was picking at a French knot in a spasm of nervousness lest Kate betray the fact that they had met.

Disston was aware that Mrs. Neifkins knew Kate and his lip curled at her cowardice. He raised his head haughtily; he would not subject his partner to further rebuffs.

"Come on, Katie," he said, curtly, and they passed into the dining room.

The girl's cheeks were flaming as they sat down on the chairs ranged against the wall.

"Hughie," her fingers were like ice as she clasped them together in her lap. "What's the matter? Do I look—queer?"

He answered shortly:

"You're all right."

They sat watching the crowd file in. Suddenly

Hughie exclaimed in obvious relief:

"There's Teeters, and Maggie Taylor and her mother! Wait here—I'll bring them over."

He went up to them with assurance, for their friendliness and hospitality had been marked upon the several occasions that he had accompanied Teeters, who always had some transparent excuse for stopping at their ranch.

Mrs. Taylor, with her backwoods' conceit and large patronizing manner, had been especially amusing to Hughie, but now in this uncomfortable situation she looked like a haven in a storm as he saw her towering by nearly half a head above the tallest in the crowd.

It was Mrs. Taylor's proud boast that she came of a race of giants. Even upon ordinary occasions she bore a rather remarkable resemblance to a mountain sheep, but to-night the likeness was further increased by a grizzled bunch of frizzled hair that stood out on either temple like embryo horns. Mrs. Taylor looked, as it were, "in the velvet." She wore a brown sateen basque secured at the throat by a brooch consisting of a lock of hair under glass. It was observed, also, that for the evening she had removed the string which she commonly wore around her two large and widely separated front teeth, and which were being drawn together by this means at about the rate the earth is cooling off.

Mrs. Taylor dated events from the time "Mr. Taylor was taken," though there was always room for doubt as to whether Mr. Taylor was "taken" or quite deliberately went.

Miss Maggie was tall and sallow and was anticipating matrimony with an ardor that had made the maiden one of the country's stock jokes, since the sharer of it seemed to be of secondary importance to

the fact. All her spare change and waking hours were spent buying and embroidering linen for the "hope chest" that spoke of her determined confidence in the realization of her ambition.

The three greeted Hughie warmly. Miss Maggie flashed her dazzling teeth; Teeters reached out and smote him with his fist between the shoulder blades; Mrs. Taylor laid her hand upon his arm with her large smug air of patronizing friendliness, and, stooping, beamed into his face.

"We were not looking for you here. Did Mr. and Mrs. Toomey come? Are you alone?"

"I brought Katie Prentice—she's sitting over there."

"Oh!" Mrs. Taylor's expression changed.

The boy looked at her pleadingly as he added:

"She has so few pleasures, and she would so like to have acquaintances—to make friends."

"I dare say," dryly.

"She—she doesn't know any one. Won't you—all come and join us?" There was entreaty in the boy's voice.

Mrs. Taylor rose out of her hips until she looked all of seven feet tall to Hughie.

"You must excuse me, Mr. Disston." She hesitated, then added in explanation: "When we came West I told myself that I must not allow myself to deteriorate in rough surroundings, and I have made it a rule never to mingle with any but the best, Mr. Disston. My father," impressively, "was a prominent undertaker in Philadelphia, and as organist in a large Methodist church in that city I came in contact with the best people, so you understand," blandly, "don't you, why I cannot—"

The boy was red to the rim of his ears as he bowed formally to mother and daughter.

"I don't in the least," he replied, coldly.

The pain in Kate's eyes hurt him when he returned to his seat and she asked.

"They wouldn't come?"

He hesitated, then answered bluntly:

"No."

"H-had we better stay?"

"Yes," he replied, doggedly, "we'll stay."

Their efforts at conversation were not a success, and it was a relief to them both when Hiram Butefish, as Floor Manager, commanded everybody to take partners for a waltz.

Hughie arose and held out his hands to Kate.

"Hughie, I can't," she protested, shrinking back. "I'm—afraid."

"Yes, you can," determinedly. "Don't let these people think they can frighten you."

"I'll try because you want me to," she answered, "but it's all gone out of my head, and I know I can't."

"You'll get it directly," as he took her hand. "Just remember and count. One, two, three—now!"

The bystanders tittered as she stumbled. The sound stung the boy like a whip, his black eyes flashed, but he said calmly enough:

"You make too much of it, Katie. Put your mind on the time and count."

She tried once more with no better result. She merely hopped, regardless of the music.

"I tell you I can't, Hughie," she said, despairingly. "Let's sit down."

"Never mind," soothingly as he acquiesced, "we'll try it again after a while. The next will very likely be a square dance and I can pilot you through that."

"You're so good!"

He looked away to avoid her grateful eyes. What would she say if she knew the reason he had brought

her there? On a bet! He had seen only what appeared to be the humorous side. Hughie's own pride enabled him to realize how deep were the hurts she was trying so pluckily to hide. But why did they treat her so? Even her dreadful get-up seemed scarcely to account for it.

The next number, as he surmised, was a square dance.

"Take your pardners fer a quadrille!"

There was a scrambling and a sliding over the floor, accompanied by much laughter, to the quickly formed "sets."

"There's a place, Kate—on the side, too, so you have only to watch what the others do."

She hesitated, but he could see the longing in her eyes.

He taunted boyishly, "Don't be a 'fraidy cat,'" at which for the first time they both laughed with something of naturalness.

Mr. Scales of the Emporium and his plump bookkeeper were there, and the willowy barber with the stylish operator of the new telephone exchange, while Mr. and Mrs. Neifkins made the third couple, and Hugh and Kate completed the set.

There was an exchange of looks as the pair came up. The stylish operator lifted an eyebrow and drew down the corners of her mouth. The bookkeeper said, "Well!" with much significance,—but it remained for Mrs. Neifkins to give the real offense. The expression on her vapid face implied that she was aghast at their impudence. Gathering the fullness of her skirt as though to withdraw it from contamination she laid the other hand on her husband's arm:

"There's a place over there, Myron, where we can get in."

"It's nearer the music," said Neifkins with an apologetic grin to the others.

Those who stayed had something of the air of brazening it out. In vain Mr. Butefish called sternly for, "One more couple this way!"

It was Scales of the Emporium who said, finally:

"Looks like we don't dance—might as well sit down."

Every one acted on the suggestion with alacrity save Kate and Hughie. When he turned to her, he saw that she was swallowing hard at the lump that was choking her.

"It's on account of me that they act so, Hughie! You stay if you want to; I'm going."

"Stay here?" he cried in boyish passion. "You're the only lady in the room so far as I can see! What would I stay for?"

The citizens of Prouty were still deeply impressed by each other's pretensions, as the reputations the majority had left in their "home towns" had not yet caught up with them. Therefore, being greatly concerned about what his neighbor thought of him, no one would have dared be friendly to the ostracized couple even if he had the disposition.

Kate and Hughie walked out, very erect and looking straight ahead, followed by a feeling of satisfaction that this opportunity had presented itself for the new order to show where it stood in the matter of accepting doubtful characters on an equal social footing. It had properly vindicated itself of the charge that western society was lax in such matters. That they had hurt—terribly hurt—another, was of small importance.

CHAPTER V

FOR ALWAYS

In the little room upstairs, where less than an hour before she had dressed in happy excitement, Kate tore off the paper flowers and wild rose pods. She threw them in a heap on the floor—the cherished mitts, the bunting dress—while she sobbed in a child's abandonment, with the tears running unchecked down her cheeks. The music floating up the stairway and through the transom, the scuffling sound of sliding feet, added to her grief. She had wanted, oh, how she had wanted to dance!

The thought that Hughie had suffered humiliation because of her was little short of torture. But he had not deserted her—he had stuck—even in her misery she gloried in that—and how handsome he had looked! Why, there was not a man in the room that could compare with him! His clothes, the way he had borne himself, the something different about him which she could not analyze. It was a woman's pride that shone in her swollen red-lidded eyes as she told herself this, while she pinned on her shabby Stetson in trembling haste, buckled the spurs on her boots and snatched up her ugly mackinaw.

Hugh was waiting for her in the office below.

The horses were tied to the hitching rack. Kate gulped down the lump that rose in her throat as she swung into the saddle. The orchestra was playing the "Blue Danube," and she especially loved that waltz. The strains followed them up the street, and tears she could not keep back fell on the horse's mane as

she drooped a little over the saddlehorn.

She looked down through dimmed eyes upon the lights streaming from the windows of the Prouty House, as they climbed the steep pitch to the bench above town, and the alluring brightness increased the aching heaviness of her heart, for she felt that she was leaving all they represented behind her forever. She knew she never could find the courage to risk going through such an ordeal again.

A childhood without playmates had created a longing for companionship that was pathetic in its eagerness, and the yearning had not been modified by the isolation and monotony of her present life. To dance, to be merry, to have the opportunity to please, seemed the most important thing in the world to the girl and now she seemed to realize, in mutinous despair, that through no fault of her own she was going to be cheated of that which was her right—of that which was every girl's right—to have the pleasures which belonged to her years.

Kate's standards were the standards of the old west and of the mountains and plains, which take only personal worth into account, so she did not yet comprehend clearly what it was all about. She herself had done nothing to merit such treatment from people whose names she did not even know. She rode for a long time without speaking, trying, in her tragic bewilderment, to puzzle it out.

The silence was in painful contrast to the high spirits in which they had ridden into town. Then, they had found so much to talk about, so much to anticipate—and it had all turned out to be so different, so far removed from anything they had dreamed. Each shrank from being the first to broach the subject of their humiliating retreat.

The moon came up after a while, full and mellow,

and the night air cooled Kate's flaming cheeks. The familiar stars, too, soothed her like the presence of old friends, but, more than anything, the accustomed motion of her horse, as it took its running walk, helped to restore her mental poise.

At the top of a hill both drew rein automatically. Walking down steep descents to save their horses and themselves was an understood thing between them. At the bottom they still trudged on, leading their horses and exchanging only an occasional word upon some subject far removed from their real thoughts. It was Kate who finally said with seeming irrelevance:

"Uncle Joe brought home two collie puppies once—fat, roly-poly little things that didn't do anything but play and eat, and they were—oh, so innocent! They were into everything, and always under foot, afraid of nothing or nobody, because they never had been hurt.

"One night a storm came up—a cold rain that was almost snow. They ran into my tent and settled themselves on my pillow all shivering and wet. In squirming around to make a nest for themselves they pulled my hair. It made me cross. I was half asleep and I slapped them.

"They paid no attention to it at first—they couldn't believe I meant it, so they kept on trying to cuddle up to me to get warm. I slapped them harder. They whimpered, but still they couldn't realize that I meant to hurt them. Finally, I struck them—hard—again and again—until they howled with pain. They understood finally that they were not wanted—and they went crying and whimpering out into the rain.

"It awakened me, thinking what I had done, how they had come to me so innocent—taking kindness as a matter of course because they never had known

anything else, and I had been the first to hurt them. I was the first to spoil their confidence in others—and themselves. I couldn't sleep for thinking of it, and finally I got up, and, to punish myself, went out barefooted into the storm and brought them back. They forgave me and soon settled down, but they never were quite the same, for they had learned what pain was and what it meant to be afraid.

"When I went there to-night I was like those puppies, just as green and confident—just as sure of everybody's kindness."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Katie," he replied in a low tone.

"I don't mean to whine," she went on, "but you see I wasn't expecting it, and, like the puppies, it took me a long time to understand. I thought at first it was my dress—that I looked—funny, somehow; but you said it wasn't that, so I thought maybe it was because we were 'in sheep,' but so is Neifkins, and nobody treated them as they did me."

"The upstarts!" savagely. "I'll never forgive myself for taking you there!"

She protested quickly:

"You're not to blame. How could you know? You meant to do something nice for me, Hughie."

He winced at that. It would have required more courage than he had to have told her at the moment the exact truth.

He held the horses back and stopped suddenly.

"Katie," turning to her, "I'd do anything in the world to make amends for what happened to-night. Isn't there some way—something I can do for you? Anything at all," he pleaded. "Just tell me—no matter what it is—you've only to let me know."

She looked at him with grateful eyes, but shook her head.

"No, Hughie, there's nothing you can do for me."

She caught her breath sharply and added, “Ex—except to go on liking me. It would break my heart if you went back on me, too.”

“Kate!”

“If you didn’t like me any more—” She choked and the swift tears filled her eyes.

“Like you!” impetuously. “I’d do more than like you if I never had seen you before to-night!” He dropped the bridle reins and laid a hand on either shoulder, holding her at arms’ length. “Your eyes are like stars! And your mouth looks so—sweet! And your hair is so soft and pretty when the wind blows it across your forehead and face like that! I wish you could see yourself. You’re beautiful in the moonlight, Kate!”

“Beautiful?” incredulously. Then she laughed happily, “Why, I’m not even pretty, Hughie.”

“And what’s more,” he declared, “you’re a wonderful girl—different—a fellow never gets tired of being with you.”

“You are making up to me for what happened to-night! I nearly forget it when you tell me things like that.”

“I didn’t know how much I did care until they hurt you. I could have killed somebody if it wouldn’t have made things worse for you.”

“As much as that?” She looked at him wistfully. “You care as much as that? You see,” she added slowly, “nobody’s ever taken my part except Uncle Joe—not even my mother; and it seems—queer to think that anybody else likes me well enough to fight for me.”

The unconscious pathos went straight to the boy’s chivalrous heart.

“Oh, Honey!” he cried impulsively, and taking her hand in both of his he held it tight against his breast.

Her eyes grew luminous at the word and the caress.

"Honey!" she repeated in a wondering whisper. "I like that."

Her lids lowered before the new and strange expression in his face.

"You've always seemed so independent and self-reliant, like another fellow, somehow. I didn't know you were so sweet. I'm just finding you out."

She looked at him before replying, but he trembled before the soft light shining in her eyes.

He stood for a moment uncertainly, fighting for his self-control, then, casting off restraint, he threw his arms about her, crying passionately:

"I love you! I love you, Katie! There's nobody like you in the whole world. Kiss me—Sweet!"

She drew back startled, looking into his eyes. Her own seemed to melt under what she saw there, and she slowly lifted her lips. When she could speak—

"You'll love me for always, Hughie?"

"For always," huskily. "For ever and ever, Katie."

CHAPTER VI

THE WOLF SCRATCHES

Mormon Joe had underestimated Jasper Toomey's capacity for extravagance and mismanagement when he had given him five years to "go broke" in, as he had accomplished it in four most effectively—so completely, in fact, that they had moved into town with only enough furniture to furnish a small house, which they spoke of as having "rented," though as yet the owner had had nothing but promises to compensate him for their occupancy.

It was close to a year after their advent in Prouty that Mrs. Toomey awakened in the small hours, listened a moment, then prodded her husband sharply:

"The wind's coming up, Jap, and I left out my washing."

"Never mind—I'll borrow a saddle horse in the morning and go after it."

"Everything will be whipped to ribbons," she declared plaintively.

"I'm not going out this time of night to collect laundry; besides, the exercise would make me hungrier."

"Are you hungry, Jap?"

"Hungry! I've been lying here thinking of everything I ever left on my plate since I was a baby!"

Mrs. Toomey sighed deeply.

"Wouldn't a fat club sandwich with chicken, lettuce, thin bacon and mayonnaise dressing—"

"Hush!" Toomey exploded savagely. "If you say that again I'll dress and go out and rob a hen roost!"

Mrs. Toomey suggested hopefully:

"Perhaps if you light the lamp, and smoke, it will take your mind off your stomach."

"I surmise that's all there is on it." Toomey lighted the lamp on the table beside the bed and

looked at the clock on the bureau.

"Hours yet, my love, before I can gorge myself on a shredded wheat biscuit."

Mrs. Toomey braided a wisp of hair to an infinitesimal end and said firmly:

"Jap, we've simply *got* to do something! Can't you borrow?"

"Borrow! I couldn't throw a rock inside the city limits without hitting some one to whom I owe money. Come again, Old Dear," mockingly.

"Wouldn't Mormon Joe—"

"I'd starve before I'd ask that sheepherder!" His face darkened to ugliness. "I'm surprised at you—that you haven't more pride. You know he broke me, shutting me off from water with his leases. I've explained all that to you."

She was silent; she didn't have the heart to hit him when he was down, though she had her own opinion as to the cause of his failure.

Since she did not reply, he went on vindictively:

"I've come to hate the sight of him—his damned insolence. Every time I see him going into his shack over there," he nodded towards the diagonal corner, "I could burn it."

"It's funny—his building it."

"To save hotel bills when he comes to town. Yes," ironically, "I can see *him* lending *me* money." Mrs. Toomey sat up and cried excitedly:

"Jap, let's sell something! There's that silver punch bowl that your Uncle Jasper gave us for a wedding present, and Aunt Sarah Page's silver teapot —Mrs. Sudds admires it tremendously."

Toomey's brow cleared instantly.

"We can do that—I'll raffle it—the punch bowl—and get a hundred and fifty out of it easily." He discussed the details enthusiastically, finally blowing

out the light and going to sleep as contentedly as though it already had been accomplished.

But in the darkness Mrs. Toomey cried quietly. Selling tickets for a raffle which was for their personal benefit seemed a kind of genteel begging. She wondered that Jap did not feel as she did about it. And what would Mrs. Pantin think? What Mrs. Abram Pantin thought had come to mean a great deal to Mrs. Toomey.

The wind had risen to a gale and she thought nervously of fringed napkins and pillow slips—the wind always gave her the "blues" anyway, and now it reminded her of winter, which was close, with its bitter cold—of snow driven across trackless wastes, of gaunt predatory animals, of cattle and horses starving in draws and gulches, and all the other things which winter meant in that barren country. She slept after a time, to find the next morning that the wind still howled and the fringe on her laundry was all she had pictured.

Toomey set forth gaily immediately after breakfast with the punch bowl wrapped in a newspaper, and Mrs. Toomey nerved herself to negotiate for the sale of the teapot to Mrs. Sudds, in the event of his being unsuccessful.

She watched for his return eagerly, but it was two o'clock before she saw him coming, leaning against the wind and clasping the punch bowl to his bosom. Her heart sank, for his face told her the result without asking.

Toomey set Uncle Jasper's wedding gift upon the dining room table with disrespectful violence.

"You must be crazy to think I could sell that in Prouty! You should have known better!"

"Didn't anybody want it, Jap?" Mrs. Toomey asked timidly.

"Want it?" angrily. "'Tinhorn' thought it was some kind of a tony cuspidor, and a round-up cook offered me a dollar and a half for it to set bread sponge in."

"Never mind," soothingly, "I'm sure Mrs. Sudds will take the teapot."

"We can't live all winter on a teapot," he answered gloomily.

"But you're sure to get into something pretty quick now."

"When I land, I'll land big—I'll land with both feet," he responded more cheerfully.

"Of course, you will—I never doubt it." Mrs. Toomey endeavored to make her tone convincing. "Let's have tea in the heirloom before we part with it," she suggested brightly. "It's never been used that I can remember."

"It's ugly enough to be valuable," Toomey observed, eyeing the teapot as she took it from the top of the bookcase.

"Solid, nearly, and came over in the *Mayflower*," Mrs. Toomey replied proudly. "We'll have tea and toast and codfish."

"The information is superfluous." Toomey sniffed the air and made a wry face. "I'd as soon eat billposter's paste as codfish."

"To-night we'll have steak—thick, like that—" Mrs. Toomey measured with her thumb and finger as she went into the kitchen.

Toomey eyed the codfish darkly when his wife placed it on the table.

"Sit down, Jap," she urged. "The tea will be steeped in just a second. Don't wait—" A scream completed the sentence.

Toomey overturned his chair as he rushed to the kitchen. He arrived in time to see the lid of the

priceless heirloom disappearing in a puddle of pewter. It seemed to the Toomeys that the Fates had singled them out as special objects for their malevolence.

The wind continued to blow as though it meant never to stop. It was a wind of which the people of the East who speak awesomely of their own “gales” and “tempest” wot not.

This wind which had kept Prouty indoors for close to a week came out of a cloudless sky, save for a few innocent looking streaks on the western horizon. It had blown away everything that would move. All the loose papers had sailed through the air to an unknown destination—Nebraska, perhaps—while an endless procession of tumble weed had rolled in the same direction from an apparently inexhaustible supply in the west.

Housewives who had watched their pile of tin cans move on to the next lot found their satisfaction short-lived, for as quickly they acquired the rubbish that belonged to their neighbor on the other side. Shingles flew off and chimney bricks, and ends of corrugated iron roofing slapped and banged as though frantic to be loose. Houses shivered on their foundations, and lesser buildings lay on their sides. Clouds of dust obscured the sun at intervals, and the sharp-edged gravel driven before the gale cut like tiny knives.

Any daring chicken that ventured from its coop slid away as if it were on skates. Pitchforks were useless, and those who had horses to feed carried the hay in sacks. The caged inhabitants stood at their windows and made caustic comments upon the legs and general contour of such unfortunates as necessity took out, while those pedestrians who would converse, upon catching sight of each other made a

dive for the nearest telephone pole. There, clinging by an arm like a shipwrecked sailor to a mast, they ventured to opine that it must be “getting ready for something.” It seemed as though the earth would soon be denuded of its soil, leaving the rocks exposed like a skeleton stripped of its flesh. Yet, day after day, it blew without respite, and the effect of it upon different temperaments was as varied as that of drink.

No one could seem to remember that the wind had not always blown, or realize that it would sometime stop. No character was strong enough to maintain a perfect equilibrium after three days of it. Logic or philosophy made no more impression upon the mental state than water slipping over a rock. It set the nerves on edge. Irritation, restlessness and discontent were as uncontrollable as great fear. Two wildcats tied together were not more incompatible than husbands and wives, who under normal conditions lived together happily. Doting mothers became shrews; fond fathers, brutes, lambasting their offspring on the smallest pretext; while seven was too conservative an estimate to place upon the devils of which the children who turned the house into Bedlam seemed to be possessed.

Optimists grew green with melancholia, pessimists considered suicide as an escape from the futility of life, neighbors resurrected buried hatchets. Friends found fault with friends. Enemies vowed to kill each other as soon as the wind let up.

If the combination of wind and altitude had this effect upon phlegmatic temperaments, something of Mrs. Toomey’s state may be surmised. With nerves already overwrought this prolonged windstorm put her in a condition in which, as she declared hysterically to her husband, she was “ready to fly.”

Lying on his back on the one-time handsome sofa, where he spent many of his waking hours, Toomey responded, grimly:

"I'm getting so light on that breakfast-food diet that we'll both fly if I don't make a 'touch' pretty quick. I'm 'most afraid to go out in a high wind without running a little shot in the bottoms of my trousers."

Mrs. Toomey, who was standing at the dining room table laying a section of a newspaper pattern upon a piece of serge, felt an uncontrollable desire to weep. Furthermore, the conviction seized her that, turn and twist the pattern as she might, she was not going to have material enough unless she pieced.

Her lids turned pink and her eyes filled up.

"Isn't it awful, Jap, to think of us being like this?"

"You make me think of a rabbit when you sniffle like that. Can't you cry without wiggling your nose?"

Mrs. Toomey's quavering voice rose to the upper register:

"Do you suppose I care how I look when I feel like this?"

"How do you think I feel," ferociously, "with my stomach slumping in so I can hardly straighten up?" He raised a long arm and shook a fist as though in defiance of the Fate that had brought him to this. "I'd sell my soul for a ham! I'm going to Scales and put up a talk."

Toomey found his hat and coat. "Don't cut your throat with the scissors while I'm gone, Little Sunbeam, and I'll be back with food pretty quick—unless I blow off."

He spoke with such confidence that Mrs. Toomey looked at him hopefully. When he opened the door the furious gust that shook the house and darkened the room with a cloud of dust seemed to suck him

into a vortex. Mrs. Toomey watched him round the corner with a sense of relief. Now that she was alone she could cry comfortably and look as ugly as she liked, so the tears flowed copiously as she stood at the table puzzling over the pattern and cloth. They flowed afresh when she proved beyond the question of a doubt that she would have to piece the under-arm sleeve. Simultaneously she wondered if she could do it so skilfully that Mrs. Abram Pantin would not see the piece. Then she frowned in vexation at the realization that it was becoming second nature to wonder what Prissy Pantin would think. Was it possible that there had been a time when she had debated as to whether she wanted to know Mrs. Abram Pantin at all?

When she had married Jap she had thought she was done forever with the miserable poverty and hateful economies that are the lot of the family of a small-town minister; that after years of suppression of opinions and tastes in order not to evoke criticism or give offense, she at last was in a position to assert herself.

And now after a taste of freedom, of power and opulence, here she was back in practically the same position and rapidly developing the same mental attitude towards those more affluent and, therefore, more socially important than herself. Mrs. Toomey's thoughts were much the color of the serge into which she slashed.

Finally, after a glance at the clock, she walked to the window to look for her husband. He was not in sight. As she lingered her glance fell on Mormon Joe's tar-paper shack that set in the middle of the lot on the diagonal corner from their house, and she told herself bitterly that even that drunken renegade, that social pariah, had enough to eat.

Her face brightened as Toomey turned the corner and promptly lengthened when she saw that he was empty-handed and walking with the exaggerated swagger which she was coming to recognize as a sign of failure.

A glimpse of his face as he came in, banged the door, and flung off his hat and coat made her hesitate to speak.

"Well?" he glared at her. "Why don't you say something?"

"What is there to say, Jap?" meekly. "I see he refused you."

"Refused me? He insulted me!"

Mrs. Toomey looked hurt.

"What did he say, Jap?"

"He offered me fifteen dollars a week to *clerk*."

Toomey resented fiercely the pleased and hopeful expression on his wife's face, and added:

"I suppose you'd like to see me cutting calico and fishing salt pork out of the brine?"

She ventured timidly:

"I thought you might take it until something worth while turned up."

"Maybe," he sneered, "I could get a job swamping in 'Tinhorn's' place—washing fly specks off the windows and sweeping out."

"Of course, you're right, Jap," conciliatingly, but she sighed unconsciously as she went back to her work.

Toomey paced the floor for a time, then sank into his usual place on the sofa. Mrs. Toomey permitted herself to observe sarcastically:

"It's a wonder to me you don't get bed sores—the amount of time you spend on the flat of your back."

"What do you mean by that?" suspiciously. "Do you mean I'm lazy because I didn't take that job?"

Since she made no denial, conversation ceased, and the silence was broken only by the sound of her scissors upon the table and the howling of the gale.

He smoked cigarette after cigarette in gloomy thought, finally getting up and going to a closet off the kitchen.

"What are you looking for, Jap?" she called as she heard him rummaging.

He did not reply, but evidently found what he sought for he came out presently carrying a shotgun.

"Are you going to try and raffle that?"

Still he did not deign to answer, but preserved his injured air, and getting once more into his hat and coat started off with the martyred manner of a man who has been driven from home.

Mrs. Toomey finally threw down her scissors with a gesture of despair. She was too nervous to do any more. The wind, her anxious thoughts, the exacting task of cutting a suit from an inadequate amount of cloth, was a combination that proved to be too much. She glanced at the clock on the bookcase—only three o'clock! Actually there seemed forty-eight hours in days like this. She stood uncertainly for a moment, then determination settled on her tense worried face. Why put it off any longer? It must be done sooner or later—she was sure of that. Besides, nothing ever was as hard as one anticipates. This was a cheering thought, and the lines in Mrs. Toomey's forehead smoothed out as she stood before the mirror buttoning her coat and tying a veil over her head.

It took no small amount of physical courage for a person of Mrs. Toomey's frailty to face such a gale. But with her thin lips in a determined line and her gaze straight ahead, she managed, by tacking judiciously and stopping at intervals to clasp a

telephone pole while she recovered her breath, to reach the iron fence imported from Omaha which gave such a look of exclusiveness to the Pantins' residence.

Mr. Pantin thought he heard the gate slam and peered out through the dead wild-cucumber vines which framed the bow window to see Mrs. Toomey coming up the only cement walk in Prouty. He immediately thrust his stockinged feet back in his comfortable Romeos preparatory to opening the door, but before he got up he stooped and looked again, searchingly. Mr. Pantin was endowed with a gift that was like a sixth sense, which enabled him to detect a borrower as far as his excellent eyesight could see one. This intuition, combined with experience, had been developed to the point of uncanniness. No borrower, however adroit, could hope to conceal from Mr. Pantin for a single instant the real purpose of his call by irrelevant talk and solicitous inquiries about his health. In the present instance it did not require great acumen to guess that something urgent had brought Mrs. Toomey out on a day like this, nor any particular keenness to detect the signs of agitation which Mr. Pantin noted in his swift glance. She was coming to borrow—he was as sure of that as though she already had asked, and if any further confirmation were needed, her unnatural gayety when he admitted her and the shortness of her breath finished that.

It availed Mrs. Toomey nothing to tell herself that Mrs. Pantin was her best friend, and that what she was asking was merely a matter of business—the sort of thing that Mr. Pantin was doing every day. Her heart beat ridiculously and she was rather shocked to hear herself laughing shrilly at Mr. Pantin's banal inquiry as to whether she had not "nearly blown off."

He added in some haste:

"Priscilla's in the kitchen."

Mrs. Pantin looked up in surprise at her caller's entrance.

"How perfectly sweet of you to come out a day like this!" she chirped. "You'll excuse me if I go on getting dinner? We only have two meals a day when we don't exercise. This wind—isn't it dreadful? I haven't been out of the house for a week."

She placed two rolls in the warming oven and broke three eggs into a bowl.

"Abram and I are so fond of omelette," she said, as the egg-beater whirred. "Tell me," she beamed brightly upon Mrs. Toomey, "what have you been doing with yourself?"

"Priscilla—Prissy—" Mrs. Toomey caught her breath—"I've been miserable—and that's the truth!"

"Why, my dear!" The egg-beater stopped. "Aren't you well? No wonder—I'm as nervous as a witch myself." The egg-beater whirred again encouragingly. "You must use your will power—you mustn't allow yourself to be affected by these external things."

"It's not the wind." Mrs. Toomey's eyes were swimming now. "I'm worried half to death."

Mrs. Pantin had not lived twelve years with Abram in vain. A look of suspicion crossed her face, and there was a little less solicitude in her voice as she inquired:

"Is it anything in particular? Bad news from home?"

"It's money!" Mrs. Toomey blurted out. "We're dreadfully hard up. I came to see if we could get a loan."

The egg-beater went on, but the milk of human kindness which, presumably, flowed in Mrs. Pantin's

breast stopped—congealed—froze up tight. Her blue eyes, whose vividness was accentuated as usual by the robin's egg blue dress she wore, had the warm genial glow radiating from a polar berg. It was, however, only a moment before she recovered herself and was able to say with sweet earnestness:

"I haven't anything to do with that, my dear. You'll have to see Mr. Pantin."

Mrs. Toomey clasped her fingers tightly together and stammered:

"If—if you would speak to him first—I—I thought perhaps—"

Mrs. Pantin's set society smile was on her small mouth, but the finality of the laws of the Medes and the Persians was in her tone as she replied:

"I never think of interfering with my husband's business or making suggestions. As fond as I am of you, Delia, you'll have to ask him yourself."

Mrs. Toomey had the feeling that they never would be quite on the same footing again. She knew it from the way in which Mrs. Pantin's eyes travelled from the unbecoming brown veil on her head to her warm but antiquated coat, stopping at her shabby shoes which, instinctively, she drew beneath the hem of her skirt.

To be shabby from carelessness was one thing—to be so from necessity was another, clearly was in Mrs. Pantin's mind. She had known, of course, of the collapse of their cattle-raising enterprise, but she had not dreamed they were in such a bad way as this. She hoped she was not the sort of person who would let it make any difference in her warm friendship for Delia Toomey; nevertheless, Mrs. Toomey detected the subtle note of patronage in her voice when she said:

"Abram is alone in the living room—you might

speak to him."

"I think I will." Mrs. Toomey endeavored to repair the mistake she felt she had made by speaking in a tone which implied that a loan was of no great moment after all, but she walked out with the feeling that she used to have in the presence of the more opulent members of her father's congregation when the flour barrel was low.

Mrs. Toomey was not too agitated to note how immaculate and dainty the dining room table looked with its fine linen and cut glass. There were six dices of apple with a nut on top on the handsome salad plates, and the crystal dessert dishes each held three prunes swimming in their rich juice.

The living-room, too, reflected Mrs. Pantin's taste. A framed motto extolling the virtues of friendship hung over the mantel and the "Blind Girl of Pompeii" groped her way down the staircase on the neutral-tinted wall. A bookcase filled with sets of the world's best literature occupied a corner of the room, while ooze leather copies of Henry Van Dyke gave an unmistakable look of culture to the mission table in the center of the room. A handsome leather davenport with a neat row of sofa pillows along the back, which were of Mrs. Pantin's own handiwork, suggested luxurious ease. But the chief attraction of the room was the brick fireplace with its spotless tiled hearth. One of Mr. Pantin's diversions was sitting before the glowing coals, whisk and shovel in hand, waiting for an ash to drop.

Seeing Mrs. Toomey, Mr. Pantin again hastily thrust his toes into his slippers—partly because he was cognizant of the fact that no real gentleman will receive a lady in his stocking feet, and partly to conceal the neat but large darn on the toe of one sock. He was courteous amiability itself, and Mrs.

Toomey's hopes shot up.

"I came to have a little talk."

"Yes?"

Mr. Pantin's smile deceived her and she plunged on with confidence:

"I—we would like to arrange for a loan, Mr. Pantin."

"To what amount, Mrs. Toomey?"

Mrs. Toomey considered.

"As much as you could conveniently spare."

The smile which Mr. Pantin endeavored to conceal was genuine.

"For what length of time?"

Mrs. Toomey had not thought of that.

"I could not say exactly—not off-hand like this—but I presume only until my husband gets into something."

"Has he—er—anything definite in view?"

"I wouldn't say definite, not definite, but he has several irons in the fire and we expect to hear soon."

"I see." Mr. Pantin's manner was urbane but, observing him closely, Mrs. Toomey noted that his eyes suddenly presented the curious illusion of two slate-gray pools covered with skim ice. It was not an encouraging sign and her heart sank in spite of the superlative suavity of the tone in which he inquired:

"What security would you be able to give, Mrs. Toomey?"

Security? Between friends? She had not expected this.

"I—I'm afraid I—we haven't any, Mr. Pantin. You know we lost everything when we lost the ranch. But you're perfectly safe—you needn't have a moment's anxiety about that."

Immediately it seemed as though invisible hands shot out to push her away, yet Mr. Pantin's tone was

bland as he replied:

"I should be delighted to be able to accommodate you, but just at the present time—"

"You can't? Oh, I wish you would reconsider—as a matter of friendship. We need it—desperately, Mr. Pantin!" Her voice shook.

Again she had the sensation of invisible hands fighting her off.

"I regret very much—"

The hopelessness of any further plea swept over her. She arose with a gesture of despair, and Mr. Pantin, smiling, suave, urbane, bowed her out and closed the door. He watched her go down the walk and through the gate, noting her momentary hesitation and wondering where she might be going in such a wind. When she started in the opposite direction from home and walked rapidly down the road that led out of town it flashed through his mind that she might be bent on suicide—she had looked desperate, no mistake, but, since there was no water in which to drown herself, and no tree from which to hang herself, and the country was so flat that there was nothing high enough for her to jump off of and break her neck, he concluded there was no real cause for uneasiness.

It was Mr. Pantin's proud boast that he never yet had "held the sack," and now he thought complacently as he turned from the window, grabbed the shovel and whisk and leaped for an ash that had dropped, that this was an instance where he had again shown excellent judgment in not allowing his warm heart and impulses to control his head.

CHAPTER VII

THE BLOOD OF JEZEBEL

The prognostication made by the citizens of Prouty that it was "gettin' ready for somethin'" seemed about to be verified out on the sheep range twenty miles distant, for at five o'clock one afternoon the wind stopped as suddenly as it had arisen and heavy snow clouds came out of the northeast with incredible swiftness.

Mormon Joe walked to the door of the cook tent and swept the darkening hills with anxious eyes. Kate should have been back long before this. He always had a dread of her horse falling on her and hurting her too badly to get back. That was about all there was to fear in summer time, but to-night there was the coming storm.

Kate's sense of direction was remarkable, but the most experienced plainsman would be apt to lose himself in these foothills, with the snow falling thick and the night so black he could not see his hand before his face.

Mormon Joe shook his head and turned back to his task of peeling potatoes. While he worked he reproached himself that he had not hunted those horses himself; but she had been so insistent upon

going. She did not mind the wind, she had said, but then she did not “mind” anything, when it came to that. What would have been hardships for another were merely adventures to her.

At any rate, Kate was more comfortable now than she had been the year before. He smiled a little as he recalled her delight in the sheep wagon which he had given her to be her own quarters. He had had to borrow the money at the bank in addition to what he already had borrowed for running expenses, but his circumstances justified it. He was getting ahead, not with phenomenal rapidity, but satisfactorily. With the leases, and the land he owned, he was building the future upon a substantial foundation. A few years more of economy and attention to business and he could give Kate the advantages he wished. He listened, got up from the condensed-milk box upon which he sat and walked to the entrance of the tent once more. He strained his ears, but death itself was not more still than the opaque night.

Kate had left immediately after breakfast, and since the horses had only a few hours’ start and would probably feed as they went, she had expected to be back by noon.

Kate was exceedingly resourceful—she knew what to do if caught out, he assured himself, unless she had been hurt. It was this thought that gave him a curious stillness at his heart. What would life be without her now? With the knife in his hand he stopped as he turned inside and stared at the potatoes on the box. He never had thought of that before—it left him aghast.

The girl had twined herself into every fiber of his nature from the time she had come to him as a child. She was identified with every hope. Humph! He knew well enough what the answer would be if

anything happened to Kate. He would shoot the chutes, again—quick. It was she who had awakened his ambition and kept him tolerably straight. Without her? Humph!

He stoked the sheet-iron camp stove, put the potatoes to boil, cut chops enough for two and laid the table with the steel knives and forks and tin plates. Then he set out a tin of molasses and the sour-dough bread, after which there was nothing to do but wait for the potatoes to boil, and for Kate.

He was trying the potatoes with a fork when he raised his head sharply. He was sure he heard the rattle of rocks. A faint whoop followed.

"Thank God!" He breathed the ejaculation fervently, yet he said merely as he stood in the entrance puffing his pipe as she rode up, "Got 'em, I see, Katie!"

"Sure. Don't I always get what I go after?" Then, with a tired laugh, "I'm disappointed; I thought you would be worried about me."

He smiled quizzically.

"I don't know why you'd think that."

"I'll know better next time," she replied good-humoredly, as she swung down with obvious weariness.

"There won't be any next time,'" he replied abruptly, "at least not at this season of the year."

"Oh, but I'm glad I went," she interposed hastily.

As Mormon Joe unwrapped the lead-rope from the saddle horn and took the horses away to picket, he wondered what wonderful adventure she would have to relate, for she seemed able to extract entertainment from nearly anything. By the time he returned she had removed her hat, gloves and spurs, washed her dust-streaked face, smoothed her hair, slipped on an enveloping apron over her riding

clothes and had the chops frying.

The sight warmed his heart as he paused for a moment outside the circle of light which came through the entrance.

He had seen the same thing often before, but it never had impressed him particularly. Her presence in the canvas tent made the difference between home and a mere shelter. The small crumbs of bread he had cast upon the water were indeed coming back to him.

"I've ridden over forty miles since morning," she chattered, while he flung the snow flakes from his hat brim and brushed them from his shoulders. "The wind blew the horses' tracks out so I couldn't follow them. I never caught sight of them until just this side of Prouty. You can sit down, Uncle Joe—everything's ready."

They talked of the coming snowstorm, and the advisability of holding the sheep on the bed-ground if it should be a bad one; of the trip to town that he was contemplating; of the coyote that was bothering and the possibility of trapping him. There was no dearth of topics of mutual interest. Nevertheless, Mormon Joe knew that she was holding something in reserve and wondered at this reticence. It came finally when they had finished and still lingered at the table.

"Who do you suppose I met to-day when I was hunting horses?"

"Teeters?" Mormon Joe was tearing a leaf from his book of cigarette papers.

"Guess again."

He shook his head.

"Can't imagine."

She announced impressively:

"Mrs. Toomey!"

He was distributing tobacco from the sack upon the crease in the paper with exactitude. He made no comment, so Kate said with increased emphasis:

"She was crying!"

Still he was silent, and she demanded:

"Aren't you surprised?"

She looked crestfallen, so he asked obligingly:

"Where did all of this happen?"

"In a draw a couple of miles this side of Prouty, where I found the horses. They had gone there to get out of the wind and it was by only a chance that I rode down into it.

"She was in the bottom, huddled against a rock, and didn't see me until I was nearly on her. I thought she was sick—she looked terrible."

"And was she?"

"No—she was worried."

"Naturally. Any woman would be who married Toomey."

"About money."

"Indeed." His tone and smile were ironic.

Kate, a trifle disconcerted, continued:

"He's had bad luck."

"He's had the best opportunities of any man who's come into the country."

"Anyway," she faltered, "they haven't a penny except when they sell something."

He shrugged a shoulder, then asked teasingly:

"Well—what were you thinking of doing about it?"

"I said—I promised," she blurted it out bluntly, "that we'd loan them money."

"What!" incredulously.

"I did, Uncle Joe."

He answered with a frown of annoyance:

"You exceeded your authority, Katie."

"But you will, won't you?" she pleaded. "You've never refused me anything that I really wanted badly, and I've never asked much, have I?"

"No, girl, you haven't," he replied gently. "And there's hardly anything you could ask, within reason, that wouldn't be granted."

"But they only need five hundred until he gets into something. You could let them have that, couldn't you?"

His face and eyes hardened.

"I could, but I won't," he replied curtly.

When Prouty was in its infancy, certain citizens had been misled by Mormon Joe's mild eyes, low voice and quiet manner. His easy-going exterior concealed an incredible hardness upon occasions, but this was Kate's first knowledge of it. He never had displayed the slightest authority. In any difference, when he had not yielded to her good-naturedly, they had argued it out as though they were in reality partners. At another time she would have been wounded by his brusque refusal, but to-night it angered her. Because of her intense eagerness and confidence that she had only to ask him, it came as the keenest of disappointments. This together with her fatigue combined to produce a display of temper as unusual in her as Mormon Joe's own attitude.

"But I promised!" she cried, impatiently. "And you've told me I must always keep my promise, 'if it takes the hide'!"

"You exceeded your authority," he reiterated. "You've no right to promise what doesn't belong to you."

"Then it's all 'talk' about our being partners," she said, sneeringly. "You don't mean a word of it."

"You shan't make a fool of yourself, Katie, if I can help it," he retorted.

"Because you don't care for friends, you don't want me to have any!" she flung at him hotly.

He was silent a long time, thinking, while she waited angrily, then he responded quietly and with obvious effort:

"That's where you're mistaken, Katie. If I have one regret it is that in the past I have not more deliberately cultivated the friendship of true men and gentle women when I have had the opportunity. It doesn't make much difference whether they are brilliant or rich or successful, if only they are true-hearted. Loyalty is the great attribute—but," and he shrugged a shoulder, "it is my judgment that you will not find it in that quarter."

"You're prejudiced."

"It is my privilege to have an opinion," he replied coldly.

"We were going to be friends—Mrs. Toomey and I —we shook hands on it!" Tears of angry disappointment were close to the surface.

He replied, doggedly:

"If you have to buy your friendships, Katie, you'd better keep your money."

The speech stung her. She glared at him across the narrow table, and, in the moment, each had a sense of unreality. The quarrel was like a bolt from the blue, as startling and unexpected—as most quarrels are—the bitterest and most lasting. Then she sprang to her feet and hurled a taunt at him some Imp of Darkness must have suggested:

"You're jealous!" She stamped a foot at him. "That's the real reason. You're jealous of everybody that would be friends with me! You're jealous of Hughie. You didn't like his coming here and you don't like his writing to me! I *hate* you—I won't stay any longer!" It was the blood of Jezebel of the Sand

Coulee talking, and there was the look of her mother on the girl's face, in her reckless, uncontrolled fury.

Mormon Joe winced, exactly as though she had struck him. He sat quite still while the color faded, leaving his face bloodless. Kate never had known anything like the white rage it depicted. Persons at the Sand Coulee who lost their temper cursed volubly and loudly, and threatened or made bodily attacks upon the cause of it. In spite of herself she shrank a little as he, too, got up slowly and faced her. She didn't know him at all—this man who first threw his cigarette away carefully, as though he were in a drawing room and must regard the ashes—he was a personality from an environment with which she was unfamiliar. Then, as though she were his equal in years, experience and intelligence, he spoke to her in a tone that was cool and impersonal, yet which went slash! slash! slash! like the fine, deep, quick cut of a razor.

"I had no notion that you entertained any such feeling towards me. It is something in the nature of a —er—revelation. You are quite right about leaving. Upon second thought, you are quite right about everything—right to keep your promise to Mrs. Toomey, since you gave it, right in your assertion that I am jealous. I am—but not in the sense in which you mean it.

"I have been jealous of your dignity—of the respect that is due you. I have resented keenly any attempt to belittle you. That is why Disston was not welcome when he came to see you. It is the reason why I have not shown a pleasure I did not feel in his writing you!"

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"I mean that he took you to that dance on a wager—a bet—to prove that he had the courage. To

make a spectacle of you—for a story with which to regale his friends and laugh over."

She groped for the edge of the table.

"Who told you?"

"Toomey."

"I don't believe it!"

"Teeters verified it."

She sat down on the box from which she had risen.

Unmoved by the blow he had dealt her, he continued:

"You went to that dance against my wishes. What I expected to happen did happen, though you did not choose to tell me.

"In my descent through various strata of society I have learned something of types and of human nature. In protesting, my only thought was to save you pain and disappointment—as in this instance—but experience, it seems, is the only teacher.

"To-morrow I am going to Prouty, hire a herder to do your work and mortgage the outfit for half its value. It will be yours to use as it pleases you. You have earned it. Then," with a gesture of finality, "the door is open to you. I want you to go where you will be happy."

With his usual deliberation of movement he put on his hat and went out to change the horses on picket, while Kate, stunned by the incredible crisis and the revelation concerning Hugh Disston, sat where she had dropped, staring at the agate-ware platter upon which the mutton grease was hardening.

It was Mormon Joe's invariable custom to help her with the dishes, but he did not return, so she arose, finally, and set the food away automatically, with the unseeing look of a hypnotic subject. She

washed the dishes and dried them, trying to realize that she would be leaving this shortly—that there would be a last time in the immediate future. Her anger was lost in grief and amazement. There was something so implacable, so steel-like in Mormon Joe's hardness that it did not occur to her to plead with him for forgiveness. And Hughie! She told herself that she could not turn to a traitor for help or sympathy. She blew out the lantern, tied the tent flap behind her, and ran through the fast falling snow to her wagon.

Kate dozed towards morning after a sleepless night of wretchedness and was awakened by a horse's whinny. Listening a moment, she sprang out and looked through the upper half of the door which opened on hinges. It was a white world that she saw, with some four inches of snow on the level, though the fall had ceased and it was colder. Mormon Joe, dressed warmly in leather "chaps" and sheep-lined coat, was riding away on one of the work horses.

Never since they had been together had he gone to Prouty without some word of farewell—careless and casual, but unfailing. Nor could she remember when he had not turned in the saddle and waved at her before they lost sight of each other altogether. This time she waited vainly. He went without looking behind him, while she stood in the cold watching his peaked high-crowned hat bobbing through the giant sagebrush until it vanished. She had thrust out a hand to detain him—to call after him—and had withdrawn it. Her pride would not yet permit her to act as her heart prompted.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAN OF MYSTERY

The cold that dried the new-fallen snow to powder sent the mercury down until it broke all records.

While the improvident did, indeed, wonder what they had done with their summer wages, the thrifty contemplated their piles of wood and their winter vegetables with a strong feeling of satisfaction.

Speaking colloquially, the Toomeys were “ga'nted considerably,” and in their usual state of semistarvation, but were in no immediate danger of freezing, owing to the fact that Toomey had succeeded in exchanging a mounted deer head for four tons of local coal mined from a “surface blossom,” which was being exploited by the *Grit* as one of the country’s resources.

Vastly delighted with his bargain, until he discovered that he no sooner had arrived from the coalhouse with a bucket of coal than it was necessary for him to make a return trip with a bucket of ashes, Toomey now hurled anathemas upon the embryo coal baron. It was not empty verbiage when he asserted that, by spring, at the rate he was wearing a trench to the ash can, nothing but the top of his head would be visible.

Mrs. Toomey, however, was grateful, for she felt that if there was one thing worse than being hungry it was being cold, so she stoked the kitchen range with a free hand and luxuriated in the warmth though it necessitated frequent trips outside in

Toomey's absence.

Mrs. Toomey was returning from the ash can when she saw Mormon Joe going into his shack on the diagonal corner. She slackened her trot to a walk and watched while he unlocked the door, as though to read from his back something of his intentions in regard to the loan Kate had promised so confidently.

It had seemed too good to be realized, so she had not told Jap of their meeting. She must not count on it, however—she had been disappointed so often that she dreaded the feeling. Ugh! What frightful cold! Mrs. Toomey ran into the house and forgot the incident.

Later in the afternoon Toomey came home in high spirits.

"They got in!" he announced. "I hardly thought they'd start, such weather. It's twenty-five below now and getting colder."

"Who?" inquired Mrs. Toomey, absently.

"The show people."

"Oh, did they?"

"Might as well take it in, mightn't we?" in feigned indifference.

"How can we? It's a dollar a ticket, isn't it?"

For answer he produced two strips of pink pasteboard from his waistcoat pocket.

"Jap?" wonderingly.

"Yes'm."

"Where did you get the money?"

"I raised it."

"But how?"

He hesitated, looking sheepish.

"On the range."

Mrs. Toomey sat down weakly.

"The cook stove! You mortgaged it?"

"I had to give some security, hadn't I?" he

demanded with asperity.

"Who to?"

"Teeters. I got five dollars."

Mrs. Toomey found it convenient to go into the pantry until she had regained control of her feelings.

It was twenty-eight degrees below zero when the doors of the Opera House were opened to permit the citizens of Prouty to hear the World Renowned Swiss Bell Ringers and Yodlers.

The weather proved to be no deterrent to a community hungry for entertainment, and they swarmed from all directions, bundled to shapelessness, like Esquimaux headed for a central igloo. Infants in arms and the bedridden in wheel chairs, helped to fill the Opera House to its capacity, emptying the streets and houses for a time as completely as an exodus.

While the best people, among whom were the Toomeys, occupied the several rows of reserved chairs and smiled tolerantly upon the efforts of the performers, and the proletariat stamped and whistled through its teeth and cracked peanuts, a man muffled to the ears by the high collar of a mackinaw coat, his face further concealed by the visor of a cap and ear-laps, rode to the top of the bench, drew rein and looked down upon the lights of Prouty.

It was not a night one would select for traveling on horseback, unless his business was urgent. However, the man's seemed to be of this nature, for he rode behind a large signboard which advertised the wares of the Prouty Emporium, dismounted, tied his horse to the prop that held the signboard upright, and with a show of haste took a coil of rope from his saddlehorn, an axe—the head of which was wrapped in gunny sacking—and a gun that swung in loops of saddle thongs at an angle to fit comfortably in the

bend of the rider's knee.

He did not follow the road, but took a shorter cut straight down the steep side of the bench to the nearest alley, through which he ran as noiselessly as a coyote. He ran until he came to Main Street, which the alley bisected. In the shade of the Security State Bank he peered around the corner and listened. The street was deserted, not even a dog or prowling cat was visible the entire length of it.

The man crossed it hurriedly, looking up and down and over his shoulder furtively, like some cautious animal which fears itself followed. In the protection of the alley he ran again until he came to Mormon Joe's tar-paper shack setting square and ugly in the middle of the lot—an eyesore to the neighbors.

The door was locked, but it was the work of a second to tear off the axe-head's covering and pry it open. He stepped inside and closed the door quietly. Lighting the candle he took from his pocket, with his hand he shielded the flame from the one window, and looked about with a glance that took in every detail of the shack's arrangement.

A single iron bedstead extended into the room and a soogan and two blankets, thin and ragged from service, were heaped in the middle. There was no pillow, and a hard cotton pad constituted the mattress. An empty whiskey bottle stood by the head of the bed.

A small pine table that at most might have cost a couple of dollars set against the wall by the window. The starch box that served as a chair was shoved under the table, and another box in the corner did duty as a washstand. There was a cake of soap and a tin basin upon the latter and a grimy hand towel hung close by from a spike driven into the unplaned

boards. Facing the door was a sheet-iron camp stove, rusty and overflowing with ashes. The rickety, ill-fitting pipe was secured with the inevitable baling wire.

After his swift survey, the man stepped to the washstand and let a few drops of melted candle grease drip upon one corner. In this he held the candle until it hardened in place. Then he went to work with the businesslike swiftness of skill and experience.

He laid the shotgun on the stove and untwisted the baling wire which held the stovepipe, giving a grunt of satisfaction when he found the wire was longer than he had anticipated. He stooped and gathered some kindling that was under the stove, singled out two or three sticks that suited him, and then he laid them across the top of the stove and rested the barrel of the shotgun upon them. After all was complete, he stepped back against the door and squinted, gauging the elevation. It was to his satisfaction. With supple wrist and quick movements he uncoiled the small cotton rope he had brought with him and took two turns around the trigger of the shotgun. The rest of the rope he passed around a rod in the foot of the bed, which gave a direct back pull on the trigger, and thence he carried it over the upper hinge of the door, which opened inward, and finally down to the knob and back again to the foot of the bed, where he secured it.

All was executed without a superfluous movement, and a panther could not have been more noiseless. But the man was breathing heavily when he had finished, as hard as though he had been exercising violently. He stepped to the washstand to blow out the candle, but before he did so he gave a final rapid survey of his work. His eyes glittered with

sinister satisfaction. Evidently it suited him. He held his numbed fingers over the flame of the candle to warm them before he extinguished it.

Reaching for the axe, he pried the window from its casing and set it quietly against the wall. He leaned the axe beside it and cursed under his breath when he tore a button from his mackinaw as he squeezed through the narrow opening. He dropped lightly to the ground and, crouching, ran for the alley. Where it crossed Main Street he stopped and listened, then peered around the corner of the White Hand Laundry. The street was still empty.

While he stood, the sound of laughter came faintly from the Opera House. His heart was pounding under his mackinaw. On the other side of the street red and violet lights were shining through the frosted windows of "Doc" Fussel's drug store. They looked warm and alluring, and he hesitated.

A whinny pierced the stillness. It was his horse pawing with cold and impatience behind the signboard. He looked up at the indistinct black object on the bench, then back wistfully at the red and violet lights of the drug store. He had an intense desire to be near some one—some one who was going carelessly about his usual occupation.

He crossed over and went into the little apothecary. The clerk was sitting on the back of his neck with his feet to a counter listening to the phonograph. "Has anybody here seen Kelly?" the machine screeched as the stranger entered. The clerk got up and went to the tobacco counter.

"Hell of a night," he observed, languidly.

"Some chilly," replied the stranger, indicating the brand he wanted.

"It'll be close to forty below before morning," passing out the tobacco.

“Everybody’s gone to the show but me,” plaintively.

“A drug clerk might as well be a dog chained up in a kennel.” He stopped the phonograph and changed the needle.

The stranger sat down beside the stove and placed his feet on the nickel railing. He left the collar of his mackinaw turned up, but untied his ear-laps. They looked rather foolish, dangling. His eyes were shadowed by the visor of his cap, so that really only his nose and cheek bones were visible. He glanced at the big clock on the wall frequently, and at intervals wiped the palms of his hands on the knees of his corduroy trousers as though to remove the moisture.

The clerk was putting on “When the Springtime Comes, Gentle Annie” when the opening door let in a breath from the Arctic and a tall person wearing new overalls, a coat of fleece-lined canvas and a peak-crowned Stetson. He had a scarf wound about his neck after the fashion of sheepherders.

“Hello, Bowers! Sober?” inquired the clerk, casually.

“Kinda. What you playin’?”

The clerk told him.

“Got a piece called 'The Yella Rose o’ Texas Beats the Belles o’ Tennessee'?”

“Never heard of it.”

“Got—'Whur the Silver Colorady Wends its Way'?”

The clerk replied in the negative.

“Why don’t you git some good music?”

“Why aren’t you at the show?”

“Too contrary, I reckon. When I’m out in the hills I’m a hankerin’ to see somebody. When I git in town I want to git away from everybody. I’m goin’ out to-morrow.”

"Where you going?"

"Hired out to Mormon Joe this evenin'."

The stranger stirred slightly.

"I'll look around a little—I don't want nothin'," said Bowers.

"Help yourself," replied the clerk, amiably, so the sheepherder stared at the baubles of cut glass on the shelf with a pleased expression and hung over the counter where the rings, watches and bracelets glittered. Then he examined a string of sponges carefully—sponges always interested him—they suggested picturesque scenery and adventures. He lingered over the toilet articles, sniffing the soaps and smelling at the bottles of perfume, trying those whose names he especially fancied on the end of his nose by rubbing it with the glass stopper. Then he sat down on the other side of the stove from the stranger and spelled out the queer names on the jars of drugs, speculating as to their contents and uses. He never yet had exhausted the possibilities of a drug store as a means of entertainment.

A few minutes after ten the advance guard came from the Opera House—laughing. The World's Greatest Prestidigitator had dropped the egg which he intended taking from the ear of Governor Sudds where it had broken into the ample lap of Mrs. Vernon Wentz of the White Hand Laundry. The cold, however, promptly put a quietus upon their merriment and they scuttled past, bent on getting out of it as quickly as possible.

There were two customers for cigars, and the Toomeys. Toomey bought chocolates while Mrs. Toomey held her hands to the stove and shivered.

"Come on, Dell." Toomey's glance as he took the candy included the stranger.

"How're you?" he nodded carelessly.

They were to be the last, apparently, for when their footsteps died away the street again grew silent.

The clerk planted his feet on the nickel railing and stared at the stove gloomily.

“I’d have to keep this store open till half-past 'leven if I was dyin’,” he grumbled.

“But you ain’t,” said Bowers, cheerfully.

Bowers smelled strongly of sheep, once the heat warmed his clothing. On the other side of the clerk the odor of smoke and bear grease emanated from the stranger. The clerk moved his chair back from the stove and advised the latter:

“Your soles is fryin’.”

He seemed not to hear him, for his eyes were upon the clock creeping close to eleven, and he watched the swaying pendulum as though it fascinated him. There was no conversation, and each sat thinking his own thoughts until the stranger suddenly pulled down the side of his collar and listened. The clerk eyed him with disfavor. The squeaking of footsteps in the dry snow was heard distinctly. The stranger got up leisurely and went out with a grunt that was intended for “good evening.”

“Sociable cuss,” Bowers commented ironically.

“Smelt like an Injun tepee,” said the clerk, sourly.

“It’s a wonder to me fellers don’t notice theirselves,” Bowers observed. “But they never seem to.”

A weaving figure was making its way down the middle of Main Street. A thick-coated collie followed closely. The swaying figure looked like a drunken gnome in its clumsy coat and peak-crowned hat in the cold steel-blue starlight. It stopped uncertainly at the alley, then went on to the end of the block and turned the corner.

The Toomeys had lost no time in retiring after the

entertainment, for the house, upon their return, was like a refrigerator. Almost instantly Toomey was slumbering tranquilly, but Mrs. Toomey had symptoms which she recognized as presaging hours of wakefulness. The unwonted excitement of being out in the evening had much to do with her restlessness, but chiefly it came from thinking of the cook stove. Of course she could see the force of Jap's argument as to the necessity of keeping up appearances by being seen in public places and spending money as though there was more where that came from, yet she wondered if it really deceived anybody.

And supposing Teeters foreclosed the mortgage! It seemed as though they were slipping week by week, day by day, deeper into the black depths at the bottom of which was actual beggary. Her nervousness increased as her imagination painted darker and darker pictures until she longed to scream for the relief it would have afforded her. The single hope was Mormon Joe's Kate and her promise, and that was too fantastic and farfetched to dare count on. It was not logical to suppose that a man whom Jap had quarreled with and insulted would come to their rescue even if he could afford to do so, which she doubted.

How still it was—the eloquent stillness of terrible cold! The town was soundless. Chickens humped in their feathers were freezing on their roosts, horses and cows tied in their stalls were suffering, and, as always, she visualized the desolate white stretches where hungry coyotes, gaunt and vigilant, padded along the ridges, and horses and cattle, turned out to shift for themselves, huddled shivering in the gulches and under the willows.

She knew from the snapping and cracking of

lumber and metal about the house that it was growing colder, and she drew the covers closer. Oh, what a country to live in! Whatever was to become of them! Her teeth chattered.

She thought she heard footsteps and raised her head slightly to listen. Faint at first, they were coming nearer. Whoever was out a night like this, she could not imagine. The person was walking in the middle of the road and his progress was uneven, stopping sometimes altogether, then going forward. Abreast the house the sound of heels grinding in the snow that was dry as powder was like the scrunching and squealing of the steel tire of a wagon in bitter weather.

They passed, grew fainter, finally stopped altogether. Mrs. Toomey moved closer to her husband. There was comfort in the nearness of a human being.

A shot! Her heart jumped—her nerves twanged with the shock of it. “That hit something!” The thought was almost simultaneous. The sound was more like an explosion—deadened, muffled somewhat—as of a charge fired into a bale of hay or cotton. For the space of a dozen heartbeats she lay with her mouth open, breathless in the deathly silence of the frozen night.

A scream! It must have reached the sky. Piercing, agonized—the agony of a man screaming with his mouth wide open—screaming without restraint, in animal-like unconsciousness of what he was doing.

“Jap!” She clutched his arm and shook him.

The screams kept coming, blood curdling, as if they would split the throat, tear it, and horrible with suffering.

“Jap!” She sat up and shook his shoulder violently.

"Wha's the matter?" he asked, sleepily.

"Did you hear that shot? Listen!"

"Some drunk," he mumbled.

"He's hurt, I tell you! Hear him!"

"Drug store's open."

"Oughtn't you to go to him?"

"Lemme be—can't you?" He again breathed heavily.

The screams kept coming, but each a little fainter. Either the man was moving on or the pain was lessening. Mrs. Toomey's heart continued to thump as she lay rigid, listening. She wanted to get up and look through the window, but the floor was cold and she could not remember exactly where she had left her slippers. Anyway, somebody else would go to him. It was a relief, though, when he stopped screaming.

Others whom the cries of agony awakened applied the same reasoning to the situation, with minor variations. "Tinhorn" in particular was disturbed because of their nearness. He raised his head from under a mound of blankets and frowned into the darkness as he wondered if, as Prouty's newly elected mayor, he would be criticized should he fail to go out and investigate. He was so warm and comfortable!

"Guess I'd better get up, Mamma."

His wife gripped him as if he was struggling violently, although his Honor was lying motionless as an alligator.

"You shan't—you'll get pneumonia and leave me and the children without any insurance! You've no right to take chances. Let somebody else go that hasn't any future."

There was that side to it.

"Some hobo most like." The future statesman

turned over. “Tuck my back in, Mamma.”

Mr. Sudds was awakened, and his first impulse was to rush to the man’s assistance, but he was not sure where to find matches, and it took him such an unconscionable time to dress that by the time he got there—

Scales was restrained by the arms of his fragile wife who threatened hysterics if he left her. Between love and duty Mr. Scales did not hesitate with the thermometer at forty below zero, and the knowledge that loss of sleep unfitted him for business.

So Mormon Joe, screaming in his agony, staggered up the alley, leaving a crimson trail behind him, the sheep dog following like a shadow. He had nearly reached Main Street when he lurched, groped for a support, then fell to his knees. The hot drops turned to red globules in the snow as he kept crawling, gasping, “Oh, God! Won’t somebody come to me?” The dog walked beside him as he dragged himself along, perplexed and wondering at this whim of his master’s.

Mormon Joe was leaning against the side of the White Hand Laundry, his head fallen forward, when Bowers and the drug clerk got to him. The collie was licking his face for attention, but the warm caressing hand—now red and sticky—was lying in the snow, limp and unresponsive.

Mormon Joe had “gone over”—dying as he had lived—a man of mystery.

CHAPTER IX

THE SUMMONS

Bowers had offered to take Lingle, the Deputy Sheriff, to the sheep camp, which he was sure he could find easily from the directions Mormon Joe had given him when he hired him, but, as it proved, the herder had been over-sanguine.

They were hungry and tired from long hours in the saddle, and the breath frozen on their upturned collars testified to the continued extremity of the weather when for the hundredth time they checked their horses and tried to get their bearings.

"I'm certain sure that Mormon Joe said to ride abreast that peak and about a half mile to the left of it turn in to a 'draw' runnin' northeast by southwest, and ride until I come acrost the wagon."

"Don't see how a child could miss the way from that description," replied Lingle, sarcastically.

"I think I see a woolie movin'." Bowers squinted across the white expanse and the deputy endeavored to follow his gaze, but could see nothing but dancing specks due to a mild case of snow blindness. "Yep—that's a woolie. I'm so used to 'em I kin tell what a sheep is thinkin' from here to them mountains."

Reining their horses at the top of a "draw" a quarter of an hour later they looked down upon the sheep wagon in a clearing in the sagebrush, together with the tepee and cook tent. Urging their horses down the steep side they dismounted and went inside the latter, where soiled breakfast dishes sat on the unplaned boards which served as a table. In the

way of food there was only a can of molasses and a half dozen biscuits frozen solid.

"Real cozy and homelike," Lingle commented, as he tried to pour himself some cold coffee and found it frozen. "I'll look around a bit and then go up and tell her."

"I'd ruther it ud be you than me," Bowers observed grimly. "Can't abide hearin' a female take on and beller. I don't like the sect, noway. You kin bet I don't aim to stay no longer than she kin git another herder, neither."

But Lingle was already out of hearing of the querulous voice of the misogynist, and peering into the tepee which was as Mormon Joe had left it he noted that it contained an unmade bed, and extra pair of shoes, and a few articles of wearing apparel—that was all.

The door of the sheep wagon was unlocked, yet he hesitated a moment before opening it. Its examination was in line with his duty, however, so he opened it and looked about with a certain amount of curiosity. The bare, cold stillness of it went to his marrow.

There was something pathetic to him in the pitiful attempts at home making shown in the few crude decorations. A feminine instinct for domesticity evidenced itself in the imitation of the scalloped border of a lace curtain made in soap on the glass of the small window in the back of the wagon, in a pin cushion of coarse muslin worked in blue worsted yarn, in the bouquet of dried goldenrod in a bottle, in the highly colored picture of an ammunition company's advertisement pinned to the canvas wall. A snag of a comb and a brush were thrust in a wooden strip near the small cheap mirror.

Above the bunk two loops of wire were suspended

from an oak bow of the wagon top, which obviously was where the occupant kept her rifle. There was a tiny stove by the door and a cupboard beside it, the shelves of which were crowded with books whose titles made the sheriff's eyes open. A Latin grammar, a Roman history, the "Story of the French Revolution," mythology, and many others that might as well have been Greek for all the meaning their titles conveyed to the deputy.

"Whew!" he whistled softly. He had no idea that Mormon Joe's Kate had any education. He had the impression that she was, in his own phraseology, "a tough customer." Mormon Joe must have taught her, he reflected. There never was any doubt about his learning when it suited him to display it. The discovery increased the sheriff's curiosity to see the girl.

Continuing his investigations, he opened one of the drawers that pulled out from beneath the bunk, and closed it hastily—but not too soon to see that the undergarments it contained were made of flour sacks which had been ripped, laundered and fashioned clumsily by a hand unused to sewing. In the drawer on the other side there were clippings giving recipes for improving the complexion, hair treatments, care of the teeth and nails, and other aids to beauty.

Lingle smiled as he glanced at them. Evidently she had traits that were distinctly feminine. In addition, there were writing materials and a packet of letters addressed in a masculine hand that looked unformed and youthful. They were tied with a pink ribbon, and had the appearance of having been read frequently. Lingle fingered the packet uncertainly and then threw it back in the drawer impatiently.

"Thunder!" he muttered, "I ain't paid to snoop through a woman's letters."

On the southern slope of a foothill where the snow lay less deep than on the northern and eastern exposures, Kate stood on the sunny side of a brown boulder leaning her shoulder against it as she watched the sheep below her nibbling at the spears of dried bunch grass which thrust themselves above the surface. Her rifle stood against a rock where she could reach it easily, and her horse fed near her, pawing through the snow, like an experienced "rustler."

She was dressed to meet the weather in boys' boots and arctics, woolen mittens, riding skirt of heavy blue denim, the fleece-lined canvas coat of the sheepherder, and a coonskin cap with ear-laps. Her face wore an expression that was both sad and troubled as she mechanically watched such sheep as showed a disposition to stray, and kept an eye out for coyotes.

Save in her sleep, her quarrel with Mormon Joe had not been out of her mind since, three days before, she had stood shivering at the door and watched him vanish through the sagebrush. Now, in addition, she was worried over his absence. She had kept supper waiting until long after her usual bedtime and to-day she had worn a trail to the top of the hill, watching, and still had seen no sign of him. Poignant regret for what she had said and shame for her ingratitude overwhelmed her. Along with the feelings was a fear lest he refuse to forgive her and insist upon her leaving. Then, too, there was her promise to Mrs. Toomey.

Kate was confronted with her first problem. She had threshed it out, turned it over and over, finally arriving at the conclusion that she must keep her promise at any cost to herself. A promise was a promise, and she had given her hand on it. Her

regard for her word was a dominant trait in Kate. Mormon Joe had fostered this ideal by words and his own example. So she had slowly made up her mind that having given her word she would not recall it, though it would be a high price to pay for a principle if it cost her his friendship and protection.

Kate intended to plead with him; to beg his forgiveness upon her knees, if necessary; to put her arms about his neck and make him understand how much she loved him. She had taken everything for granted heretofore, as her right because he had given it so readily, but all would be different if only he would forget what she had said and give her another opportunity, and if he would let her keep her promise to Mrs. Toomey she would herd sheep until she had saved the amount in a herder's wages.

This was her plan after sleepless hours and three days of thinking. Until their quarrel Kate never would have doubted that she could have her way without much difficulty, but then she had not met the cool polite stranger with the adamant beneath his polished exterior. The girl wondered if the whimsical unselfish friend and comrade ever would come back to her. The doubt of it set her chin quivering.

Kate trudged through the snow to turn back the sheep that Bowers had seen, and at the top of the hill stopped and gave a cry of relief and gladness. A thin blue thread of smoke was rising from the "draw" and she wondered how anyone could have come without her seeing them. She looked at the sun and calculated that she could shortly be starting the sheep back to the bed-ground, and her spirits rose immeasurably as she sent the strays scampering back to the others and returned to the small warmth which the sunny side of the rock afforded.

Kate was leaning against the boulder conjecturing as to whether it was Mormon Joe or the herder who had arrived, when Lingle rode around the side of the hill and came upon her suddenly.

Immediately the deputy's face set in lines of sternness. He had been rehearsing his part in the dialogue which was to follow and believed he had it sufficiently well in hand to play the act admirably. This murder was the first big case he had had since being appointed deputy. It was a great opportunity and he meant to make the most of it, for if handled creditably it might prove a stepping-stone to the sheriff's office. The element of surprise he knew was most effective and he was counting upon it to obtain valuable admissions. In the scene, as he visualized it while riding, he was to advance gimlet-eyed, throw open his coat and confront her with the badge which made the guilty tremble.

"Guess you know what I'm here for, Madam," he was to say significantly and harshly.

But like most prearranged things in life it all went differently. When he was close enough to see well his jaw dropped automatically. There was no more resemblance between the girl who straightened up and smiled upon him and the hard-featured woman he had pictured as "Mormon Joe's Kate," than there was between himself and the horse he was riding.

Younger by years than he had anticipated, she radiated wholesomeness, simple friendliness and candor. A strand of soft hair had slipped from beneath her cap and lay upon a cheek that was a vivid pink in the cold atmosphere; she had the clear skin of perfect health and her lips were red with the blood that was close to the surface, while the gray eyes with which she regarded him were frank and steady as she gazed at him inquiringly.

Lingle tugged at his hat brim instinctively.

"I thought you were a coyote when the sheep began running," she said, good-naturedly. "They've been bothering a lot this cold weather."

Lingle mumbled that he "presumed so."

"I suppose you are the new herder?"

"I came out with him," the deputy replied evasively.

"Didn't Uncle Joe come?" Kate's face fell in disappointment.

Lingle shifted his weight and looked elsewhere.

"He's in town yet," he answered.

Lingle knew instinctively that she thought Mormon Joe was drinking heavily.

Then, fixing her troubled eyes upon him she asked hesitatingly:

"Did he—say when I could expect him?"

The merciless hound of the law, who had dismounted, shuffled his feet uneasily and looked down to see if his badge was showing.

"Er—he didn't mention it." In the panic which seized him he could not frame the words in which to tell her, and he felt an illogical wrath at Bowers—the coward—for not coming with him. For a moment he considered resigning, then walked over to where her horse was feeding to collect himself while her wondering gaze followed him.

Lingle ran his hand along the horse's neck, the hair of which was stiff with dried sweat, lifted the saddle blanket and looked at its legs, where streaks of lather had hardened. He regarded her keenly as he turned to her.

"You been smokin' up your horse, I notice."

"I ran a coyote for two miles this morning—emptied my magazine at him and then didn't get him." The truth shining in her clear eyes was

unmistakable.

Lingle broke off a handful of sagebrush and used it as a makeshift currycomb, while Kate, a little surprised at the action, picked up the bridle reins when he had finished the gratuitous grooming and started the sheep moving.

"I'll feed back to camp slowly. Don't wait for me —you and the herder eat supper."

"Anything I can do, ma'am?"

"Oh, no, thank you."

Bowers met the deputy at the door of the cook tent, his eyes gleaming with curiosity.

"Did she beller?"

Lingle sat down morosely and removed his spurs before answering.

"I didn't tell her."

"What!" Bowers fairly jumped at him. "What's the matter?"

"She might as well eat her supper, mightn't she?" defiantly.

"Do you know what I think?" Bowers pointed a spoon at him accusingly. "I think your nerve failed you. All I got to say is—you're a devil of an officer."

"Maybe you'd like to tell her," sneeringly.

"I shore ain't afraid to!" bristling. "I don't like to listen to a female's snifflin', and I say so, but when it comes to bein' *afraid* of one of 'em—" Bowers banged the pan of biscuits on the table to emphasize the small esteem in which he held women. "What fer a looker is she?" he demanded.

"You'd better eat your supper before she gets here."

"Bad as that?"

"Worse," grimly. "I ain't got educated words enough to describe her."

They had eaten by the light of the lantern, when

they heard Kate coming.

She lifted the flap of the tent and smiled her friendly smile upon them.

“Goodness, but I’m glad I don’t have to cook supper! I haven’t had anything warm since morning.”

Bowers stood with the broom in his hand, staring, while Kate removed her cap and jacket. Then he cast an evil look upon the deputy, a look which said, “You liar!”

As she made to get the food from the stove he interposed hastily:

“You set down, Ma'am.”

Lingle gave him a look which was equally significant, a jeering look which said ironically, “Woman hater!”

Bowers colored with pleasure when she lauded his “cowpuncher potatoes” and exclaimed over the biscuits.

When Kate had finished she looked from one to the other and beamed upon them impartially.

“It’s nice to see people. I haven’t seen any one for six weeks except Uncle Joe,” wistfully. “I wish he had come back with you—it’s so lonesome.”

There was an immediate silence and then Bowers cleared his throat noisily.

“Night 'fore last was tol'able chilly in your wagon, I reckon?”

Her face sobered.

“It was—terrible! I couldn’t sleep for the cold, and thinking about and pitying the stock on the range, and anybody that had to be out in it. I was glad Uncle Joe was safe in Prouty—there was no need for us both to be out here suffering.”

Again there was silence, and once more Bowers came to the rescue with a feeble witticism, at which he himself laughed hollowly:

"I hearn that a feller eatin' supper with a steel knife got his tongue froze to it, and they had a time thawin' him over the tea kettle."

Kate rose to clear away and wash the dishes, but Bowers motioned her to remain seated.

"You rest yourself, Ma'am. I was a pearl diver in a restauraw fer three months onct so I am, you might say, a professional."

"Uncle Joe and I take turns," Kate laughed, "for neither of us likes it."

"That's the best way," Bowers agreed, breaking the constrained silence which fell each time Mormon Joe's name was mentioned. "More pardners has fell out over dish-washin' and the throwin' of diamond hitches than any other causes."

When, to Kate's horror, Bowers had wiped off the top of the stove with the dishcloth and removed some lingering moisture from the inside of a frying pan with his elbow, she said, rising:

"I'm up at four, so I go to bed early. You can sleep in Uncle Joe's tepee," to Lingle, "and you needn't get up for breakfast when we do. I suppose," to Bowers, "you'll want to start in to-morrow, so I'll go with you and show you the range we're feeding over." With a friendly good night she turned towards the entrance.

Lingle rose with a look of desperation on his countenance.

"Just a minute." There was that in his voice which made her turn quickly and look from one to the other in wonder.

Lingle had a feeling that his vocal cords had turned to wire, they moved so stiffly, when he heard himself saying:

"Guess I'll have to ask you to take a ride with me to-morrow."

"Me?" Her eyes widened. "What for?"

The yellow flame flickered in the smudged chimney of the lantern on the table, a bit of burning wood fell out from the front of the stove and lay smoking on the dirt floor in front of it. Bowers stood rigid by the basin where he had been washing his hands, with the water dripping from his fingers.

In a frenzy to have it over the deputy blurted out harshly:

"Mormon Joe's been murdered!"

The girl gave a cry—sharp, anguished, as one might scream out with a crushed finger.

Bowers advanced a step and demanded fiercely of Lingle:

"Don't you know nothin'—not no damned nothin'?"

Kate's face was marble.

"You mean—he's dead—he won't come back here—ever?"

"You've said it," the deputy replied, huskily.

Kate walked back unsteadily to the seat she had just vacated and her head sank upon her folded arms on the table. She did not cry like a woman, but with deep tearless sobs that lifted her shoulders.

The two men stood with their hands hanging awkwardly, looking at each other. Then Bowers made a grimace and jerked his head towards the tent entrance. The deputy obeyed the signal and went out on tip-toe with the sheepherder following.

"She's got guts," said Bowers briefly.

"She'll need 'em," was the laconic answer.

CHAPTER X

THE BANK PUTS ON THE SCREWS

In the initial excitement it had seemed a simple matter to apprehend the murderer of Mormon Joe with such clues as were furnished by the axe, the rope, the shotgun and the button, which were found in the snow beneath the window. But investigation showed that the axe and rope were no different from scores of other axes and ropes in Prouty, and it was soon recognized that the solution of the case hinged upon the ownership of the gun and the finding of a motive for this peculiarly cowardly and ingenious murder.

But no one could be found to identify the gun, nor could any amount of inquiry unearth an enemy with a grudge sufficiently deep to inspire murder.

Although the room was packed to the doors, nothing startling was anticipated from the coroner's inquest; and while Kate had been summoned as a witness it was not expected that much would be learned from her testimony. The crowd was concerned chiefly in seeing "how she was taking it."

But curiosity became suspicion and suspicion conviction, when Kate, as white as the alabastine wall behind her, admitted that she and Mormon Joe had quarreled the night before the murder, and over money; that she knew how to set a trap-gun and had set them frequently for mountain lions; that she could ride forty miles in a few hours if necessary. The sensation came, however, when the coroner revealed the fact that under the dead man's will she

was the sole beneficiary. Her denial of any knowledge of this was received incredulously, and her emphatic declaration that she had never before seen the shotgun carried no conviction.

The coroner and jury, after deliberation, decided that there was not sufficient evidence to hold her, but the real argument which freed her was the cost to the taxpayers of convening a Grand Jury, and the subsequent proceedings, if the jury decided to try her.

Kate would as well have been proven guilty and convicted, for all the difference the verdict of the coroner's jury made in the staring crowd that parted to let her pass as she came from the inquest. She had untied her horse with the unseeing eyes of a sleep-walker and was about to put her foot in the stirrup when Lingle came up to her.

"I'm goin' to do all I can to clear you," he said, earnestly, "and I got the mayor behind me. He said he'd use every resource of his office to get this murderer. I believe in you—and don't you forget it!"

She had not been able to speak, but the look in her eyes had thanked him.

Two days later, Kate was disinfecting the wound of a sheep that an untrained dog had injured when a note from the Security State Bank was handed her by one of Neifkins' herders. It was signed by its President, Mr. Vernon Wentz, late of the White Hand Laundry, and there was something which filled her with forebodings in the curt request for an immediate interview.

It was too late to start for Prouty that day, but she would leave early in the morning, so she went on applying a solution of permanganate of potassium to the wound and sprinkling it with a healing powder while she conjectured as to what Wentz might want

of her.

In her usual work Kate found an outlet for the nervous tension under which she was still laboring. It helped a little, though it seemed impossible to believe that she ever again would be serene of mind and able to think clearly. Her thoughts were a jumble; as yet she could only feel and suffer terribly. Remorse took precedence over all other emotions, over the sense of loneliness and loss, over the appalling accusation. Her writhing conscience was never quiet. She would gladly have exchanged every hope of the future she dared harbor for five minutes of the dead man's life in which to beg forgiveness.

In the short interval since the coroner's inquest public opinion had crystallized in Prouty, and Kate's guilt was now a certainty in the minds of its citizens.

"She done it, all right, only they can't prove it on her." Hiram Butefish merely echoed the opinion of the community when he made the assertion, upon seeing Kate turn the corner by the Prouty House and ride down the main street the day following the delivery of Mr. Wentz's summons.

Suffering had made Kate acutely sensitive and she was quick to feel the atmosphere of hostility. She read it in the countenances of the passersby on the sidewalk, in the cold eyes staring at her from the windows, in the bank president's uncompromising attitude, even in the cashier's supercilious inventory as he looked her over.

Kate had entered the wide swinging doors of the bank simultaneously with Mr. Abram Pantin, at whom Mr. Wentz had waved a long white hand and requested him languidly to be seated. Since he already had motioned Kate to the only chair beside the one he himself occupied in his enclosure, it was clear there was no way for Mr. Pantin to accept the

invitation unless he sat on the floor. It chafed Pantin exceedingly to be patronized by one who so recently had done his laundry, but since his business at the bank was of an imperative nature he concealed his annoyance with the best grace possible and waited.

Temporarily, at least, Mr. Wentz had lost his equilibrium. From washing the town's soiled linen to loaning it money was a change so sudden and radical that the rise made him dizzy; he was apt, therefore, to be a little erratic, his manner varying during a single conversation from the cold austerity of a bloodless capitalist to the free and easy democracy of the days when he had stood in the doorway of his laundry in his undershirt and "joshed" the passersby.

Mr. Wentz had a notion, fostered by his wife, that he was rather a handsome fellow. True, years of steaming had given to his complexion a look not unlike that of an evaporated apple, but this small defect was more than offset by a luxuriant brown mustache which he had trained carefully. His hair was sleek and neatly trimmed, and he used his brown eyes effectively upon occasions. His long hands with their supple fingers were markedly white, also from the steaming process. Being tall and of approximately correct proportions, his ready-made clothes fitted him excellently—as a matter of fact, Vernon Wentz would have passed for a "gent" anywhere.

Not unmindful of the presence of Mr. Pantin, of whom he secretly stood in awe, although he knew of his own knowledge that Pantin sheared his collars, Wentz swung about in his office chair and said abruptly:

"Didn't expect I'd have to send for you."

Kate's troubled eyes were fixed upon him.

"I had nothing to come for."

It pleased Mr. Wentz to regard her with a smile of tolerant amusement.

"Don't know anything about finance, do you?"

"I've never had any business to attend to. I will learn, though."

Wentz smiled enigmatically. Then, brusquely:

"We might as well come to the point and have it over—do you know them sheep's mortgaged?"

"I knew," hesitatingly, "that Uncle Joe had borrowed for our expenses, but I didn't know how he did it."

"That's how he did it," curtly. "And the mortgage includes the leases and the whole bloomin' outfit."

"But he only borrowed a few hundred," she ventured.

"We require ample security," importantly.

"What is it you want of me?" Kate's voice trembled slightly. The import of the interview was beginning to dawn upon her.

Wentz cleared his throat and announced impressively:

"There was a meeting of the directors called yesterday and it was decided that the bank must have its money."

She cried aghast:

"I haven't it, Mr. Wentz!"

"Then there's only one alternative."

"You mean ship the sheep?"

Wentz stroked his mustache.

"That's about the size of it."

"But sheep are way down," she protested. "It would take almost the two bands at present to pay off the debt and shipping expenses."

"That's not our funeral."

"And the leases are of no value without stock for them."

Mr. Wentz lowered his silken lashes and suggested smoothly as he continued to caress the treasured growth gently:

"Neifkins might be induced to take the leases off your hands at a nominal figure."

Mr. Pantin cooling his heels at the outer portals smiled. He knew what Kate did not—that Neifkins was one of the directors.

"But the notes are not due until early next summer—after shearing. Uncle Joe told me so."

"True," he assented. Then with a large air of erudition: "The law, however, provides for such cases as this. When the security of the mortgager is in jeopardy through incompetence or other causes he can foreclose immediately."

Kate paled as she listened.

"But there's no danger, Mr. Wentz," she protested breathlessly. "Your money's as safe as when Uncle Joe was living. I understand sheep—he said I was a better sheepman than he was because I had more patience and like them. I'll watch them closer than ever—day or night I'll never leave them. I'll promise you! I've got a good herder now and between us we can handle them."

Mr. Wentz shrugged a skeptical shoulder.

"You couldn't convince the directors of that. There's none of 'em wants to risk the bank's money with a woman in that kind of business."

"But can't you see," she pleaded, "that it's ruin to ship now? It will wipe me out completely. Put some one out there of your own choosing, if you can't trust me, but don't make me sell with the bottom out of the market!"

"You've got the bank's decision," he responded, coldly.

"Please—please reconsider! Just give me a chance

—you won't be sorry! I only know sheep—I've never had the opportunity to learn anything else, and I've no place to go but that little homestead back in the hills. I've no one in the world to turn to. Won't you give me a trial, and then if you see I can't handle it —"

"It's no use arguin'." Wentz brought both hands down on the arms of the chair in impatient finality. "We're goin' to ship as soon as we can get cars and drive to the railroad, so you might as well turn them sheep over and stop hollerin'."

Kate rose and took a step forward, her hands outstretched in entreaty:

"Once more I ask you—give me a little time—I'll try and raise the money somewhere—ten days—give me ten days—I beg of you!"

"Ten years or ten days or ten minutes—'twould be all the same," his voice was raucous as he, too, stood up. He looked at her contemptuously. "No; it's settled. The bank's goin' to take over them sheep, and if there's anything left after the mortgage is satisfied you'll get it." He indicated that the interview was over. "Step in, Pantin."

For the second time within the week Kate went out in the street stunned by the blow which had been dealt her: She stood uncertainly for a moment on the edge of the sidewalk and then began slowly to untie the bridle reins.

"Here's a message that came for you yesterday; we had no way of getting it to you." The girl from the telephone office was regarding her curiously.

Kate turned at the sound of a voice beside her, and took the message which had been telephoned from the nearest telegraph office.

> Have just learned of your trouble. Is there anything I can do for you? All sympathy.

HUGH

She read it twice, carefully, while her eyes filled with tears of longing, then she accompanied the girl to the telephone office where she wrote her answer.

I need nothing. Thank you.

KATE PRENTICE

In the meantime Mrs. Toomey was becoming acquainted with a new phase of her husband's character. She had thought she was familiar with all sides of it, those for which she loved him and those which taxed her patience and loyalty; but this moroseness, this brooding ugliness, was different.

He smoked continuously, ate little, drank more coffee than ever she had known him to, and at night twisted and turned restlessly. She could not account for it, since, so far as she knew, there was no more to trouble him than the usual worry as to where their next meals were coming from.

She surreptitiously studied his face wearing this new expression, and asked herself what would become of him with his violent temper, illogical reasoning and lack of balance, if it were not for the restraint of their association? Daily he became a stronger convert to the doctrine that the world owed every one—himself in particular—a living. It was one Mrs. Toomey did not hold with.

She was thankful now that she had not told him of Kate and her promise and aroused hopes that would only have meant further disappointment, in view of developments. She knew, of course, the current gossip to the effect that the Security State Bank was about to foreclose and "set Kate afoot," as the phrase was.

Mrs. Toomey was truly sorry. Her liking for Kate was more genuine than any feeling of the kind she had had for another woman in a longer time than she

could remember. Because, perhaps, the girl was so strikingly her opposite in every particular, she admired Kate exceedingly. The freshness of her candid friendly face, her general wholesomeness attracted her. She felt also the latent strength of character beneath the ingenuous surface, and the girl's courage and self-reliance drew her in her own trembling uncertainty at this period, like a magnet.

Mrs. Toomey's impulses were more often kind than otherwise, and she would have liked nothing better than to have gone to Kate in this crisis, for she believed thoroughly in Kate's innocence and guessed how much she needed a woman's friendship. Mrs. Toomey had a rather active conscience and it troubled her.

Naturally, she had not forgotten the "handshake agreement" which was to cement their friendship, but she argued that as Kate had not been able to fulfill her share of it she could not be expected to live up to her end, since it would mean opposition from Jap and no benefit to offset it. But in her heart Mrs. Toomey knew that it was not Jap she feared so much as the disapproval of Mrs. Abram Pantin.

Toomey was brooding as usual, when footsteps were heard on the wooden sidewalk and a sharp rap followed.

Mrs. Toomey was kneading bread on the kitchen table. Toomey had sold a pair of silver sugar tongs to a cowpuncher who opined that they were the very thing he had been looking for with which to eat oysters. The slipperiness of a raw oyster annoyed and embarrassed him, so he purchased the tongs gladly, and the sack of flour which resulted gave Mrs. Toomey a feeling of comparative security while it lasted.

She called through the doorway:

"You go, Jap. I'm busy."

He arose mechanically, opened the door, started back, then stepped out and closed it after him. At the kitchen table Mrs. Toomey saw the pantomime and was curious.

The sound of voices raised in altercation followed. She recognized that of Teeters.

"I tell you it is, Toomey! I'll swear to it! I'd know it anywhere because of that peculiarity!"

She could not catch the words of a second speaker, but the tone was equally aggressive and unfriendly.

"Then prove it!" Toomey's voice was shrill with excitement and defiant.

They all lowered their voices abruptly as though they had been admonished, but the tones reached her, alternately threatening, argumentative, even pleading.

What in the world was it all about, she wondered as she kneaded.

For twenty minutes or more it lasted, and then Teeters' voice came clearly, vibrating with contempt as well as purpose:

"You got a yellow streak a yard wide and if it takes the rest of our natural life Lingle and me between us are goin' to prove it!"

Toomey's answer was a jeering laugh of defiance, but when he came in and slammed the door behind him, she saw that his face was a sickly yellow and his shaking hand spilled the tobacco which he tried to pour upon a cigarette paper.

She waited a moment for an explanation but, since it was not forthcoming, asked anxiously:

"What's the matter, Jap?"

He did not hear her.

She persisted:

"Who was it?"

"Teeters and Lingle."

"The deputy sheriff?"

He nodded.

She came a little further into the room with her flour-covered hands.

"What did they want, Jap, that's so upset you?"

"I'm not upset!" He glared at her. His trembling hand could not touch the match to the cigarette paper.

"It's only right that you should tell me," she said firmly.

His eyes wavered.

"It's about the cook stove; Teeters wants to foreclose the mortgage."

She regarded him fixedly, turned, and started for the kitchen. She knew that he was lying.

CHAPTER XI

KATE KEEPS HER PROMISE

One of the things which Mrs. Abram Pantin's worst enemy would have had to admit in her favor was that, strictly speaking, she was not a gossip,

though this virtue was due as much to policy as to principle. It was her custom, however, to retain in her memory such morsels of common knowledge news as she accumulated during the day with which to entertain Mr. Pantin at evening dinner, for she observed that if his thoughts could be diverted from business it aided his digestion and he slept better, so she strove always to have some bright topic to introduce at the table.

Having said a silent grace, Mr. Pantin inquired mechanically:

"Will you have a chop, Prissy?" Since there were only two he did not use the plural.

Mrs. Pantin looked across the fern centerpiece and made a mouth as she regarded the chop doubtfully.

"I'm afraid I am eating too much meat lately."

Impaled on a tine of the fork, the chop was of a thinness to have enabled one to read through it without much difficulty.

Mr. Pantin placed the chop on his own plate with some little alacrity.

As his wife took one of the two dainty rolls concealed in a fringed napkin on the handsome silver bread tray, she endeavored to recall what it was in particular that she had saved to tell him. Oh, yes!

"What do you think I heard to-day, Abram?"

Abram was figuring interest and murmured absently:

"I have no idea."

"They say," in her sprightliest manner, "that that girl who killed her lover was refused credit at every store in Prouty. No one would trust her for even five dollars' worth of groceries. Rather pathetic, isn't it?"

Mr. Pantin looked up quickly.

"Who told you that?"

“Everyone seems to know it.”

Mr. Pantin frowned slightly.

“If you mean Miss Prentice, I wouldn’t speak of her in that fashion, Priscilla.”

“Mormon Joe’s Kate, then, if you like that better,” replied Mrs. Pantin, nettled.

“Or 'Mormon Joe’s Kate,' either,” curtly.

“So sorry; I didn’t know you knew her. Do you?”

Mr. Pantin, who at his own table was given the privilege of taking bones in his fingers, pointed the chop at her.

“Let me tell you something, Priscilla,” impressively. “Someone who is cleverer than I am has said that it is never safe to snub a pretty girl, because there is always the possibility that she’ll marry well and be able to retaliate. The same thing applies to one who has brains and is in earnest. I’ve made it a rule never to disparage the efforts of a person who had a definite purpose and works to attain it. It’s about a fifty-to-one shot that he’ll land —sometime.”

Mrs. Pantin looked at her husband suspiciously. There were times when she had a notion that she had not explored the furthermost recesses of his nature—when she wondered if it had not ramifications and passages unknown to her. It had. It was Mr. Pantin’s dearest wish to come home boiling drunk with his hat smashed and his necktie hanging. He longed to kick the front door in and see his wife cower before him. The mental orgies in which he indulged while sitting placidly in the bow window automatically snapping his Romeo against the heel of his foot by a muscular contraction of the toes—would have curdled the blood of Priscilla Pantin.

It was an interesting case of atavism. There was little doubt but that Mr. Pantin was a throwback to a

sportive ancestor who had kept a pacer that could do a little better than 2.13 when conditions were favorable, but had rendered the family homeless by betting one hundred and sixty acres of black walnut timber against a horse that left him so far behind that the spectators urged him to throw something overboard to see if he was moving. All this was family history. Mr. Pantin fought against his predilection to gamble on anything or anybody as he would have fought an impulse to take human life.

It did not escape Mrs. Pantin's attention now that her husband had not answered her question as to whether he knew this notorious character. She repeated it.

Mr. Pantin returned her searching look with one in which she could discern no guile, but his words irritated her still further.

"I happened to be in the bank the other day when the girl was begging Wentz for time on the loan which Mormon Joe had contracted for running expenses," Mr. Pantin explained with somewhat elaborate carelessness. "It wasn't due, but they were putting the screws on her to serve their own purpose —or Neifkins' purpose, rather. He wants her leases. It was a mistake of judgment, for she would have been a good borrower. Bankers are born, not made, anyway," complacently, "and Vernon isn't one of them."

"It seems to me his judgment in this instance is excellent," Mrs. Pantin contradicted tartly. "It's quite evident the business men of Prouty agree with him, since none of them will trust her."

"That doesn't alter my opinion." Mr. Pantin's reply was calm. "It's the person behind a loan that counts, anyway—not the security. If I had been in Wentz's place when she said she could handle those

sheep and meet the obligation when due, I should have believed her." Again Mr. Pantin waved the chop for emphasis as he added with something very like enthusiasm: "She has honesty, strength of character, intelligence, personal magnetism—"

"It appears to me that you made rather a close study, considering your limited opportunity," Mrs. Pantin interrupted acidly.

"She interested me."

"Evidently. But why this sudden change of opinion? I've heard you say a hundred times that all women are pinheads in business."

"Because she's no ordinary woman," Mr. Pantin defended. "The girl hasn't struck her gait yet; her mind is immature, her character undeveloped; but if she doesn't make good—" he paused while he fumbled for a convincing figure—"I'll eat my panama!"

Mrs. Pantin stared, both at the intemperate language and the rare display of animation. From a state of indifference, she felt distinct hostility toward Mormon Joe's Kate stirring in her bosom. Mr. Pantin should have known better—he did know better—but he had felt reckless, somehow. To make amends he said ingratiatingly:

"This mince pie is excellent, Prissy! Did you tell me there was no meat in it?"

"Tomatoes," frigidly. "It's mock mincemeat." A triumph in economy—an achievement! But Mr. Pantin's flattery and conciliating smile were alike futile. Like many another overzealous partisan, he had made for Kate one more enemy.

It seemed aeons ago to Mrs. Toomey that Jap had appeared to her in the light of a handsome conquering daredevil, whose dash and confident

personality made all things possible.

The real test of Toomey's character had come with his misfortunes. So long as he had money to spend and could ride, arrogant and high-handed, over the obsequious shopkeepers who benefited by his prodigality, and the poor ranchers who had not the means, or often the spirit, to oppose him, he continued to appear to her in the light in which she had first seen him. She adored his imperious temper, his erratic lavish generosity, his Quixotic standards, but with the reversal of their fortunes she was slowly brought to realize that money had provided most of the glamor which surrounded him. To be imperious with no one to obey makes for absurdity, and this trait, in his poverty, made him ridiculous, as did the extravagances in which he indulged at the expense of necessities.

It was not often Mrs. Toomey would admit to herself the real cause of the heartsickness which filled her as she watched her husband deteriorate, but with every excuse known to a woman who loves she tried to bolster up her waning faith in the man and his ability. With an obstinacy which was pathetic, she endeavored to keep him on the pedestal where she had placed him. She listened with a fixed smile of interest to the extraordinary schemes he outlined to her, sometimes hypnotizing herself into believing in them, until he returned with the exaggerated swagger which proclaimed another failure. Then she would join him in his denunciation of those who could not see the value of his plan and refused to aid him.

But the conviction that Jap had not the qualities to win material success did not hurt as did the knowledge that he was not too brave to lie, too proud to borrow from those he considered his social

inferiors and with no notion of repaying the obligation, nor too honest to obtain money by any subterfuge that occurred to him.

When she had attempted to borrow money from Abram Pantin, the light esteem in which that astute person held her husband had been as painful as her disappointment, for it was her first definite knowledge of others' estimate of him. Since then, with her eyes opened, she had come to see that Jap was regarded in Prouty as something between a joke and a pest.

Mrs. Toomey was thinking of Mormon Joe's murder one morning while she dusted, and of Kate—conjecturing as to what would become of the girl when the bank foreclosed and she lost everything. She sighed as, with the corner of her apron, she removed a smudge from her nose before the mirror. Wasn't there anything in the world any more but trouble for people who had no money?

She glanced casually out of the window and stiffened in something very like horror.

Kate was in front, tying her horse to a transplanted cottonwood sapling. What if Prissy Pantin should see her! She was visibly agitated, when she opened the door for Kate—stammering a welcome that had a doubtful ring, but Kate did not appear to notice. She looked older, Mrs. Toomey thought, in swift scrutiny. Yes, she had suffered terribly. Her heart went out to the girl, even while she glanced furtively through the windows to see who of the neighbors might be looking.

While Mrs. Toomey wondered what excuse she could make for Kate's presence, if anyone called, she indicated a chair and said nervously:

"I've been hoping to see you and tell you how sorry I am for all that's happened."

"I've been disappointed that you haven't," Kate replied, simply, "for your friendship has loomed like a mountain to me in my trouble."

She was still counting on it! Mrs. Toomey got out a frightened:

"Really?"

"When we shook hands on it up there in the draw," Kate went on, sadly, "I didn't dream how soon or how much I should need you. And women do need each other in trouble, don't they?" earnestly.

Mrs. Toomey nervously tucked in her "scolding locks."

"Er—of course," constrainedly. Her mind was rambling from Jap to Mrs. Pantin and the vigilant neighbors.

Kate rose suddenly, and crossing the room stooped to lay her gloved hand upon Mrs. Toomey's thin shoulders. Looking into her eyes she demanded:

"You don't believe I did it, do you?"

This was a question Mrs. Toomey could answer truthfully and she did, with convincing sincerity:

"No, I don't!"

"I knew it!" There was a joyous note in Kate's voice, and gratitude. "I was sure you were true-blue, and I know I'm going to love you!"

Lifting the woman to her feet, with an arm about her shoulders, Kate kissed her impulsively. She was so slight, so crushable, that Kate experienced a sense of shock as one does when he feels the bones of a little bird through its feathers. Her frailty appealed to something within the girl that was like masculine chivalry, awakening a desire that was keener than ever to protect and help her, while, as before, Mrs. Toomey felt the magnetism of the younger woman's health and strength and courage. Nevertheless, she was panic-stricken at what Kate was taking for

granted and her quick little mind was darting about like some frightened rodent from corner to corner, thinking how she was going to disentangle herself from the situation with the minimum of hurt to the girl's feelings.

There was a suggestion of her former buoyancy in Kate's manner. Her eyes had something of their old-time sparkle as she reached inside the blousing front of her flannel shirt and laid in Mrs. Toomey's hand a packet of crisp banknotes secured by bands of elastic.

"You see—I've kept my promise."

Mrs. Toomey stood motionless, staring.

"Why! Where did you get it?" when speech came back to her.

"That's my secret," Kate replied, gently. "But it's yours to use as long as you need it."

Without warning, Mrs. Toomey burst into tears.

"I c-can't help it!" she sobbed on Kate's shoulder. "It's so—unexpected."

Relief was paramount to all other emotions, but she vowed as she wept that she would show her gratitude, and would be Kate's friend as she had promised, and she would—the feeling of the money in her hand gave her courage—defy Prissy Pantin, if necessary.

Kate and Mrs. Toomey separated with the warm handclasp of friendship.

Mrs. Toomey waited in a tremulous state of eagerness for her husband's return. It was months since she had known such a feeling of relief; it was as though years suddenly had dropped from her. She went about the house humming, trying to decide upon the most effective way of surprising him, and planning how she would spend the money to derive the most good from it. At intervals she opened the top drawer of the bureau and looked at the

banknotes to be sure she was not dreaming. They would pay a little on their most urgent bills, to show their good intentions, and then buy supplies enough to render impossible any such experiences as those they had undergone recently. A goodly portion would be kept for emergencies until Jap got into something.

Mrs. Toomey glowed with gratitude to Kate and the delightful sensation of relaxed nerves after a tension. She felt as peaceful as though she had taken an opiate, therefore, when Toomey came in swaggering and with the black brow which told her of disappointment, she smiled at him tranquilly.

The smile irritated him.

"I wish you'd stop grinning."

Too happy to be perturbed, she replied in mock severity:

"If I cry, you resent it; if I smile, you stop me. Really, you know, you're rather difficult."

"You'd be difficult, too, if you had to try to do business with a bunch of tightwads. We've nothing to grin about, let me tell you."

"Haven't we?" archly.

He eyed her radiant face and ejaculated:

"Lord, but you look simple! What ails you?"

"Nothing fatal," she laughed gaily. "But tell me, Jap, what went wrong this morning?"

The question recalled him to his grievances.

"You know that scheme I told you about last night?"

"Which one?" Mrs. Toomey searched her memory.

"Don't you ever listen when I talk to you?"

"I was so sleepy," apologetically.

"That one to 'glom' all the land between Willow Creek and the mountain."

"Oh, yes," vaguely. "Couldn't you interest

anybody?"

"How can you interest clods who have no imagination?"

"What did they say about it?"

"Scales told me to go out and hold my head under the spout and he'd pump on it. If ever I get a dollar ahead to pay my fine, I'm going to work that son-of-a-gun over."

Mrs. Toomey sobered. The flippancy of the grocer was additional evidence that her husband was considered a light-weight, even in Prouty. It hurt her inexpressibly. The desire to work her surprise to a dramatic climax suddenly left her. She said quietly:

"Our worries are over for the present, Jap." She walked to the bureau and took out the money. "There is five hundred dollars."

He stared at it, at her, and back again incredulously.

"Is this a joke?" finally.

She shook her head.

"Kate Prentice."

He shouted at her.

"What? You borrowed from her?"

"She promised it to me before the—the—"

"You can't keep it."

"But, Jap—"

"I say you can't keep it."

"But, Jap—" she whimpered.

"Do you think I want to be under obligations to that—"

She put her hand over his mouth.

"You shan't say it! She's been generous. She kept her promise when neither you nor I would have done it, and I'm going to stand by her."

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" savagely.

"Now listen, Jap," she went on pleadingly. "We

need this so terribly—we're in no position to consider our feelings—we can pay it back the minute you get into something. I don't understand why you feel so strongly about her, but since you do, I respect you for not wanting to take it. However, the loan isn't to you, it's to me; it's a business proposition, and when we return it we'll pay interest."

He was listening sullenly and she read in his wavering look that he was weakening.

"You must be sensible, Jap. Be reasonable, for we haven't a dollar, and look—here are five hundred of them! We simply can't refuse."

She saw the greedy glint in his eyes as she held the money toward him, and knew that the battle was over.

"I'll not have anything to do with it, anyway."

She could have smiled at his continued pretence of reluctance, his fictitious dignity, if it had not saddened her. As she returned the money to the bureau drawer and slowly closed it she was conscious that in her heart she would have been glad and proud if he had not yielded.

CHAPTER XII

THE DUDE WRANGLER

With his tongue in his cheek, literally, and perspiring like a blacksmith, Teeters sat at the table in the kitchen of the Scissor Ranch house, and by the flickering light of a candle in a lard can wrote letters to the heads of the Vanderbilt and Astor families, to the President and those of his Cabinet whose names he could remember.

Briefly, but in a style that was intimate and slightly humorous, Teeters conveyed the information that he was starting a dude ranch, and if they were thinking of taking an outing the coming summer they would be treated right at the "Scissor" or have their money refunded. He guaranteed a first class A1 cook, with a signed contract to wash his hands before breakfast, a good saddle horse for each guest, and plenty of bedding.

He did not aim to handle over ten head of dudes to start with, so, if they wanted to play safe, they had better answer upon receipt of his letter, he warned them, signing himself after deliberation:

Yure frend

C. TEETERS

"I'll bet me I'll buy me some lamp chimbleys and heave out this palouser. A feller can't half see what he's doin'," he grumbled as he eyed a large blot on the envelope addressed to the President. "The whole place," sourly, "looks like a widdy woman's outfit."

Teeters hammered down the flaps with a vigor that made the unwashed dishes on the table rattle, and grinned as he pictured the astonishment of Major Stephen Douglas Prouty, who was still postmaster, when he read the names of the personages with whom he, Teeters, was in correspondence—after which he looked at the clock and saw that it was only seven.

So he thrust his hands in the pockets of his

overalls, and, with his chair tilted against the wall at a comfortable angle, speculated as to his chances of success in the dude business.

The more Teeters had thought of Mormon Joe's assertion that, outside of stock, the chief asset of the country was its climate and its scenery, the more he had come to believe that Joe's advice to turn the Scissor outfit into a place for eastern tourists was valuable. It had been done elsewhere successfully, and there was no dearth of accommodations on the place, since there was nothing much to the ranch but the buildings, as Toomey had fenced and broken up only enough land to patent the homestead.

Although Teeters was now the ostensible owner, in reality the place belonged to Hughie Disston's father, who had been the heaviest loser in the cattle company. Hughie had written Teeters that if they recovered from the reverse, and others that had come to them, they hoped to re-stock the range that was left to them and he wished to spend at least a portion of the year there. In the meantime, it was for Teeters to do what he could with it.

"Dudes" had seemed to be the answer to his problem.

While making up his mind, he had not acted hastily. He had consulted the spirits, with Mrs. Emmeline Taylor and her ouija board as intermediary. "Starlight" had thought highly of the undertaking, and Mrs. Taylor, knowing that Miss Maggie's hope chest was full to overflowing, encouraged it. There had been a time when bankers, railroad and other magnates had been in her dreams for her daughter, and a mere rancher like Teeters was unthinkable, but with the passing of the years she had modified her ambitions somewhat. So she had said benignly, patting his shoulder:

"The angels will look after you, as they have after me. Don't be afraid, Clarence."

It had occurred to Clarence that the not inconsiderable herd of Herefords Mr. Taylor had left behind him at "Happy Wigwam" might have had as much to do with Mrs. Taylor's feeling of security as the guardianship of the angels, but he answered merely, though somewhat cryptically:

"Even if I lose my money it won't cost me nothin'—I worked for it."

Teeters glanced at the clock, yawned as he saw that the hands pointed to half past seven, and unhooked his heels from the rung of the chair preparatory to retiring.

A horse snorted, and the sound of hoofs on the frozen dooryard brought Teeters to attention. What honest person could be out jamming around this time of night, he wondered.

In preparation for callers he reached for his cartridge belt and holster that hung on a nail and laid them on the table.

The door opened and a stranger entered, blinking. The fringe of icicles hanging from his moustache looked like the contrivance to curtail the activities of cows given to breaking and entering.

"I seen you through the winder," he said apologetically.

"I heard your horse whinner," Teeters replied, politely, rising.

"This banany belt's gittin' colder every winter." The stranger broke off an icicle and laid it on the stove to hear it sizzle.

"I was jest fixin' to turn in," Teeters hinted. "Last night I didn't sleep good. I tossed and thrashed around until half-past eight 'fore I closed my eyes."

"I won't keep you up, then. I come over on

business. Bowers's my name. I'm a-workin' for Miss Prentice. I'm a sheepherder myself by perfession."

Teeters received the announcement with equanimity, so he continued:

"Along about two o'clock this afternoon I got an idea that nigh knocked me over. I bedded my sheep early and took a chance on leavin' them, seein' as it was on her account I wanted to talk to you. You're a friend of her'n, ain't you?"

"To the end of the road," Teeters replied soberly.

Bowers nodded.

"So somebody told me. Are you goin' to town anyways soon?"

"To-morrow."

"Good! Will you take a message to Lingle?"

Teeters assented.

"Tell him for me that the night of the murder there was a onery breed-lookin' feller that smelt like a piece of Injun-tanned buckskin a settin' in Doc Fussel's drug store. He acted oneasy, as I come to think it over, and he went out jest before the killin'. I never thought of it at the time, but he might have been the feller that done it."

"I'll tell Lingle, but I don't think there's anything in it."

"Why?"

Teeters' eyes narrowed.

"Because I know where the gun come from!"

Bowers looked his astonishment.

"I'd swear to that gun stock on a stack of Bibles," Teeters continued. "It was swelled from layin' in water, and a blacksmith riveted it. The blacksmith died last summer or by now we'd a had his affidavit."

"Ain't that sick'nin'!" Bowers referred to the exasperating demise of the blacksmith.

"Anyway, Lingle's workin' like a horse on the case, and I think he'll clear it up directly. How's she standin' it?"

"Like a soldier."

"She's got sand."

"She's made of it," laconically, "and I aims to stay by her."

Teeters hesitated; then, for the first time in his life he gave his hand to a sheepherder, and, at parting, as further evidence that the caste line was down between them, said heartily:

"Come over next Sunday and eat with me; I got six or eight cackle-berries I been savin' fur somethin' special."

"Thanks. Aigs is my favor-ite fruit," Bowers replied appreciatively.

The next day Teeters went into the post office at Prouty with more letters than he had written in all his life together. The Major was at the window perspiring under the verbal attack of a highly incensed lady.

A deeply interested listener, Teeters gathered that the postmaster's faulty orthography was to blame for the contumely heaped upon him. In vain the Major protested his innocence of any malicious intent when, after hearing a rumor to the effect that the lady had died during an absence from Prouty, he wrote "diseased" upon a letter addressed to her, and returned it to the sender.

"I'm goin' to sue you for libel!" was her parting shot at him.

"Like as not she'll do it," said the Major, despondently, and added with bitterness, "I wisht I'd died before I got this post office! Teeters," he continued, impressively, "lemme tell you somethin': anybody can git a post office by writin' a postal card

to Washington, but men have gone down to their graves tryin' to git rid of 'em. The only sure way is to heave 'em into the street and jump out o' the country between sundown and daylight.

"I've met fellers hidin' in the mountains that I used to think was fugitive murderers—they had all the earmarks—but now I know better; they was runnin' away from third-and fourth-class post offices. If ever you're tempted, remember what I've told you. Anything I can do for you, Teeters?"

Teeters threw out his mail carelessly.

"Just weigh up them letters, will you?"

The name of the head of the Astor family caught the postmaster's eyes and he looked his astonishment.

"I'm expectin' him out next summer," Teeters said casually.

"You don't say?" with a mixture of respect and skepticism. "Visitin'?"

"Not exactly visitin'—he'll pay for stayin'. I'm tellin' you private that I'm goin' to wrangle dudes next season. I made him a good proposition and I think it'll ketch him."

"It would be a good ad. for the country," said the Major, thoughtfully. "But wouldn't you be afraid he'd get lonesome out there with nobody passin'?"

"I've thought over this consider'ble," Teeters lowered his voice, "and I figger that the secret of handlin' dudes is to keep 'em busy. I've been around 'em a whole lot, off an' on, over on the Yellastone, and I've noticed that the best way to get anythin' done is to tell 'em not to touch it and then go off and leave 'em. Of course an out-an'-out dude is a turrible nuisance, and dang'rous, but you got to charge enough to cover the damage he does tryin' to be wild and woolly."

He went on confidentially: “Between you and me, I’ve worked out a scale of prices for allowin’ ’em to help me—so much for diggin’ post holes and stretchin’ wire, so much for shinglin’ a roof or grubbin’ sagebrush. Only the very wealthy can afford to drive a wagon and spread fertilizer, or clean out the corral and cowshed, and it’ll take a bank account to pitch alfalfa in hayin’. If they thought I wanted ’em to help, or needed ’em, they’d laugh at me.”

“Dudes is peculiar,” the Major admitted. “I never had much truck with ’em, but I knowed a feller in the Jackson Hole County that made quite a stake out of dudin’. They took him to Warm Springs afterward—he’d weakened his mind answerin’ questions—but he left his family well pervided for. Teeters,” earnestly, “why don’t you put your money in somethin’ substantial—stock in the Ditch Company, or Prouty real estate?”

Teeters shook his head.

“Without aimin’ to toot my horn none, I got a notion I can wrangle dudes to a fare-ye-well. I’ll give it a try-out, anyway. By the way, Major, have you seen Lingle? How’s the case comin’?”

The Major’s face changed instantly and he said with quite obvious sarcasm:

“He’s busier than a man killin’ rattlesnakes, and he’s makin’ himself unpopular, I can tell you, tryin’ to stir up somethin’.”

Teeters looked at him wonderingly but said nothing; instead, he went out in search of the deputy.

Lingle was sitting dejectedly on the edge of the sidewalk when Teeters found him, and the deputy returned his spicy greeting dispiritedly.

“You look bilious as a cat,” said Teeters, eying him. “Why don’t you take somethin’?”

"You bet I'm bilious—the world looks plumb ja'ndiced!" the deputy answered, with feeling.

"What's the matter?" Teeters sobered in sudden anxiety. "Ain't the case—"

A frown grew between the deputy's eyebrows.

"The case is gettin' nowhere. Things don't look right, and I can't exactly put my finger on it."

"What do you mean, Lingle?" quickly.

"I mean that people are actin' curious—them sports inside—" he jerked his thumb at the Boosters' Club behind him, "and the authorities."

"How do you mean—curious?"

"Don't show any interest—throw a wet blanket over everything as if they wanted to discourage me—I'm not sure that they're not tryin' to block me."

"But why would they?" Teeters looked incredulous.

Lingle shrugged a shoulder.

"I don't know yet, but I've got my own opinion."

"But you won't lay down," Teeters pleaded, "even if they pull against you?"

"Not to notice!" the deputy replied grimly.

CHAPTER XIII

MRS. TOOMEY'S FRIENDSHIP IS TESTED

Momentarily flustered, flattered, and not a little curious, Mrs. Toomey opened the door one afternoon and admitted Mrs. Abram Pantin, who announced vivaciously that she had run in informally for a few minutes and brought her shadow embroidery.

Since Mrs. Pantin never ran in informally anywhere, and she was wearing the sunburst and rings which Mrs. Toomey had noted were in evidence when she wished particularly to have her position appreciated, the hostess, while expressing her pleasure, sought for the real purpose of the visit.

Ostensibly admiring Mrs. Pantin's new coiffure, she thought, bridling, "Perhaps she's come to find out how we're managing since Mr. Pantin refused us."

Yet Mrs. Toomey had to acknowledge that this did not seem like her visitor, either, for ordinarily she was too self-centered to be very curious about others.

As the afternoon passed and Mrs. Pantin twittered brightly on impersonal subjects, introducing topics which evidenced clearly that her mentality was of a higher order than that of the women about her, whose conversation consisted chiefly of gossip and trivial happenings, Mrs. Toomey came to think that she was mistaken and that this friendly visit was a rare compliment.

While Mrs. Pantin's bejewelled and rather clawlike fingers flew in and out of the embroidery hoop as she plied her needle, and while Mrs. Toomey adroitly selected the stockings which needed the least darning from her basket of mending, the latter came nearer really liking Priscilla Pantin than she had since she had known her.

Mrs. Pantin exhibited a completed spray for Mrs. Toomey's approval and commented upon the

swiftness with which time sped in congenial company. A delightful afternoon was especially appreciated in a community where there were so few with whom one could really unbend and talk freely —to all of which Mrs. Toomey agreed thoroughly, understanding, as she did, what Mrs. Pantin meant exactly.

"Even in a small community one must keep up the social bars and preserve the traditions of one's up-bringing, mustn't one?"

"One is apt to become lax, too democratic—it's the tendency of this western country," Mrs. Toomey assented. She felt very exclusive and elegant at the moment.

Mrs. Pantin's eyes had been upon her work, now she raised them and looked at Mrs. Toomey squarely.

"Have you seen—a—Miss Prentice lately?"

Mrs. Toomey had the physical sensation of her heart flopping over. That was it, then! She had the feeling of having been trapped—hopelessly cornered. In a mental panic she answered:

"Not lately."

"Are you expecting to see much of her?"

There was something portentous in the sweetness with which Mrs. Pantin asked the question.

It was a crisis—not only the test of her promised friendship and loyalty to Kate but to her own character and courage. Was she strong enough to meet it?

It was one of Mrs. Toomey's misfortunes to be not only self-analytical, but honest. She had no hallucinations whatever regarding her own weaknesses and shortcomings. As she called a spade a spade, so she knew herself to be by instinct and early training a toady. Of the same type, in appearance and characteristics, in this trait, lay the

main difference in the two women: while Mrs. Pantin with her better intelligence was intensely selfish, Mrs. Toomey's dominant trait was a moral cowardice that made her a natural sycophant.

No quaking soldier ever exerted more will power to go into battle than did Mrs. Toomey to answer:

"I hope so."

Mrs. Pantin's bright blue eyes sharpened. "Ah-h, they must have money!" she reflected. Aloud she said:

"Really?"

"Certainly."

This was mutiny. Mrs. Pantin lifted a sparse eyebrow—the one which the application of a burnt match improved wonderfully.

"Do you think that's—wise?"

Mrs. Toomey had a notion that if she attempted to stand her legs would behave like two sticks of wet macaroni, yet she questioned defiantly:

"Why not?"

Undoubtedly they had made a raise somewhere!

"Why—my dear—her reputation!"

"She doesn't know any more about that murder than we do," bluntly.

"I wasn't referring to the murder—her morals."

"I don't question them, either."

"You are very charitable, Delia. She lived alone with Mormon Joe, didn't she?"

A frost seemed suddenly to have touched the perfect friendship between these kindred spirits.

"I'm merely just," Mrs. Toomey retorted, though her heart was beating furiously. "All we know is hearsay."

With the restraint and sweetness of one who knows her power, Mrs. Pantin replied:

"I'm sure it's lovely of you to defend her."

"Not at all—I like her personally," Mrs. Toomey answered stoutly.

It was time to lay on the lash; Mrs. Pantin saw that clearly.

"Nevertheless, as a friend I wouldn't advise you to take her up—to—er—hobnob with her." Mrs. Pantin did not like the word, but the occasion required vigorous language.

"I'm the best judge of that, Prissy." Her hands were icy.

"When you came to town a stranger I tried to guide you in social matters," Mrs. Pantin reminded her. "I told you whose call to return and whose not to—you found my judgment good, didn't you?"

"You've been more than kind," Mrs. Toomey murmured miserably, and added, "I'm so sorry for her."

"We all are that, Delia, but nevertheless I think you will do well to follow my suggestion in this matter."

Mrs. Toomey recognized the veiled threat instantly. It conveyed to her social ostracism—not being asked to serve on church committees—omitted when invitations for teas were being issued—cold-shouldered out of the Y.A.K. Society, which met monthly for purposes of mutual improvement—of being blackballed, perhaps, when she would become a Maccabee! She repressed a shudder; her work swam before her downcast eyes and she drew up the darn on the stocking she was repairing until it looked like a wen. The ordeal was worse than she had imagined it.

And how she hated Priscilla Pantin!

Always Mrs. Toomey had had a quaint conceit that if she listened attentively she would be able to hear Priscilla's heart jingling in her body—rattling

like a bit of ice in a tin bucket. Now the woman's mean, chaste little soul laid bare before her filled Delia Toomey with a dumb fury.

Mrs. Pantin waited patiently for her answer, though the experience was a new one. Usually she had only to reach for the whip when her satellites mutinied; almost never was it necessary to crack it.

While Mrs. Toomey hesitated Mrs. Pantin folded her work—this, too, was significant.

Mrs. Toomey replied, finally, in desperation:

"I'll think over what you've said, Priscilla. I appreciate your intentions, thoroughly, believe me."

There was a cowed note in her voice which Mrs. Pantin detected. She smiled faintly.

"I don't know when I've spent such a delightful afternoon," and kissed her.

Mrs. Toomey curbed an impulse to bite her friend as she returned the parting salute.

"And I've so enjoyed having you," she murmured.

Mrs. Toomey turned pale when she looked through the front window and saw Kate, a few days after Mrs. Pantin's visit, dismount and tie her horse to the cottonwood sapling, for the threat, which held for her all the import of a Ku-Klux warning, had been hanging over her like the sword of Damocles.

It had haunted her by day, and at night she could not sleep for thinking of it, and yet she was no nearer reaching a decision than when the struggle between her conscience and her cowardice had started.

Quite instinctively she glanced again to see if the neighbors were looking. There were interested faces at several windows. Mrs. Toomey had a sudden feeling of irritation, not with the sentinels doing picket duty but with Kate for tying her horse in front so conspicuously. Mrs. Toomey shrank from the

staring eyes as though she had found herself walking down the middle of the road in her underclothing.

The feeling vanished when Kate came up the walk slowly and she saw how white and haggard the girl's face was.

Mrs. Toomey opened the door and asked her in nervously.

Kate looked at her wistfully as though she yearned for some display of affection beyond the conventional greeting, but since Mrs. Toomey did not offer to kiss her she sank into a chair with a suggestion of weariness.

"I hope you're not busy—that I'm not bothering?"

"Oh, no—not at all."

"I couldn't help coming, somehow—I just couldn't go back without seeing you. I wanted to see a friendly face—to hear a friendly voice." She clasped her fingers tightly together: "Oh, you don't know how much you mean to me! I feel so alone—adrift—and I long so for some one to lean on, just for a little, until I get my bearings. It seems as though every atom of courage and confidence had oozed out of me. I don't believe that ever again in all my life I'll long for sympathy as I do this minute." She spoke slowly with breaths between, as though the heaviness of her heart made talking an effort.

"I presume you miss your—uncle." There was a constraint in Mrs. Toomey's voice and manner which Kate was too engrossed and wretched to notice.

She put her hand to her throat as though to lessen the ache there.

"I can't tell you how much. And remorse—it's like a knife turning, turning—his eyes with the pain and astonishment in them when I struck at him so viciously in my temper; they haunt me. It's terrible."

Mrs. Toomey fidgeted.

Kate went on as though she found relief in talking. Her voice sounded thick, somehow, and lifeless with suffering.

"I have such a feeling of heaviness, of oppression"—she laid her hand upon her heart—"I can't describe it. If I were superstitious I'd say it was a premonition."

"Of what, for instance?" Mrs. Toomey looked frightened.

Kate shook her head.

"I don't know. The thought keeps coming that, bad as things have been, there are worse ahead of me—unhappiness—more unhappiness—like a preparation for something."

Distinctly impressed, Mrs. Toomey exclaimed inanely:

"Oh, my! Do you think so?" Was *she* going to get "mixed up" in something, she wondered.

"I have a dread of the future—a shrinking such as a blind person might have from a danger he feels but cannot see. Your friendship is the only bright spot in the blackness—it's a peak, with the sun shining on it!" Kate's eyes filled with quick tears. They were swimming as she raised them and looked at Mrs. Toomey.

"I'm glad you feel that way," Mrs. Toomey murmured.

Something in the tone arrested Kate's attention, an unconvincing, insincere note in it. She fixed her eyes upon her face searchingly, then she crossed the room swiftly and dropped upon her knees beside her. Taking one of her thin hands between both of hers she said, pleadingly:

"You will be my friend, won't you? You won't go back on me, will you?" She could scarcely have begged for her life with more earnestness.

"I am very fond of you," Mrs. Toomey evaded. She did not look at her.

Kate regarded her steadily. Laying down the hand she had taken she asked quietly:

"Will you tell me something truthfully, Mrs. Toomey?"

Mrs. Toomey's mind, ratlike, scuttled hither and thither, wondering what was coming.

"If I can," uneasily.

Kate laid her hand upon the older woman's shoulder and searched her face:

"Is my friendship an embarrassment to you?"

Mrs. Toomey squirmed.

"Tell me! The truth! You owe that to me!" Kate cried fiercely, her grip tightening on the woman's shoulder.

As Mrs. Toomey was a coward, so was she a petty liar by instinct. Her first impulse when in an uncomfortable position was to extricate herself by any plausible lie that occurred to her. But Kate's voice and manner were too compelling, her eyes too penetrating, to admit of falsifying or even evading further. Then, too, she had a wild panicky feeling that she might as well tell the truth and have it over —though it was the last thing in the world she had contemplated doing.

"It is—rather."

"Why?" Her voice sounded guttural.

Like a hypnotic subject Mrs. Toomey heard herself whimpering:

"People will talk about it—Mrs. Pantin has warned me—and I'll—I'll get left out of everything, and—and when Jap gets into something it will hurt us in our business."

Kate got up from her knees; involuntarily Mrs. Toomey did likewise.

The girl did not speak but folded her arms and looked at her "friend." Mrs. Toomey had the physical sensation of shrivelling: as though she were standing naked before the withering heat of a blast furnace.

In the silence that seemed interminable, Kate's eyes moved from her head to her shabby shoes and back again, slowly, as though she wished to impress her appearance upon her memory, to the minutest detail.

As by divination, Mrs. Toomey saw herself as Kate saw her. Stripped of the virtues in which the girl had clothed her, she stood forth a scheming, inconsequential little coward in a weak ineffectual rack of a body—not strong enough to be vicious, without the courage to be dangerous. Thin-lipped, neutral-tinted, flat of chest and scrawny, without a womanly charm save the fragility that incited pity; to Kate who had idealized her she now seemed a stranger.

Kate completed her scrutiny, and searched her mind for the word which best expressed the result of it. Her lip curled unconsciously when she found it. She said with deliberate scathing emphasis:

"You—Judas Iscariot!"

Then she walked out, feeling that the very earth had given way beneath her.

Nothing was definite, nothing tangible or certain; there was not anybody or anything in the world, apparently, that one could count on. She had a feeling of nausea along with a curious calm that was like the calm of desperation. Yet her mind was alert, active, and she understood Mrs. Toomey with an uncanny clearness. She believed her when she had said that she liked her, just as she knew that she had lied when she had said that she was glad to see her. She understood now that Mrs. Toomey had accepted

the loan hoping to carry water on both shoulders, and finding herself unable to do so, had eased herself of the burden which required the least courage. The perspicacity of years of experience seemed to come to Kate in a few minutes, so surely did she follow Mrs. Toomey's motives and reasoning.

Was this human nature when one understood it? Was this what the world was like if one were out in it? Wasn't there anybody sincere or kind or disinterested? She asked herself these questions despairingly as she untied her horse and swung slowly into the saddle.

"Poverty makes most people sordid, selfish, cowardly." She fancied she heard Mormon Joe saying it, and herself expressing her disbelief in the statement. "There are few persons strong enough to stand the gaff of public opinion." She had contradicted him, she remembered.

She recalled—word for word, almost—a philosophical dissertation apropos of Prouty as he sat on the wagon tongue one evening smoking his pipe in the moonlight.

"People who live without change in a small community grow to attach an exaggerated importance to the opinions of others. They come to live and breathe with a view to what their neighbors think of them. When life resolves itself into a struggle for a bare existence, it makes for cowardice and selfishness. In time the strongest characters deteriorate with inferior associates and only small interests to occupy their minds. Wills weaken, standards lower unconsciously, ideals grow misty or vanish. Youth, enthusiasm, hope, die together. Ambition turns to bitterness or stolid resignation. Suspicion, meanness, cruelty, are the natural offspring of small intelligences and narrow

environment—and they flourish in a town like Prouty."

"I don't believe it!" she had cried, shocked by his cynicism. He had shrugged a shoulder and replied solemnly:

"I hope to God you'll never know how true it is, Katie. I hope no combination of circumstances will ever place you at their mercy. It is to make any such condition impossible that I am bending all my energies to get on my feet again."

In this moment it seemed to Kate that his cynicism had the sweetness of honey compared to her own bitterness.

Since the murder, curiosity had changed to unfriendliness, and unfriendliness in some instances to actual hostility. Her slightest advance was met by a barrier of coldness that froze her, and she quickly had come to wince under each fresh evidence of enmity as from a blow in the face. Thoughts of Mrs. Toomey's friendship and the belief that this antagonism was only temporary and would disappear when the local authorities had brought out the truth concerning the murder, had sustained and comforted her. The last time she had questioned Lingle, the deputy had told her with much elation in his manner that "the trail was getting warmer."

Now, crushed, heartsick, staggering fairly under the brutal blow that Mrs. Toomey's weak hand had dealt her, it was an ordeal to ride back to Main Street and run the gauntlet.

All that was left to her was the hope that Lingle might soon clear her, and she felt in her despair that she could not return to the ranch until he had given her some reassurance. She checked her horse at the corner and looked each way for him, but he was nowhere visible. Then, while she hesitated she saw

him emerge from a doorway where a steep stairway led to the office of the mayor on the second floor of Prouty's only two-story building.

Kate received the swift impression that the deputy was agitated, and a closer view confirmed it. His face was pale, and the light that shone in his eyes was unmistakably due to anger. He walked to the edge of the sidewalk and stood there, too engrossed in thought to see Kate until she had ridden close to him.

"Will you tell me what progress you're making? It's so hard, this waiting and not knowing."

The deputy's eyes blazed anew when he recognized the girl, and under stress of feeling he blurted out harshly:

"I'm called off, Miss Prentice!"

"Called off!" she gasped. "You mean—"

"Stopped!" fiercely. "I've been blocked at every turn by the authorities and others, and now it's come straight from 'Tinhorn' himself—the mayor."

Speechless, Kate's trembling hand sought the saddle horn and gripped it.

"But why?" finally.

Ineffable scorn was in the deputy's answer:

"It might hurt the town to have this murder stirred up and the story sent broadcast—make prospective settlers hesitate to invest in such a dangerous community—that's what was given me, along with my instructions to quit. But another reason is that the man implicated belongs to one of them secret orders."

"I can't believe it!" she cried piteously.

"I couldn't either, until I had to. But I've got sense enough to know that I'm done, with nobody to back up my hand. After all, I'm only a deputy," he said savagely. "I'm all broke up, I can tell you!"

"But aside from the way in which it leaves me it seems such a—such an insult to Uncle Joe—as though nobody cared—as though—" she could not finish.

"I know—I know," he nodded gravely.

"I'm going up to see the mayor—to beg him to keep on—to tell him what it means to me!" she declared passionately.

"I wouldn't, Miss Prentice," Lingle advised.

"I must! It can't stop like this! He shall understand what it means to me—this suspicion—this disgrace that is nearly killing me!"

He saw that she was determined, so he did not protest further, but his reluctant gaze followed her as she disappeared up the narrow dirty stairway.

The mayor attended to the official business of Prouty at a flat-top desk in a large front room where he also wrote an occasional life insurance policy. As the insurance business was a rise from a disreputable saloon and gambling joint, so the saloon and gambling joint had been a step upward from his former means of livelihood as a dance-hall tout in a neighboring state.

With his election to an office which nobody else wanted, an incipient ambition began to stir. Already his mind was busy with plans for advancement, and each move that he made was with an eye to the future. But one thing was certain, and it was that wherever his Star of Destiny led him he would remain, underneath any veneer of polish which experience might give him, the barroom bully, the mental and moral tinhorn that Nature had made him.

Enveloped in a cloud of the malodorous smoke of a cheap cigar and tilted on the hind legs of his chair with his heels hooked in the rungs, he was resting his head against the wall where a row of smudges from

his oily black hair bore evidence to the fact that it was a favorite position.

Hearing a woman's light step and catching a glimpse of a woman's skirt as Kate came down the corridor, he removed his cigar and unhooked his heels preparatory to rising.

She was in the doorway before he recognized her; where she paused during a moment's look of mutual inquiry. Then, with all the deliberation of an intentional insult he retilted his chair, returned his heels to the rungs and replaced his cigar while he surveyed her with a quite indescribable insolence.

"Tinhorn" had no special reason for the act and it served no purpose; it was merely the instinctive act of the bully who strikes in wanton cruelty at something or somebody he knows cannot retaliate. His Honor found a satisfaction now in watching the blood rise flaming to the roots of Kate's hair and it gave him a feeling of power knowing that she must accept the humiliation or leave with her errand unstated, though he guessed the nature of her visit.

It pleased him, however, to feign ignorance when, gripping the frame of the doorway, she said in a voice that trembled noticeably in spite of her obvious effort to steady it:

"I came to ask you if it's true—that you mean to stop work—on the—case?"

He rolled the chewed end of his cigar between his yellow snags of teeth and asked insolently:

"What case you talkin' about?"

"There's only one that interests me," she replied, with a touch of dignity.

"What do you want, anyhow?"

Kate's labored breathing was audible.

"Is it so that you are not going to do any more about the murder of my uncle?"

"Your uncle!" he snorted, necked the ashes from the end of his cigar, rolled it back into place with his tongue and reiterated: "Your uncle!" Then: "What's it to you? You got off, didn't you?"

She came into the room a step or two.

"It's everything to me or I wouldn't be here. Can't you understand what it means to me—going through life with people thinking—"

"You got the money, didn't you?" he interrupted.

"What you throwing a bluff like this for, anyhow? I guess what people think ain't worryin' you."

Kate's fingers clenched, but she said quietly:

"You haven't answered my question."

He resented the rebuke, but chiefly her self-control. The bully in him wanted to see tears, to see her overawed and humble; she had too much assurance for a social cipher. If she did not realize that fact yet, it was for him to let her know it.

He brought the front legs of his chair down with a thump and thundered:

"Yes—it's closed, and it won't be opened, neither! You'd better not start in tryin' to stir up somethin', or you'll be sorry—as it is, you're a detriment to the community!"

He mistook her white-faced silence, and added with less violence:

"Why don't you fade away, anyhow—sell out and get into something in your line in some good town or city?"

She was shivering as with a chill as she walked closer and asked in a hoarse whisper:

"What would you suggest—exactly?"

Ah, this was more like it! There was something even beneficent in his relaxed features as he answered:

"You could open a first-class place with your

stake. It's quick and big money, if you can get the right kind of a stand-in with the police. No cheap joint, but a high-toned dance hall in some burg where you can get a liquor license. That's my advice to you."

"It's what I thought you meant, but I wanted to be sure of it!" Her voice came between her teeth, guttural, and the face into which his startled eyes looked was the face of Jezebel of the Sand Coulee. "I'd kill you if I had anything to do it with, but, so help me God, you shan't say that to me and get away with it!"

The girl struck him full across the face with such force that he recoiled under it, while the prints of her fingers stood out like scars on his sallow cheek for a full minute. She was gone before he recovered, but curses followed her as she ran panting in her blind rage down the narrow stairway.

Kate felt as though liquid fire were racing through her veins, like some one rushing from a house with his clothes on fire, as she tore open the knot of the bridle reins and swung into the saddle. She did not need to hear the words to know that the guffaw which reached her from a group on the sidewalk was inspired by some coarse witticism concerning her.

There was not a single friendly pair of eyes, or one pair that was even neutral, among the many that looked at her and after her as she gave her horse its head and let it clatter at a gallop that was all but a run down the main street and over the road that led out of Prouty.

It was a crisis, and intuitively she recognized it—one of those emotional climaxes that sear and burn and leave their scars forever.

The powerful horse bounded up the steep grade without slackening, but at the top she checked it,

and from the edge of the bench stood looking down upon the crude town sprawling on the flat beneath her. It represented one antagonistic personality to her, and as such she addressed it aloud, with deliberately chosen words, as one throwing down the gauntlet to an enemy.

"You've hurt me! You've never done anything else but hurt me, and I've forgiven and forgotten and tried to make myself believe you didn't mean it. Now I know better.

"You still have it in your power to hurt me, to anger me, sometimes to defeat me. I am one and you are many, but you can't crush me, you can't break my heart or spirit; you can't keep me down! I'll succeed! I may be years in doing it, but I'll win out over you. I'll be remembered when you're rotten in your graves, and if I can live long enough I'll pay back every blow you've ever given me, one by one, and collectively—no matter what it costs me!"

CHAPTER XIV

LIKE ANY OTHER HERDER

The northeast wind lifted Kate's shabby riding skirt and flapped it against her horse's flank as she sat in the saddle with field glasses to her eyes looking intently at a covered wagon that was crawling over the sagebrush hummocks, its top swaying at perilous angles. She shivered unconsciously as the loose ends of her silk neckerchief fluttered and snapped in front of her and the limp brim of her Stetson blew straight against the crown of it.

"There are certainly two of them," she murmured, "and they must be lost or crazy to be wandering through the hills at this season. They had better get back to the road, if they don't want to find themselves snowed up in a draw until summer."

She replaced the glasses in the case that she wore slung by a strap over her shoulder, and looked behind her. They were undoubtedly snow clouds that the wind was driving before it from the distant mountains.

"Good thing I brought my sour-dough," she muttered as she untied the sheepskin-lined canvas coat from the back of her saddle. "We'd better sift

along, Cherokee, and turn the sheep back to the bedground."

By the time the sheep had fed slowly back and settled themselves for the night on the gently sloping side of a draw above the sheep wagon there was just daylight enough left for her to feed and hobble the horse and cut wood without lighting a lantern. From half a mutton hanging outside at the back of the wagon she cut enough for her own supper, and fed the young collie she was training. Then, she dipped a bucket of water from the barrel, made a fire in the tiny camp stove and put on the tea kettle. She looked with distaste at a pile of soiled dishes that remained from Bowers's breakfast, and at the unmade bunk with a grimy flour sack for a pillow case.

"Thank goodness, Bowers will be back to-morrow!"

She swept the untidy floor with a stump of a broom and replaced it in its leather straps outside the wagon. When the water was heated, she washed the dishes and scoured the greasy frying pan with a bit of sagebrush, for there was no makeshift of the west with which she was not familiar. Then she made biscuits, fried bacon and a potato, and boiled coffee, eating, when the meal was ready, with the gusto of hunger.

Her hair glistened with flakes as she withdrew her head after opening the upper half of the door to throw out the dish water later.

"It's coming straight down as though it meant business," she muttered. "I'm liable to have to break trail to get them out to feed to-morrow." Then, with a look of anxiety as the thought came to her, "If they ever 'piled up' in a draw they're so fat half of them would smother."

While the fire went out she sat thinking what

such a loss would mean to her—ruin, literally; and worse, for in addition she had an indebtedness to consider.

"It seems colder." She shivered, and straightening the soiled soogans, she spread her canvas coat over the grimy pillow, pulled off her riding boots and lay down with her clothes on. Before she fell asleep Kate remembered the eccentric travelers, and again wondered what possible business could bring them, but mostly she was thinking that she must not sleep soundly, although the collie was under the wagon to serve as ears for her.

While she slept, the moist featherlike flakes hardened to jagged crystals and rattled as they struck the canvas side of the wagon with a sound like gravel. The top swayed and loose belts rattled, but inside Kate lay motionless, breathing regularly in a profound and dreamless sleep. Underneath the wagon the dog rolled himself in a tighter ball and whimpered softly as the temperature lowered.

Exactly as though an unseen hand had shaken her violently, she sat bolt upright and listened. Instantly she was aware that the character of the storm had changed, but it was not that which had aroused her; it was the faint tinkle of bells which told her that the sheep were leaving the bed-ground. Her alert subconscious mind had conveyed the intelligence before even the dog heard and warned her. He now barked violently as she sprang out of bed and groped for the matches.

While she pulled on her boots, and a pair of Bowers's arctics she had noticed when sweeping, and slipped on her coat and buttoned it, the tinkle grew louder and she knew that the sheep were passing the wagon. She flung on her hat, snatched up the lantern and opened the door. The lantern flickered and she

gasped when she stepped out on the wagon tongue and a blast struck her.

"I'm in for it," she said between her teeth as she ran in the direction of the bells, the dog leaping and barking vociferously beside her.

The wagon disappeared instantly, the blizzard swirled about her and the flickering lantern was only a tiny glowworm in the blackness which enveloped her. She tripped over buried sagebrush, falling frequently, picking herself up to run on, calling, urging the dog to get ahead and turn the leaders.

"Way 'round 'em, Shep! Way 'round 'em, boy!" she pleaded. But the dog, half-trained and bewildered, ran only a little way, to return and fawn upon her as though apologetic for his uselessness.

There was no thought or fear for herself in her mind as she ran—she thought only of the sheep that were drifting rapidly before the storm, now they were well started, and she could tell by the rocks rolling from above her that they were making their way out of the gulch to the flat open country.

If only she could get ahead and turn them before they split up and scattered she could perhaps hold them until morning. Was it long until morning, she wondered? Breathless, exhausted from climbing and floundering and stumbling, the full fury of the blizzard struck her when she reached the top. The driving ice particles stung her skin and eyeballs when she turned to face it, the wind carried her soothing calls from her lips as she uttered them, her skirt whipped about her as though it would soon be in ribbons, and then with a leap and a flicker the flame went out in the smoke-blackened chimney, leaving her in darkness.

There was a panic-stricken second as she stood, a single human atom in the howling white death about

her but it passed quickly. She dreaded the physical suffering which experience told her would come when her body cooled and the wind penetrated her garments, yet there was no feeling of self-pity. It was all a part of the business and would come to any herder. The sheep were the chief consideration, and she never doubted but that she could endure it somehow until daylight.

"I've got to keep moving or I'll freeze solid," she told herself practically, and added between her set teeth with a grim whimsicality:

"Be a man, Kate Prentice! It's part of the price of success and you've got to pay it!"

Kate knew that hourly she was getting farther from the wagon as the sheep drifted and she followed. But daylight would bring surcease of suffering—she had only to endure and keep moving. So she stamped her feet and swung her arms, tied her handkerchief over her ears, rubbed her face with snow when absence of feeling told her it was freezing, and prayed for morning. Surely the storm was too severe to be a long one—it would slacken when daylight came, very likely, and then she could quickly get her bearings. She thought this over and over, and over and over again monotonously, while somehow the interminable hours of dumb misery passed.

Daylight! Daylight! And when the first leaden light came she was afraid to believe it. It was faint, just enough to show that somewhere the sun was shining, yet her chilled blood stirred hopefully. But there was no warmth in the dawn, the storm did not abate, and at an hour which she judged to be around nine o'clock she was able to make out only the sheep in her immediate vicinity, snow encrusted, huddled together with heads lowered, and drifting, always

drifting. She had no notion where she was, and to leave the sheep was to lose them. No, she must have patience and patience and more patience. At noon it would lighten surely—it nearly always did—and she had only to hold out a little longer.

The top of the sagebrush made black dots on the white surface, and there were comparatively bare places where she dared sit down and rest a few moments, but mostly it was drifts now—drifts where she floundered and the sheep sunk down and stood stupidly until pushed forward by those behind them.

Twelve o'clock came and there was no change save that the drifts were higher and she could see a little farther into the white wilderness.

"What if—what if—" she gulped, for the thought brought a contraction of the throat muscles that made swallowing difficult. "What if there were twenty-four more of it!" Could she stand it? She was tired to exhaustion with walking, with the strain of resisting the cold, and the all-night vigil—weak, too, with hunger.

Was she to become another of those that the first chinook uncovered? One of the already large army that have paid with their lives in just such circumstances for their loyalty, or their bad judgment? After all she had gone through to reach the goal she had set for herself was she to go out like this—like a common herder who had no thought or ambition beyond the debauch when he drew his wages?

When the dimming light told her the afternoon was waning, and then indications of darkness and another night of torture, despair filled her. Numb, hungry, her vitality at low ebb, she doubted her ability to weather it. Was she being punished, she wondered, for protesting against the life the Fates

appeared to have mapped out for her? Was this futile inane end coming to her because since that day when she had stood looking down upon Prouty and vowed to succeed she had fought and struggled and struck back, instead of meekly acknowledging herself crushed and beaten? Had she shaken her fist at the Almighty in so doing, when she should have bowed her head and folded her hands in resignation? She did not know; in her despair and bewilderment she lost all logic, all perspective; she knew only that in spite of the exhaustion of her body her spirit was still defiant and protesting.

She spread out her hands in supplication, raising her face to the pitiless sky while needlelike particles stung her eyeballs, and she cried despairingly:

"Oh, Uncle Joe, where are you? Is this the end of me—Katie Prentice? Is this all I was born for—just to live through heartaches and hardships, and then to drop down and die like an animal without knowing happiness or success or anything I've worked and longed and prayed for? Oh, Uncle Joe, where are you?"

The wail that the wind carried over the desert was plaintive, minor, like the cry that had reached him when she sought him in the darkness in that other crisis. She herself thought of it, but then he had responded promptly, and with the sound of his voice there had come a sense of safety and security.

She stood motionless thinking of it, the snow beating into her upturned face, the wind whipping her skirts about her. Then a feeling of exultation came to her—an exultation that was of the mind and spirit, so tangible that it sent over her a glow that was physical, creeping like a slow warm tide from her toes to the tips of her numb fingers. Even as she marveled it vanished—a curious trick of the

imagination she regarded it—but it left her with a feeling of courage; inexplicably it had roused her will to a determination to fight for her life with the last ounce of her strength, and so long as there was a heart beat in her body.

The time came, however, when this moment of transport and resolution seemed so long ago that it was like some misty incident of her childhood. Her body, as when a jaded horse lashed to a gallop reaches a stage where it drops to a walk from which no amount of punishment can rouse it, was refusing to respond to the spur of her will. It became an effort to walk, to swing her arms and stamp her feet, to make any brisk movement that kept the circulation going. She knew what it portended, yet was unable to make greater resistance against the lethargy of cold and exhaustion.

The dog was still with her, close at her heels, and she pulled off her gauntlets clumsily, the act requiring a tremendous effort of will, and tried to warm her fingers in the long hair of its body; but she felt no sensation of heat and she replaced the gloves with the same effort.

The second night was full upon her now—a night so black that she could feel the storm, but not see it. At intervals she experienced a sense of detachment—as if she were a disembodied spirit, lonely, buffeted in a white hell of torture.

Usually the faint tinkle of a sheep bell recalled her, but each time the sound had less meaning for her, and the sheep seemed less and less important. She was staggering, her knees had an absurd fashion of giving way beneath her, but she could not prevent them. She was approaching the end of her endurance; she could not resist much longer—this her dull rambling brain told her over and over. And

that curious phenomenon—that feeling of confidence and exultation that she had had away back—when was it? Long ago, anyhow—that had meant nothing —nothing—meant nothing. The Supreme Intelligence who had made things didn't know she existed, probably. Her coming was nothing; her going was nothing. And now she was stepping off of something —she was going down hill—down hill—the first gulch she had found in her wanderings. It was full of drifts, likely she'd stumble in one and lie there—it was tiresome to keep going, and it made no difference to anybody. Then she stumbled and fell to the bottom, prone, her arms outstretched, the briars of a wild-rose bush tearing her cheek as she lay face downward in the center of it. But she did not know it —she was comfortable, very comfortable, and she could as well lie there a little while—a little while—

Then somewhere a querulous voice was saying:

"I told you the picture would be overexposed when you were takin' it. You'll never listen to me."

A deeper voice answered:

"The light was stronger than I thought; but, anyway, it's a humdinger of a negative." Then, sharply, "Sh-ss-sh! What was that, Honey?"

A silence fell instantly.

"Honey!" Kate had a notion that she smiled, though her white face did not alter its expression. Her tongue moved thickly, "I like that name, Hughie."

Her collie whimpered and scratched again at the door of the wagon. The traveling photographer pushed it open and the animal sprang inside, leaping from one to the other in his gratitude.

"It's a sheep dog!" the man cried in consternation. "There's a herder lost somewhere."

"Can we do anything—such a night?" the old

woman asked doubtfully. “Can anyone be alive in it?”

“Light the lantern—quick! Maybe I can track the dog back before the snow fills them. He might be down within a stone’s throw of the wagon.” Snatching the lantern from her hand he admonished his wife as he stepped out into the wilderness:

“You-all keep hollerin’ so I can hear you. I kin git lost mighty easy.”

The light became a blur almost instantly, but he was not fifty feet from the wagon when he shouted:

“I got him!” Then—his voice shrilled in astonishment—“Sufferin’ Saints! It’s a woman!”

CHAPTER XV

ONE MORE WHIRL

Mr. Toomey folded his comfortable bathrobe over his new pajamas and tied the silken cord and tassel, remarking casually:

“I think we’ll have breakfast here this morning.”

The flowing sleeve of Mrs. Toomey’s pink silk negligee fell away from her bare arm as she stood arranging her hair before the wide-topped dresser of

Circassian walnut that looked so well against a background of pale gray wall paper with a delicate pink border.

"They charge extra," she reminded him.

Toomey was already at the telephone.

"Whole ones? Certainly—and Floridas—be particular. Eggs—soft to medium. Toast for two, without butter. And coffee? Of course, coffee. Send a paper with it, will you?"

As he hung up the receiver, "This is our last breakfast on earth, Old Dear—we're going home to-morrow."

Mr. Toomey repaired to the adjoining bathroom with its immaculate porcelain and tiling, where he inspected his chin critically in the shaving mirror and commented upon the rapid growth of his beard, which he declared became tropical in a temperate climate.

"Just to be warm and not have to carry ashes—it's heavenly!" ecstatically sighed Mrs. Toomey.

"Forget it!" laconically. "What makes 'em so slow with that order?" Mr. Toomey lighted a gold-tipped cigarette and paced the floor impatiently.

Mrs. Toomey could not entirely rid herself of the notion that she was dreaming. A lace petticoat hanging over the back of a chair and a brocaded pink corset over another contributed to the illusion. She could not yet believe they were hers, any more than was the twenty-dollar creation in the hat box on the shelf in the closet.

During their week's stay in Chicago Mrs. Toomey had gone about mostly in a state which resembled the delightful languor of hasheesh, untroubled, irresponsible, save when something reminded her that after Chicago—the cataclysm. Yet she had not yielded easily to Toomey's importunities. It had

required all his powers of persuasion to overcome her scruples, her ingrained thrift and natural prudence.

"We need the change; we've lived too long in a high altitude, and we're nervous wrecks, both of us," he had argued. "We should get in touch with things and the right kind of people. A trip like this is an investment—that's the way you want to look at it. If you want to win anything in this world you've got to take chances. It's the plungers, not the plodders, who make big winnings. I gotta hunch that I'm going to get in touch with somebody that'll take an interest in me."

Left to herself, Mrs. Toomey would have paid something on their most urgent debts and bought prudently, but she told herself that Jap was as likely to be right as she was, and the argument that he might meet some one who would be of benefit to him was convincing; so finally she had consented. The sense of unreality and wonder which Mrs. Toomey experienced when she saw her trunk going was surpassed only by the astonishment of the neighbors, who all but broke the glass in their various windows as they pressed against it to convince themselves that the sight was not an optical illusion.

The Toomeys had traveled in a stateroom, over Mrs. Toomey's feeble protest, and the best room with bath in one of the best hotels in Chicago was not too good for Mr. Toomey. They had thought to stay three weeks, with reasonable economy, and return with a modest bank balance, but the familiar environment was too much for Toomey, who dropped back into his old way of living as though he never had been out of it, while the new clothes and the brightness of the atmosphere of prosperity after the years of

anxiety and poverty drugged Mrs. Toomey's conscience and caution into a profound slumber—the latter to be awakened only when, counting the banknotes in her husband's wallet, she was startled to discover that they had little more than enough to pay their hotel bill and return to Prouty in comfort. If either of them remembered the source from which their present luxurious enjoyment came, neither mentioned it.

The breakfast and service this morning were perfect and Mrs. Toomey sighed contentedly as she crumpled her napkin and reached for the paper.

"There's been a terrible blizzard west of the Mississippi," she murmured from the depths of the *Journal*.

"I'm glad we've missed a little misery," Toomey replied carelessly. "It'll mean late trains and all the rest of it. We'd better stay over until they're running again on schedule."

Mrs. Toomey ignored, if she heard, the suggestion, and continued:

"It says that the stock, and the sheep in particular, have died like flies on the range, and scores of herders have been frozen."

"There's more herders where they came from." Toomey brushed the ashes from his cigarette into the excavated grapefruit, and yawned and stretched like a cat on its cushion.

"Think of something pleasant—what are we going to do this evening?"

"We mustn't do anything," Mrs. Toomey protested quickly. "If we spend any more we will have to get a check cashed, and that might be awkward, since we know no one; besides, we can't afford it. Let's have a quiet evening."

"A quiet evening!" Toomey snorted. "That's my

idea of hell. I'll tell you about me, Old Dear—I'm going to have one more whirl if I have to walk back to Prouty, and you might as well go with me."

Since he was determined, Mrs. Toomey arrived at the same conclusion also, for not only did she too shudder at the thought of a quiet evening, but her presence was more or less of a restraint upon his extravagant impulses. She endeavored to soothe her uneasiness by telling herself that they could make up for it by some economy in traveling. And just one more good play—what, after all, did it really matter?

The theater was only four blocks from the hotel, but, as a matter of course, Toomey called a taxicab. These modern conveniences were an innovation that had come during his absence from "civilization" and his delight in them was not unlike the ecstasy of a child riding the flying horses. It availed Mrs. Toomey nothing to declare that she preferred exercise and they arrived at the theater in a taxi. At sight of the box office Toomey forgot his promise to buy inexpensive seats, but asked for the best obtainable.

Carefree and debonair, between acts Mr. Toomey strolled in the lobby smoking and looking so very much in his element that Mrs. Toomey temporarily forgot her disquietude in being proud of him. His dinner jacket was not the latest cut, but after giving it much consideration they had decided that it was not far enough off to be noticeable, and how very handsome and assured he looked as he sauntered with the confident air of a man who had only to entertain a whim to gratify it.

Such is the psychology of clothes and the effect of environment upon some temperaments that that was the way Mr. Toomey felt about it. Prouty and importunate creditors did not exist for him. This condition of mental intoxication continued when the

play was over and, fearful, Mrs. Toomey spoke hastily of going home immediately.

"I'm hungry," he asserted. "We'll go somewhere first and eat something."

"Let's have sandwiches sent up to the room," she pleaded.

"Why not a bow-wow from the night-lunch cart I noticed in the alley? I like the feeling of the mustard running between my fingers," derisively.

"Oh, Jap, we oughtn't to—we really ought not!"

But he might have been deaf, for all the attention he paid to her earnest protests as he turned into one of the brilliantly lighted restaurants which he had previously patronized and that he liked particularly. There was a glitter in his eyes which increased her uneasiness, and a recklessness in his manner that was not reassuring.

"I may go to my grave without ever seeing another lobster," he said as he ordered shellfish. "What will you have to drink?" while the waiter hovered.

"Nothing to-night," she replied, startled.

"Different here, Old Dear, I'm thirsty. The wine list, waiter."

That was the beginning. From the time the champagne and oysters arrived until long past midnight Mrs. Toomey experienced all the sensations that come to the woman who must sit passive and watch her husband pass through the several stages of intoxication. And in addition, she had the knowledge that he could less afford the money he was spending than the waiter who served him.

In high spirits at first, with his natural drollness, stimulated to brilliancy, his sallies brought smiles from those at adjoining tables. Then he became in turn boastful, arrogant, argumentative, thick of

speech, finally, and slow of comprehension, but obstinate always.

“Goin’ back jail 'morra, Ol' Dear—goin’ finish out my life sentence,” when she reminded him of the lateness of the hour and her weariness, and he resented her interference so fiercely when she countermanded an order that she dared not repeat it.

“You lis'en me, waiter, thish my party. Might think I was town drunkard—village sot way my wife tryin’ flag me.” Mrs. Toomey colored painfully at the attention he attracted.

He turned to a late comer who had seated himself at a small table across the narrow aisle from them. “My wife’s a great disappointment to me—no sport—never was, never will be. 'Morra,” addressing himself to the stranger exclusively, “goin’ back to hear the prairie dogs chatter—goin’ listen to the sagebrush tick—back one thousan’ miles from an oyster—”

“Jap!” Mrs. Toomey interrupted desperately, “we must be going. Everyone’s leaving.”

“We’ll be closing shortly,” the waiter hinted.

Toomey blinked at the check he placed before him.

“Can’t see whether tha’s twenty dollars, or two hundred dollars or two thousand dollars.”

The waiter murmured the amount, but not so softly but that Mrs. Toomey paled when she heard it. He had not enough to pay it, she was sure of it, for while he had brought from the room an amount that would have been ample for any ordinary theater supper, wine had not been in his calculations.

Mrs. Toomey looked on anxiously while he produced the contents of his pocket.

“Sorry, sir, but it isn’t enough,” said the waiter, after counting the notes he tossed upon the plate.

Toomey found the discovery amusing.

“You s'prise me,” he chuckled.

“Sorry, sir, but—” the waiter persisted.

With a swift transition of mood Toomey demanded haughtily:

“Gue'sh you don' know who I am?”

“No, sir.”

Toomey tapped the lapel of his jacket impressively with his forefinger.

“I’m Jasper Toomey of Prouty, Wyoming.”

The waiter received the information without flinching.

“Call up the Blackstone and they’ll tell you I’ll be in to-morra an’ shettle.” He wafted the waiter away grandly, that person shrugging a dubious shoulder as he vanished. “They’ll tell 'im the f'ancial standin’ of Jasper Toomey—shirtingly.”

The waiter returned almost immediately.

“The hotel knows you only as a guest, sir.”

“Thish is insult—d‘lib’rate insult.” Mr. Toomey rose to his feet and stood unsteadily. “Send manager to me immedially—immedially!”

“He’s busy, sir,” replied the waiter with a touch of impatience, “but he said you’d have to settle before leaving.”

Mrs. Toomey, crimson with mortification and panic-stricken as visions of a patrol wagon and station house rose before her, interrupted when Toomey would have continued to argue.

“Jap, stay here while I go to the hotel—I can take a taxi and be back in a few minutes.”

Toomey refused indignantly. He declared that not only would this be a reflection upon his honesty, but equivalent to pawning him.

“How’d I know,” he demanded shrewdly, “that you’d ever come back to redeem me?”

As Mrs. Toomey cast a look of despair about, her

eyes met those of the man who was sitting alone at the table across the aisle. Even in her distress she had observed him when he had entered, for his height, breadth of shoulder, erectness of carriage—together with the tan and a certain unconventional freedom of movement which, to the initiated, proclaimed him an outdoor westerner, made him noticeable.

He was fifty—more, possibly—with hair well grayed and the face of a man to whom success had not come easily. Yet that he had succeeded was not to be doubted, for neither his face nor bearing were those of a man who could be, or had been, defeated. His appearance—substantial, unostentatious—inspired confidence in his integrity and confidence in his ability to cope with any emergency. The lines in his strong face suggested something more than the mere marks of obstacles conquered, of battles lost and won in the world of business—they came from a deeper source than surface struggles. His mouth, a trifle austere, had a droop of sadness, and in his calm gray eyes there was the look of understanding which comes not only from wide experience but from suffering.

Mrs. Toomey had the feeling that he comprehended perfectly every emotion she was experiencing—her fright, her mortification, her disgust at Jap's maudlin speech and foolish appearance. But it was something more than these things which had caused her to look at him frequently. He reminded her of some one, yet she could not identify the resemblance. In their exchange of glances she now caught a sympathetic flash; then he rose immediately and came over.

"May I be of service, brother?" As he spoke he indicated the small button he wore which

corresponded to another on Toomey's waistcoat. With a slight inclination of the head towards Mrs. Toomey, "If you'll allow me—"

The relieved waiter promptly fled with the note he laid on the plate.

"These situations are a little awkward for the moment," he added, smiling slightly.

"Mighty nice of you, Old Top!" Toomey shook hands with him. "Lemme buy you somethin'. Wha'll you have?"

The stranger declined and thanked him.

Mrs. Toomey expressed her gratitude incoherently.

"You must leave your name and address; we'll mail you a check to-morrow."

"I always stay at the Auditorium. Mail addressed to me there will be forwarded." He laid his visiting card upon the table.

Toomey placed a detaining hand upon his arm as he turned from the table.

"Look here! Won't let you go till you promise come make us a visit—stay month—stay year—stay rest o' your life—la'sh string hanging' out for you. Pure air, Swizzerland of America, an' greatest natural resources—"

The stranger detached himself gently.

"I appreciate your hospitality," he replied courteously. "Who knows?" to Mrs. Toomey, "I might some day look in on you—I've never been out in that section of the country."

With another bow he paid his own account and left the restaurant.

"Thoroughbred!" declared Toomey enthusiastically. "Old Dear, I made a hit with him."

Mrs. Toomey was staring after the erect commanding figure.

She read again the name on the card she held in her fingers and murmured with an expression of speculative wonder:

"The spelling's different but—Prentiss! and she looks enough like him to be his daughter."

CHAPTER XVI

STRAWS

It was spring. The sagebrush had turned from gray to green and the delicate pink of the rock roses showed here and there on the hillsides. The crisp rattle of cottonwood leaves was heard when the wind stirred through the gulches, and along the water course the drooping plumes of the willows were pale green and tender. It was the season of hope, of energy revived and new ambitions—the months of rejuvenation, when the blood runs faster and the heart beats higher.

But, alas, the joyful finger of spring touched the citizens of Prouty lightly. Worn out and jaded with the strain of a hard winter and waiting for something to happen, they did not feel their pulses greatly accelerated by mere sunshine. It took more than a

rock rose and a pussy willow to color the world for them. June might as well be January, if one is financially embarrassed.

The suspicion was becoming a private conviction that when Prouty acquired anything beyond a blacksmith shop and a general merchandise store it got more than it needed. Conceived and born in windy optimism, it had no stamina. The least observant could see that, like a fiddler crab's, the progress of the town was backward. But these truths were admitted only in moments of drunken candor or deepest depression, for to hint that Prouty had no future was as treasonable as criticising the government in a crisis. So the citizens went on boasting with dogged cheerfulness and tried to unload their holdings on any chance stranger.

A trickle of water came through the ditch that had been scratched in the earth from the mountains to some three miles beyond Prouty. Nearly every head-gate the length of it had been the scene of a bloody battle where the ranchers fought each other with irrigating shovels for their rights. And, after all, it was seldom worth the gore and effort, for the trickle generally stopped altogether in August when they needed it. If the flow did not stop at the intake it broke out somewhere below and flooded somebody. If the sides did not give way because of the moisture loosening the soil, the rats and prairie dogs conspired to ruin Prouty by tunneling into the banks. And if by a miracle "the bone and sinew" of the community raised one cutting of alfalfa, the proceeds went to the Security State Bank, or Abram Pantin, to keep up their 12 per cent. interest.

When the route to the Coast was shortened by one of the state's railroads and Prouty found itself on the cutoff, it was delirious with joy, but it regained its

balance when the fast trains not only did not stop, but seemed to speed up instead of slackening; while the local which brought any prospective investor deposited him in a frame of mind which was such that it was seldom possible to remove his prejudice against the country.

These were the conditions one spring day when the buds that had not already burst were bursting and Mr. Teeters dashed into Prouty. “Dashed” is not too strong a word to describe his arrival, for the leaders of his four-horse team were running away and the wheelers were, at least, not lagging. It was obvious to those familiar with Mr. Teeters’ habits that he was en route to the station to meet incoming passengers. This was proclaimed by his conveyance and regalia. He wore a well-filled cartridge belt and six-shooter, while a horse hair watch chain draped across a buckskin waistcoat, ornate with dyed porcupine quills, gave an additional Western flavor to his costume. His beaded gauntlets reached to his elbow, and upon occasions like the present he wore moccasins. There was a black silk handkerchief around the neck of his red flannel shirt, and if the rattlesnake skin that encircled his Stetson did not bring a scream from the lady dudes when they caught sight of it, Teeters would feel keenly disappointed.

“I can wrangle dudes to a fare-ye-well and do good at it,” Teeters had declared to the Major. And it was no idle boast, apparently, for Teeters stood alone, supreme and unchallenged, the champion dude-wrangler of the country.

“It’s a kind of talent—a gift, you might say—like breakin’ horses or tamin’ wild animals,” he was wont to reply modestly when questioned by those who followed his example and failed lamentably. “You

got to be kind and gentle with dudes, yet firm with them. Onct they git the upper hand of you they's no livin' with 'em."

Five years had brought their changes to Teeters as well as to Prouty.

He was still faithful to Miss Maggie Taylor, but a subtle difference had come into his attitude towards her mother. He was less ingratiating in his manner, less impressed by the importance of her father, the distinguished undertaker; less interested in her recitals of her musical triumphs when she had played the pipe organ in Philadelphia. Her habit of singing hymns and humming which had annoyed him even in the days when he was merely tolerated, actually angered him.

Now, as the four horses attached to the old-fashioned stagecoach which had been resurrected from a junk-heap behind a blacksmith shop, repaired and shipped to the Scissor Outfit as being the last word in the picturesque discomfort for which dudes hankered, the onlookers observed with keen interest as the Dude Wrangler tore past the Prouty House, "There must be a bunch of millionaires coming in on the local."

The horses kept on past the station, but by throwing his weight on one rein Teeters ran them over the flat in a circle until they were winded. Then he brought them dripping and exhausted to the platform, where he said civilly to a bystander, indicating a convenient pickhandle:

"If you'll jest knock the 'off' leader down if he bats an eyelash when the train pulls in, I'll be much obliged to you."

As is frequently the way with millionaires, few of those who emerged from the day coach sandwiched in between a coal and freight car, looked their

millions. It was evident that they had reserved their better clothing for occasions other than traveling, since to the critical eyes of the spectators they looked as though they were dressed for one of the local functions known as a “Hard Times Party.”

The present party of millionaire folk seemed to be led by a bewhiskered gentleman in plaid knickerbockers and puttees, who had travelled all the way from Canton, Ohio, in hobnailed shoes in order instantly to be ready for mountain climbing.

To a man they trained their cameras upon Teeters, who scowled, displayed his teeth slightly, and looked ferocious and desperate enough to scare a baby.

Then his expression changed to astonishment as his eyes fell upon a passenger that was one of three who, slow in collecting their luggage, were just descending. A second look convinced him, and he not only let out a bloodcurdling yell of welcome, but inadvertently slackened the lines that had been taut as fiddle strings over the backs of the horses. The leaders jumped over “the Innocent Bystander” before he had time to use his pickhandle, reared and fell on their backs, where they lay kicking the harness to pieces.

“You miser'ble horse-stealin’, petty larceny, cache-robbin’—” just in time Teeters remembered that there were ladies present and curtailed his greeting to Hughie Disston. “Why didn’t you let me know you was comin’?” he ended.

“Wanted to surprise you, Teeters,” said Disston, dropping the bags he carried.

“Yo shore done it!” replied Teeters emphatically, casting an eye at the writhing mass of horses. “It’ll take me an hour or more to patch that harness!”

“In that event,” said the guest from Canton, Ohio,

with a relief that was unmistakable, “it were better, perhaps, that we should go to the hotel and wait for you.”

“It were,” replied Teeters. “It’s that big yella building' with the red trimmin’s.” He pointed toward the town with his fringed and beaded gauntlet. “I’ll be along directly, and if I kin, I’ll stop and git you.”

“Isn’t he a character!” exclaimed a lady in an Alpine hat, delightedly.

Teeters wrapped the lines around the brake and descended leisurely.

“Set on their heads, Old Timers”—to the volunteers who were endeavoring to disentangle the struggling horses—and shook hands with Disston.

“This is Mrs. Rathburn and Miss Rathburn, Clarence—”

Mr. Teeters bowed profoundly, and as he removed his hat his bang fell in his eyes, so that he looked like a performing Shetland pony.

“Much obliged to meet you, ladies,” deferentially. Then to Disston, darkly:

“I’ll take that from you onct, or twict, maybe,—but if you call me Clarence three times I’ll cut your heart out.”

Disston grinned understandingly.

Toomey was among those who went to the Prouty House to look at the “bunch of millionaires” waiting on the veranda, and his surprise equalled Teeters’ at seeing Disston.

“Say, Hughie—I got a deal on that’s a pippin—a pippin. There isn’t a flaw in it!” said Toomey confidentially.

“Glad to hear it, Jap,” Disston replied cordially, and presented him to Mrs. Rathburn and her daughter.

The mother was a small woman of much

distinction of appearance. A well-poised manner, together with snow-white hair worn in a smooth moderate roll away from her face, and very black eyes that had a rather hard brilliancy, made her a person to be noticed. Having engineered her own life successfully, her sole interest now lay in engineering that of her daughter.

The last place Mrs. Rathburn would have selected to spend a summer was an isolated ranch in the sagebrush, but propinquity, she knew, had done wonders in friendships that had seemed hopelessly platonic, so, when Hugh urged them to join him, and endeavored to impart some of his own enthusiasm for the country, she assented.

In another way the daughter was not less noticeable than the mother, though more typically southern, with her soft drawl and appealing manner. Her skin had been so carefully protected since infancy that it was of a dazzling whiteness that might never have known the sunshine. Her feet were conspicuously small, her hands white, perfectly kept and helpless. Nature had given her the bronze hair that dyers strive for, and her brown eyes corresponded. She was as unlike the other alert self-sufficient young persons of the “millionaire bunch”—who were either dressed for utilitarian purposes only, or in finery of a past mode as could well be imagined.

Miss Rathburn had managed to remain immaculate, while their faces were smudged and streaked with soot and car dust, their hats awry and hair dishevelled. Cool, serene, with a filmy veil thrown back from her hat brim, she rocked idly, utterly unconscious of the eyes of the populace.

“The scenery is grand—Wagnerian! Out here one forgets one’s ego, doesn’t one?” the lady in the

Alpine hat was saying when, leading the party like a bewhiskered gander, the gentleman from Canton, Ohio, dashed to the end of the veranda with his camera ready for action.

“What a picturesque character!” she cried ecstatically, following. “And see how beau-tee-fully she manages those horses!”

The cameras clicked as a young woman sitting very erect on the high spring seat of a wagon and looking straight ahead of her came past the hotel at a brisk trot, holding the reins over four spirited horses.

Disston straightened and asked quickly:

“Who’s that, Jap? It looks like—”

“Mormon Joe’s Kate,” Toomey finished. His tone had a sneer in it. “You were very good friends when you left, I remember.”

The eyes of both Mrs. Rathburn and her daughter showed surprise when Disston colored.

“That we are not now is her fault entirely,” he answered. “How is she?”

Toomey shrugged a shoulder.

“If you mean physically—I should say her health was perfect. No one ever sees her. She lives out in the hills alone with her sheep and a couple of herders.”

“How very extraordinary!” Miss Rathburn observed languidly.

“Plucky, I call it,” Disston answered.

“They’ve named her the 'Sheep Queen of Bitter Crick.'” Toomey laughed disagreeably.

“It’s curious you’ve never mentioned her, Hughie, when you’ve told us about everyone else in the country.”

“I didn’t think you’d be interested, Beth,” he answered stiffly.

Toomey changed the subject and the incident

seemed forgotten, but Mrs. Rathburn's eyes rested upon Hugh frequently with a look that was inquiring and speculative.

Kate's heart always hardened and her backbone stiffened involuntarily the moment she had her first glimpse of Prouty. Invariably it had this effect upon her and to-day was no different from any other. Her eyes narrowed and her nerves tightened as though to meet the attack of an advancing enemy when at the edge of the bench, before she set the brake for the steep descent, she looked upon the town below her.

While her own feeling never altered and her attitude remained as implacable as the day she had sworn vengeance upon it, the bearing of the town had changed considerably. With cold inscrutable eyes she had watched open hostility and active enmity become indifference. Engrossed in its own troubles, Prouty had forgotten her, save when one of her rare visits reminded it of her existence. The comments upon such occasions were mostly of a humorous nature, pertaining to the "Sheep Queen," a title which had been bestowed upon her in derision.

They heard exaggerated accounts of her losses through storms and coyotes, knew that she acted as camptender and herder when necessary, continued to live in a sheep wagon, and they presumed that she was still deeply in debt to the mysterious person or persons from whom she had obtained money at the time the bank threatened foreclosure.

She was seldom mentioned except in connection with the murder of Mormon Joe, a story with which the inhabitants occasionally entertained strangers. In other words, she was of no consequence socially or financially.

Looking neither to the right nor to the left as she

swung her leaders around the corner, yet no sign of the town's retrogression since her last visit escaped her—any more than did the mean small-town smirk upon the faces of a group of doorway loafers, who commented humorously upon the "Sheep Queen's" arrival.

Yet there were tiny straws which showed that the wind was quartering. A few persons inclined their heads slightly in greeting, while the deference due a customer who paid cash was creeping into the manner of Scales of the Emporium. And there were others.

These small things she noted with satisfaction. It was the kind of coin she demanded in payment for isolation and hardships. She did not want their friendship; she wanted merely their recognition. To force from those who had gone out of their way to insult and belittle her the tacit admission of her success was a portion of the task she had set herself. Her purpose, and the means of attaining it were as clear in her mind as a piece of war strategy.

Kate gauged her position with intuitive exactness, and could quite impersonally see herself as Prouty saw her. She had no hallucinations on that score and knew that she was a long way yet from the fulfillment of her ambition. When she had reached a point where to decry her success was to proclaim her disparager envious or absurd, she would be satisfied; until then, she considered herself no more successful than the failures about her who yet found room to laugh at her.

Kate now shrugged a shoulder imperceptibly as she noted that another store building was empty. So the tailor had flitted? She recalled the Western adage concerning towns with no Jews in them and smiled faintly. Two doors below, still another shop was

vacant. “To Let” signs were not synonymous with prosperity. Hiram Butefish supported his back against the door jamb in an attitude which did not suggest any pressing business. Mrs. Sudds, who formerly had passed Kate with a face that was ostentatiously blank, now stared at her with a certain inquisitive amiability. Major Prouty sitting in front of the post office waved a hand at her that was comparatively friendly. Oh, yes—the wind was beginning to blow from a new direction, undoubtedly.

She stopped in front of the bank, where she kept an account only sufficiently large to pay her current expenses. She had set the brake and was wrapping the lines about them when a curious sound attracted her attention. Looking up she saw approaching the first automobile in Prouty, driven by Mrs. Abram Pantin. Beside her, elated and self-conscious, was Mrs. Jasper Toomey. Kate got down quickly to hold the heads of the leaders, who were snorting at the monster. The machine was of a type which gave the driver the appearance of taking a sitz bath in public. Mrs. Pantin when driving sat up so straight that she looked like a prairie dog. Mrs. Toomey unconsciously imitated her, so they looked like two prairie dogs out for an airing—a thought which occurred to Kate as she watched the approaching novelty.

The sheep woman had not met Mrs. Toomey since the day when the final blow had been given to her faith in human nature. Now while Kate’s face was masklike she felt a keen curiosity as to how Time was using the woman who had had so much to do with the molding of her character and future.

She saw Mrs. Toomey’s mental start when the latter recognized her, and the momentary hesitation before she drew back far enough not to be seen by

Mrs. Pantin, and inclined her head slightly. It was the languid air of a great lady acknowledging the existence of the awed peasantry.

The incident filled Kate with a white fury that was like one of her old-time rages. Yet she was helpless to resent it. Her resentment would mean nothing to anybody, even if she had any way of showing it. It was quite useless at the moment for her to tell herself that Mrs. Toomey was only a pitiful inconsequential little coward, whose action was in keeping with her nature. She knew it to be true, yet she was stirred to her depths by the insult, and if anything more had been needed to keep her steadfast to her purpose, the incident would have accomplished it. Sensitive to the extent of morbidness—it was impossible for her to ignore the occurrence.

Kate's hands were trembling with the violence of her emotions as she tied a slip noose in a leather strap and secured the horses to the railing. She made a pretence of examining the harness in order to regain sufficient self-possession to transact her business in the bank with the impersonal coolness to which she had schooled herself when it was necessary to enter that institution.

Mr. Vernon Wentz at his near-mahogany desk was deep in thought when Kate passed him. He bowed absently and she responded in the same manner. It occurred to Mr. Wentz that a time when everyone else was either borrowing, or endeavoring to, she was one of the few customers whose balances appeared ample for their expenses.

The banker's attitude since his interview with Kate and her subsequent astonishing and unexpected payment of the mortgage had been one of polite aloofness. That matter was still a mystery which he

hoped to solve sometime. But long ago Mr. Wentz had learned that the life of a banker is not the free independent life of a laundryman, and that with a competitor like Abram Pantin forever harassing him by getting the cream of the loans, it was sometimes necessary to make concessions and conciliations.

As Kate was leaving, he arose and extended a hand over the railing.

"We don't see you often, Miss Prentice."

She showed no surprise at his action and extended her own hand without either alacrity or hesitancy as she replied briefly:

"I seldom come to Prouty."

"I merely wished to say that if at any time we can accommodate you, do not hesitate to ask us." Mr. Wentz realized that he was laying himself open to an embarrassing reminder, and expected it, but Kate did not betray by so much as the flicker of an eyelid that she remembered when she had pleaded, not for money, but only for time to save herself from ruin.

"You are very kind." She bowed slightly.

"You are one of our most valued customers." Her reserve piqued him; it was a kind of challenge to his gallantry. "I hope—I trust you will allow us to show our appreciation in some way—if only a small favor."

"I don't need it."

"You are very fortunate to be in that position, the way times are at present. In that case," he smiled with the assurance of a man who had had his conquests, "I'll presume to ask one. We should be pleased—delighted to handle your entire account for you. You keep it—"

"In Omaha."

"Why not in Prouty?" ingratiatingly.

Kate did not answer immediately, but while she

returned the gaze of his melting brown eyes steadily she received a swift impression that for some reason deposits would be particularly welcome. There had been no eagerness or anxiety to suggest it, yet she had the notion strongly that the bank needed the money. Perhaps, she reasoned swiftly, the suspicion was born merely of her now habitual distrust of motives; nevertheless, it was there, to become a fixed opinion.

While she seemed to deliberate, Mr. Wentz's thoughts were of a different nature. If she were not so tanned and wore the clothes of civilization—she had the features, and, by George! she had a figure! These interesting mental comments were interrupted by a sudden dilation of Kate's pupils as though from some sudden mental excitement. The gray iris grew luminous, he noticed, while her face was flooded with color, as though she had been startled.

"I will consider it."

The answer was noncommittal, but the graceful sweeping gesture with which he stroked his mustache as she departed was one of satisfaction. Mr. Wentz had a notion that after looking at him for all these years the young woman had just really seen him.

The banker returned to his desk, opened a drawer and extracted a small mirror, in which he regarded himself surreptitiously. What was it about him—what one thing in particular, he wondered, that was so compelling that even a woman like this Kate Prentice must relent at his first sign of interest? Was it his appearance or his personality?

In the pleasing occupation of contemplating his own features and trying to answer these absorbing questions, Mr. Wentz forgot temporarily that Neifkins, in violation of the law governing such

matters, was in debt to the bank beyond the amount of his holdings as director, and behind with his interest—a condition which had disturbed the president not a little because it was so fraught with unpleasant possibilities.

CHAPTER XVII

EXTREMES MEET

Kate raised herself on an elbow and looked out through the open window above her bunk where the first streak of dawn was showing. The soft air was redolent of things growing and the pungent odor of sagebrush. The bush birds were chirping furiously; all the soul-stirring magic of spring in the foothills was in its perfection; but it conveyed nothing to Kate save the fact that another day was beginning in which to get through the work she had outlined.

She was like that now—practical, driving, sparing neither herself nor others—apparently without sentiment or any outside interest. Her sheep and that which pertained to them seemed to fill her whole horizon.

The interior of the wagon alone was sufficient to

disclose the change in Kate. As the growing light made the dim outlines clearer it brought out on the floor and side benches a promiscuous clutter that contained nothing suggesting a feminine occupant. There was no scrollwork in soap on the window now. On the contrary, the glass badly needed washing. No decorative advertisement, no bouquet above the mirror, or festal juniper thrust between the oak bows and the canvas. A pile of market reports and *Sheep Growers' Journals* replaced the fashion magazines, while the shelves that had contained romances and histories were filled with books on wool-growing.

The floor space and side benches were occupied by new horse shoes, a can of paint, sheep shears, a lard bucket filled with nails and staples, boxes of rifle ammunition, riding boots and arctics, a halter and a broken bridle.

It all said plainly that the wagon represented only a place for sleep and shelter, yet, since she had no other, it was home to the sheep woman.

Kate raised herself higher on her elbow and called sharply:

"Bowers?"

A sleepy response came from somewhere.

"It's daylight—hurry!"

Bowers's voice, plaintive but stronger, answered:

"I'd be ten pounds heavier if it wasn't for that word 'hurry.'"

Kate smiled faintly. Complaining and threatening to mutiny was to Bowers merely a form of recreation and Kate knew that nothing short of a charge of dynamite could blast Bowers loose from his beloved wagon. He spoke invariably of the ranch as "Our Outfit" and he could not have been more faithful if their interests had been identical, though he missed no occasion to declare that it robbed a man of his

self-respect to work for a woman.

The chief complaint of Kate's herders was against her brusque imperious manner and her exactions, which took no account of their physical limitations. Fatigue, weather, long hours without food or sleep under trying conditions, were never excuses to satisfy her for the slightest neglect of duty, or any error of judgment which worked to her disadvantage. She seemed to regard them as human machines and they felt it. All save Bowers obeyed without liking her.

"Headquarters" were still on the original homestead, but they had grown since they had consisted of Kate's sheep wagon, Mormon Joe's tepee and a ten-by-twelve cook tent. Now it looked like a canvas village when first seen through the willows, for there was a dining tent connected with the cook tent by a fly, and near it a commissary tent where were heaped supplies, saddles, harness and all that it was needful to keep under shelter, while around the tents was a semicircle of sheep wagons. There was a substantial horse corral, and across the creek the sheep-pens had tripled in size, with a row of well-built shearing-pens beside them. Under a long shed with a corrugated-iron roofing there were sacks of wool piled to a height which gave Kate a feeling of deep satisfaction each time she passed them.

Everything showed thrift, economy, a practical intelligence and a Spartan disregard for personal comfort. The camp was as devoid of luxuries and superfluities as an Indian village. And on a hillside where the afternoon sun lay longest there was a sunken grave enclosed in wire. Here Mormon Joe was turning to dust, unavenged, forgotten nearly, by all save a handful.

Kate felt that she had every reason to be satisfied

with her progress and to congratulate herself upon the judgment she had displayed in continuing to raise sheep for their fleece when the price of wool was nil, practically, and every discouraged grower in the state, including the astute Neifkins, was putting in “black-faces” that were better for mutton. Now a protective administration was advancing the price of wool, and when she sold she would have her reward for her courage. She had been the first to import a few of the coarser wool sheep from Canada and the experiment had proved that they were especially adapted to the rocky mountainous range of that section. The Rambouillets she purchased had kept fat where the merinos had lost weight on the same feed. The ewes had sheared on an average of close to twelve pounds and the bucks more than fifteen, a few as high as twenty-five. And now she wanted more of them.

Thus circumstances seemed to have diverted her tastes into new channels entirely. As she had once yearned for clothes, and companionship, and happiness, she now with the same intensity wanted sheep, and more sheep, and better sheep. Little by little, too, and unobtrusively, she was acquiring script land, lieu land, long-time leases, patented homesteads, and the water holes which controlled ranges. To do all this meant the elimination of every unnecessary expenditure and she denied herself cheerfully, wearing clothes that were no better than her herders', shabby sometimes to grotesqueness.

The coming autumn she would have old ewes and wether lambs to ship sufficient to cover her expenses, while the sale of her wool at present prices would enable her to grade up her herds to a point that would be approximately where she would have them. She had seen too many hard winters and short

ranges ever again to be over-sanguine, but she knew that unless some unprecedented loss came to her she was well on the way to the fulfillment of her ambition. A few good years and the "Sheep Queen of Bitter Creek" would no longer be a title of derision. But these thoughts were her secrets and she had no confidants. Bowers was the nearest approach to one, but even he knew nothing of the incentive which made her seemingly tireless herself and possessed of a driving energy that made all who worked for her fully earn their wages.

Bowers was preparing breakfast by lamplight when Kate clanged the triangle of iron to awaken two herders asleep in their "tarps" under the willows. They crawled out in the clothes in which they had slept, dishevelled and grumbling.

They breakfasted by lamplight, seated on benches on either side of the long table improvised from boards and cross-pieces of two-by-fours. There was no tablecloth and the dishes were of agate-ware as formerly. Kate ate hurriedly and in silence, but the usual airy persiflage went on between Bowers and the herders.

"It near froze ice this mornin'," Bowers observed by way of making conversation. "I was so cold that I had to shiver myself into a pressperation before I could get breakfast."

"I slept chilly all night," said Bunch, and added, looking askance at his erstwhile bed-fellow, "They ain't no more heat in Oleson than a rattler."

"Looks like you'd steal yurself a blanket somewhur," Bowers commented.

"I wouldn't a slept the fore part of last night anyhow," Bunch said pointedly.

"I hope I didn't keep you awake with my singin'?" Bowers's voice expressed a world of solicitude.

“Was that you makin’ that comical noise?” Bunch elevated his brows in astonishment. “I thought one of the horses was down, and chokin’.”

Bowers slammed a pyramid of pancakes upon the table.

“Why don’t you take a shovel, Bunch?” he demanded. “You’re losin’ time eatin’ with your knife and fingers.”

“These sweat-pads of yourn would be pretty fair if 'twant fur the lumps of sody a feller’s allus bitin’ into,” the herder commented.

“Maybe you’d ruther do the cookin’ so you kin git ’em to suit you,” Bowers retorted, nettled.

“Oh, I ain’t kickin’—I lived with Injuns a year and I kin eat anything.”

“You got manners like a pet 'coon,” Bowers eyed the herder with disfavor as that person shoved a cake into his mouth with one hand and reached for the molasses jug with the other.

Kate paid no attention to this amiable exchange of personalities, for while she ate with the men she seldom took part in the conversation. Now she said, rising:

“Stack the dishes, Bowers, and come over and help us.”

“Yes, Bowers,” Bunch mocked when Kate was well out of hearing, “come over and run down fifty or sixty sheep and wrastle a few three-hundred poun' bucks and drag around several wool sacks and halter-break that two-year-ol' colt while you’re restin’.”

Bowers resented instantly any criticism of Kate by her herders. But he himself saw and regretted the change in her. Occasionally he wished that he dared remind her of the old adage that “Molasses catches more flies than vinegar,” for there were times when she made difficulties for herself by her brusqueness,

antagonizing where it would have been as easy to engender a feeling of friendliness. She was more interesting, perhaps, but less lovable, and this Bowers felt vaguely.

The work that morning went slowly. Bunch and Oleson moved with exasperating deliberation and made stupid blunders. The brunt of the labor fell upon Bowers and Kate, who soon were grimy with dust and perspiration. As the sun rose higher, so did Kate's temper, and her voice grew sharper and more imperious each time she spoke to the shirkers. The fact that the present task was necessary, because of carelessness on their part, did not tend to increase her tolerance. Bunch, herding a band of yearlings, had allowed them to get back to their mothers. To allow a "mix" was one of the supreme offenses and the herders knew that only necessity ever made Kate overlook it. If new men had been available, both Bunch and Oleson would have received their time checks quickly.

Kate had been at the "dodge gate" until she was dizzy. Her eyes ached with the strain of watching the chute and her arm ached with the strain of slamming the gate to-and-fro, which cut them into their proper divisions. The last sheep was through finally, but not until the sun was high and the heat made exertion an effort.

"There are some yearlings in there that belong in the 'bum bunch,' and six or eight with wrong earmarks. We'll have to catch them." Kate set the example by walking in among them, and immediately a cloud of dust arose as the frightened sheep ran bleating in a circle. Above the din Kate's voice rose sharp and imperative as her trained eye singled out the sheep she wanted.

"There, Oleson, that one! Bowers, catch that lame

one! Hold that sheep with the sore mouth, Bunch, till I look at it."

The sheep dodged and piled up in one end of the corral to the point of suffocation, then around and around in a dizzy circle, with Kate and the herders each intent on the particular sheep he was bent on catching.

In the midst of it a laugh, feminine, musical, amused, rang out above the turmoil. Kate looked up quickly. Her swift glance showed her the figure of a man and a girl leaning over the gate at the far end of that division.

She frowned slightly.

"Bunch," curtly, "tell those people to stand back."

Bunch waved his hand and yelled bluntly:

"Git back furderer!"

Again the light feminine laugh reached Kate and her lips tightened as she thought cynically:

"Dudes from the Scissor Ranch over to look at the freak woman sheepherder."

Disston winced a little. Kate might misunderstand and take offense at Beth Rathburn's laughter.

But Kate ignored, then forgot them, until Bowers, working at that end of the corral, came back and jerked his thumb over his shoulder:

"That feller wants to speak to you."

Kate looked up impatiently, hesitated, wiped her face on the sleeve of her forearm and walked over without great alacrity.

As she went forward Kate looked only at the girl, who, cool and dainty in her sheer white muslin, her fair face reflecting the glow from the pink silk lining of her parasol, small of stature and as exquisitely feminine as a Dresden china shepherdess, was her direct antithesis.

Kate's divided skirt was bedraggled, a rent

showed in the sleeve of her blouse, her riding boots were shabby, and the fingers were out of her worn gauntlets. Her hat was white with the dust of the corral, her hair dishevelled and her face, still damp with perspiration, was grimy. But somehow she managed to be picturesque and striking. Her clothes could not hide the long beautiful curves of her tall figure and she carried herself very erect, with something dignified and authoritative in her manner, while her wide free gestures were the movements of independence and self-reliance.

Disston looking at her eagerly and intently as she came closer noted that the changes the years had made were chiefly in her expression. The friendly candor of her eyes was replaced by a look that was coldly speculative, and her lips that had smiled so readily now expressed determination. Her whole bearing was indicative of concentration, singleness of purpose and patience or, more strictly, a dogged endurance. These things Disston saw in his swift scrutiny before she recognized him.

She stopped abruptly, her eyes widened and her lips parted in astonishment.

"Hughie!" She went forward swiftly, her eyes shining with the glad welcome he remembered and all her old-time impetuosity of manner. Then she checked herself as suddenly. She did not withdraw the hand she had extended, but the smile froze on her lips and all the warmth went out of her greeting. She added formally, "I wasn't expecting to see any one I knew—you surprised me."

Wondering at her change of manner, he laughed as he shook hands with her.

"I hoped to—it's one of the things I've been looking forward to."

Beth Rathburn was looking, not at Kate, but at

Disston, when he introduced them; she could not remember when she had seen him so animated, so genuinely glad.

"I've been enormously interested—however do you do it?" Miss Rathburn said in her cool drawl, while she studied Kate's face curiously.

"It's my business," Kate replied simply, regarding her with equal interest.

"And you live out here by yourself, without any other woman? Aren't you lonely?"

"I'm too busy."

"You work with the men—just like one of them?"

"Just like a man," Kate repeated evenly.

"It is quite—quite wonderful!" Beth subtly conveyed the impression that on the contrary she thought it was dreadful.

Kate drew back her head a little and looked at her visitor.

"Is it?" coolly.

"And Hugh never has told me a word about you—he's been so reticent." She laid her finger tips upon his arm in proprietory fashion while a sly malice shone through the mischievousness of her smile.

Disston colored.

Kate replied ironically:

"Perhaps he is one of those who do not boast of their acquaintance with sheepherders."

"Kate!" he protested vigorously.

She regarded him with a faint inscrutable smile until Bowers interrupted:

"How many bells shall I put on them yearlin's?"

"One in fifty; and cut those five wethers out of the ewe herd. Catch those yearling ewes with the wether earmark and change to the shoe-string."

"What do you want done with that feller in the pen?"

"Saw his horn off and I'll throw him into the buck herd later."

"Where'll Oleson hold his sheep?"

"Well up the creek; and if he lets them mix again —"

"He says he can't do nothin' without a dog," Bowers ventured.

"Then he'd better quit right now—you can tell him." Kate's voice was curt, incisive, her tone final. "He can't use a dog on these Rambouillets—they're high-strung, nervous, different from the merinos. Anyway, I won't have it." She swung about to indicate that the conversation was ended.

"That's all Greek to me. Do you understand it, Hugh?" Miss Rathburn's lofty drawl, her faintly patronizing manner, all indicated amusement.

"I don't know much about sheep," he admitted.

"Do you know—" to Kate, with all her social manner—"you are deliciously unique?"

Kate, who detected the sneer, but had no social manner to meet it, asked brusquely:

"In what way?"

"You're so—" she hesitated for a word and seemed to search her vocabulary for the right one —"so strong-minded."

Kate's eyes were sparkling.

"If by that you mean intelligent, I thank you for the compliment, and I'm sorry that I can't—" She checked herself, but the inference was clear that she intended to add—"return it."

Miss Rathburn's fair skin became a deeper pink than even a pink-lined parasol warranted, while Kate addressed herself to Disston exclusively.

Disston had listened in dismay. Whatever was the matter? In truth, it must be, he told himself, that women were natural enemies. He never had seen this

feline streak in Beth to recognize it, and he had felt instinctively that, on Kate's side, from the first glance she had not liked her visitor.

To Beth Rathburn, it was ridiculous that Disston should take seriously this girl who, at the moment, was considerably less presentable than any one of their own servants—that he should treat her with all the deference he showed to any woman of his acquaintance, as if she were of his own class exactly! And a worse offense was his obviously keen interest in her. It was a new sensation for the southern girl to be ignored, or at least omitted from the conversation, and each second her resentment grew, though the underlying cause was that she felt herself overshadowed by Kate's stronger personality.

To remind Disston of his remissness she walked over to a pen where Bowers, astride a powerful buck, saw in hand, was having his own troubles. She returned almost immediately, shuddering prettily:

"He's sawing that sheep's horn off! Doesn't it hurt it?"

"Not nearly so much as letting it grow to put its eye out."

"I presume you do that, too?" The girl's eyes and tone were mocking.

"Oh, yes, I do everything that's necessary." There was something savage in Kate's composure as she turned directly and looked at her. "I have sheared sheep when I had no money to pay herders, slept out in the hills on the ground on a saddle blanket with my saddle for a pillow. I've made my underwear out of flour sacks and my skirts of denim. I've lived on corn meal and salt pork and dried apples and rabbits for months at a time. I eat and hobnob with sheepherders from one year's end to the other. I'm out with a drop bunch in the lambing season, and I

brand the bucks myself—on the nose—burn them with a hot iron. I'll send you word when I'm going to do it again and you can come over—it's e-normously amusing. Just wait a minute—come over to the fence here—and I'll show you something. I'm even more deliciously unique than you imagine."

She walked to the gate and vaulted it easily. Hughie and Beth could do no less than follow as far as the fence, while Kate stood searching the band of sheep that milled about her. When she found what she sought, she made one of her swift swoops, caught the sheep by the hind leg and threw it with a dextrous twist. Then holding it between her knees, she took a knife from her pocket and tested the edge of the blade with her thumb.

The girl at the fence cried aghast:

"Oh, what's she going to do?" Then she clutched Disston's arm and stared in fascinated horror while Kate ear-marked the sheep and released it.

"She's barbarous—horrible—impossible!"

"You brought it on yourself, Beth," he reminded her in a low tone. "You—goaded her,"

"And you defend her?" she demanded, furiously. "Take me away from here—I'm nauseated!"

"I'll say good-bye—you go on, and I'll join you."

He vaulted the fence and went up to Kate, who was going on with her work and ignoring them.

"Kate," he put out his hand, "I'm sorry."

She disregarded it and turned upon him, her eyes blazing:

"Don't you bring any more velvet-pawed kittens here to sharpen their claws in me!"

"Kate," earnestly, "I wouldn't have been the means of hurting you for anything I can think of."

"I'm not hurt," she retorted, "I'm mad."

"I'm coming to see you again—alone, next time. I

want to know why you did not answer my letters—I want to know lots of things—why you're so different —what has changed you so much."

"And you imagine I'll tell you?" she asked dryly.

"You wouldn't?"

She shrugged a shoulder. "I don't babble any longer."

"It's nothing to you whether I come or not?"

"I'm very busy."

He looked at her for a moment in silence, then he held out his hand once more.

"I am disappointed in you!"

"Are you, Hughie?" she said indifferently, as she took his hand without warmth.

"Bowers!" Her tone was energetic and businesslike as she turned sharply. "Come here and help me earmark the rest of these yearlings."

Disston stood for a moment, feeling himself dismissed and already forgotten, yet conscious with a rush of emotion which startled him, that in spite of the fact that her dress, speech, manner, occupation, mode of life violated every ideal and tradition, she appealed to him powerfully, stirred him as had no other woman. She aroused within him an enveloping tenderness—a desire to protect her—though she seemed the last woman who needed or cared for either.

When Oleson with the ewes and lambs was well up the creek, Kate gave Bunch his parting instructions:

"Let them spread out more. You Montana herders feed too close—it's a fault with all of you. Can't you see the grass is different here? Use your head a little. Got plenty of cartridges? I saw cat tracks in a patch of sand along the creek yesterday. He got eight lambs in his last raid on Oleson's band. I'll have to put out

some poison."

She walked slowly across the foot log after the last lamb had leaped bleating through the gate. She inspected her boots, noting that one heel had run over, and looked at her gauntlets, with the fingers protruding. Then, when she stepped inside the wagon, she walked straight to the mirror and stared at her reflection—dishevelled, her face frankly dirty, about her neck a handkerchief that was faded and unbecoming, a mouth that drooped a little with fatigue, her whole face wearing an expression of determination that she realized might very easily become hard. A few more years of work and exposure and she would be grim-featured and hopelessly weather-beaten. No wonder that girl had looked at her as though she were some curious alien creature with whom she had nothing at all in common! And Hughie had said he was disappointed in her.

This was Katie Prentice, she said to herself—Katie Prentice for whom the future, to which she had looked forward eagerly, had been another word for happiness—the Katie Prentice who had tripped in and out of that air castle of her building, looking like this girl that Hugh had brought with him. Now this image was the realization!

Just for the fraction of a second the corners of her mouth twitched, her chin quivered—then she raised it defiantly:

"To do what you set out to do—that's the great thing. Nothing else matters."

She slammed the door behind her and untied her horse from the wagon wheel.

"Come on, Cherokee, we'll go and see what that Nebraskan's doing."

The Nebraskan was standing on a hilltop when

she first saw him, facing the east and as motionless as the monument of stones beside him. His sheep were nowhere visible.

As Kate rode closer the same glance that disclosed the band of sheep showed her a coyote creeping down the side of a draw in which they were feeding. She reached instantly for her carbine and drew it from its scabbard, but she was not quick enough to shoot it before it had jumped for the lamb it had been stalking. The coyote missed his prey, but the lamb, which had been feeding a little apart from the others, ran into the herd with a terrified bleat and the whole band fled on a common impulse.

The coyote followed the lamb it had singled out, through all its twistings and turnings, but manœvering to work it to the outside where it could cut the lamb away from the rest and pull it down at its leisure.

Kate dared not shoot into the herd, and after a second's consideration as to whether or not to follow, she thrust the rifle back in its scabbard and turned her horse up the hill.

Even the sound of hoofs did not rouse the herder from his deep absorption. His hands were hanging at his sides, and his mouth was partially open. He was staring towards the east with unblinking eyes, and with as little evidence of life as though he had died standing.

"What are you looking at, Davis?"

He whirled about, startled.

"I was calc'latin' that Nebrasky must lay 'bout in that direction." He pointed to a pass in the mountains.

"A little homesick, aren't you?" Her voice was ominously quiet.

"Don't know whether I'm homesick or bilious;

when I gits one I generally gits the other."

"You were wondering just then what your wife was doing that minute, weren't you?"

Her suavity deceived him and he grinned sheepishly.

"Somethin' like that, maybe."

"You are married, then?"

The herder began to see where he was drifting.

"Er—practically," he replied ambiguously.

"So you lied when you joined the Outfit and I asked you?"

The herder whined plaintively.

"I heerd you wouldn't hire no fambly man if you knew it."

"When I make a rule there's a reason for it. 'Family men' are unreliable—they'll quit in lambing time because the baby's teething; they'll leave at a moment's notice when a letter comes that their wife wants to see them; their mind isn't on their work and they're restless and discontented. I knew you were married the first time I found you with your sheep behind instead of ahead of you."

"You can't understand the feelin's of a fambly man away from home." He rolled his eyes sentimentally. The subject was one which was dear to the uxorious herder. He pulled out the tremolo stop in his voice and quavered: "You feel like you're goin' 'round with nothin' inside of you—a empty shell—or a puff-ball with the puff out of it. You got a feelin' all the time like somethin's pullin' you." He looked so hard towards Nebraska that he all but toppled. "Somethin' here," he laid a hand on his heart, approximately, "like a plaster drawin'. Love," eloquently, "changes your hull nature. It makes lambs out o' roughnecks and puts drunks on the wagon. It turns you kind and forgivin' and takes the

fight out o' you. It makes you—"

"Maudlin! And weak! And inefficient!" Kate interrupted savagely. "It distracts your thoughts and dissipates your energy. It impairs your judgment, lessens your will power. It's for persons who have no ambition or who have achieved it. For the struggler there's nothing worth bothering with that doesn't take him forward."

"That's a pretty cold-blooded doctrind," declared the shocked herder. "If 'twant for love—"

"If 'twant for love," Kate mimicked harshly, "you wouldn't be indulging in a spell of homesickness and leaving your sheep to the coyotes! Sentiment is lovely in books, but it's expensive in business, so I'm going to fire you. Bowers will be here with the supply wagon to-morrow, so I'll take the sheep until he can relieve me. I'll pay you off and you can walk back to the ranch or," grimly, "take a short cut through the Pass up there—to 'Nebrasky.'"

CHAPTER XVIII

A WARNING

"I can't hold dem ewes and lambs on de bed-

ground no more! Dey know it's time to be gettin' up to deir summer range; nobody has to tell a sheep when to move on."

The Swede swirled his little round hat on his equally round little head and winked rapidly as he gave vent to his indignant protest. Kate looked at him in silence for a moment and then said in sudden decision:

"You can start to-morrow, Oleson."

The early summer was fulfilling the promise of a hot rainless spring. Bitter Creek was drying up rapidly and the water holes, stagnant and strongly alkaline, had already poisoned a few sheep. The herders could not understand the sheep woman's delay in moving to the mountains.

"I'm runnin' myself ragged over these hills tryin' to hold back them yearlin's," Bunch declared. Bowers, too, having his own special brand of grief with the buck herd, had looked the interrogation he had not voiced. Kate herself knew that the sheep should have been higher up, away from the ticks and flies and on good food and water all of two weeks ago, but, on one pretext or another, had postponed giving the order to start, though she knew in her heart that the real reason was because Disston had said he was coming again.

Now she told herself contemptuously that she was no different from the homesick Nebraskan, and, having made up her mind, lost no time in giving each herder his instructions as to when and where to move his sheep.

Kate never paid wages for anything that she could do herself, so the morning after her decision to start for the mountains she was in the saddle and leading two work horses on the way to move Oleson's and Bowers's camps before the sun was up.

The two sheep wagons were a considerable distance apart and the road over the broken country to the spot where Kate wished Oleson to make his first camp was a rough one, therefore it was late in the afternoon when Kate reached Bowers's camp—too late to pull the wagon toward the mountains that night.

She pulled the harness from the tired horses, slipped on their nose bags with their allowance of oats, and, when they had finished, hobbled and turned them loose to graze in the wide gulch where the wagon stood. Then she warmed up a few pieces of fried mutton—and this, with a piece of baking-powder bread and a cup of water from the rivulet that trickled through the gulch, constituted her frugal supper.

While driving the sheep wagon it had required all her attention to throw the brake to keep the wagon off the horses' heels, and release it as quickly, to select the best of a precarious road and maintain the wagon's equilibrium, but immediately the strain was over and her mind free to ramble, her thoughts reverted at once to Disston, in spite of her efforts to direct them elsewhere.

Activity is the recognized panacea for a heavy heart, and efficacious while it lasts, but with a lull it makes itself felt like the return of pain through a dying opiate; and so it was with Kate as she lay wide-eyed on the bunk to-night with both the door and window open, while a warm wind, faintly scented with the wild peas that purpled the side of the gulch, blew across her face.

The rivulet gurgled under the overhanging willows and alder brush. A belated kildeer broke the night stillness with its cry. The hobbles clanked as the horses thumped their fore feet in working their

way slowly to the top of the gulch. Bowers fired his evening salute before retiring as a hint to the coyotes, and, sometimes, when the wind veered, a far-off tinkle as a bell-sheep stirred on the bed-ground came to Kate's ears—all were familiar sounds, so familiar that she heard them only subconsciously. In the same way she saw the dark outlines of objects inside the sheep wagon—the turkey-wing duster thrust between an oak bow and the canvas, the outline of the coffee pot on the stove, the cherished frying pans dangling on their nails, her rifle standing on the bench within reach. So far as she knew, she and Bowers were the only human beings within miles, yet she felt no fear; to be alone in the sheep wagon in the dusk of the gulch held no new sensation for her.

She was thinking of Disston as the door of the wagon swung gently to and fro, rattling the frying pan which hung on a nail on the lower half of it, of her brusque and ungracious reply when he had told her he was coming again to see her, of the sorry figure she had cut beside the girl he had brought, and of her fierce resentment at the girl's covert ridicule. She had shocked and disgusted Disston beyond doubt by the manner in which she had retaliated, yet she knew that in similar circumstances she would do the same again, for her first impulse nowadays was to strike back harder than she was struck.

It seemed, she reflected, as though everything about her, her disposition, her history, her environment and work forbade any of the pleasant episodes, which the average woman accepted as a matter of course, ever happening in her life. To be an object of ridicule, the target of somebody's wit, appeared to be her lot. At odds with humanity,

engaged almost constantly in combating the handicaps imposed by Nature, the serenity of the normal woman's life was not for her.

Anyway, one thing was certain; her poor little romance, builded upon so slight a foundation as an impulsive boy's ephemeral interest, was over. He would not come again—and she cared. She put her hand to her throat. It ached with the lump in it—yes, she cared.

The tears slipped down and wet the flour-sack pillow case. The outlines of the coffee pot on the stove and the frying pan dangling on the door grew blurred. Her eyes were still swimming when she suddenly held her breath.

An unfamiliar sound had caught her ear, a sound like a stealthy footstep. In the instant that she waited to be sure, a hand and forearm reached inside the door and laid something on the floor.

"Who's there?"

There was no response to the imperative interrogation.

With the same movement that she swung her feet over the edge of the bunk she reached for her rifle and ran to the door. There was not a sound or sign that was unusual save that the horses had stopped eating and with ears thrown forward were looking down the gulch. She picked up the paper that lay on the floor, struck a match and read a scrawl by its flare:

WARNING

Stop where you are if you ain't looking for trouble. Them range maggots of yourn ain't wanted on the mountain this summer.

What did it mean? The match burned to her fingers while she conjectured. Who was objecting? Neifkins? Since there was ample range for both, and

each had kept to the boundaries which he tacitly recognized, there had been no dispute. A horse outfit grazing a small herd of horses during the summer months, and a dry-farmer with a couple of milch cows, who, while he plowed and planted and prayed for rain, was incidentally demonstrating the exact length of time that a human being could live on jack-rabbit and navy beans, were the only other users of the mountain range. Was it the hoax of some local humorist? Or an attempt to intimidate and worry her by someone whose enmity she had incurred?

Whatever the motive, was it possible that any one knew her so little as to believe they could frighten her in any such manner? Her lip curled as she asked herself the question. She had imagined that she had at least proved her courage.

Bowers, she knew, would stand by her; the others, perhaps, would use the familiar argument that it cost too much for repairs to be shot up for forty-five dollars a month.

Finally, she tossed the note on the sideboard and stepped out on the wagon tongue. The stars glimmered overhead and the shadows lay black and mysterious in the gulch, but she felt no fear as she stood there straight and soldierlike, her eyes sparkling defiance. She had, rather, a feeling of gratitude for the diversion—a hope that the threatened “trouble” might act as a kind of counter-irritant to the dull ache of her heavy heart.

CHAPTER XIX

AN OLD, OLD FRIEND

Bowers lay slumbering tranquilly in the shade of the wagon, his saddle blanket beneath him and his folded arms for a pillow as he slept on his face. The herd chewed its cud drowsily under the quaking asp nearby, out of the mid-day heat and away from pestiferous flies, while under a bush not far from the wagon a lamb lay with eyes half closed, waggling its narrow jaw, and grinding its sharp white teeth noisily.

Quite as though some thought had come to it forcibly, the lamb got up and stood regarding Bowers reflectively with its soft black eyes. Then it swallowed its cud with a gulp and, making a run the length of the herder's legs and spine, planted its forefeet in his neck, where it stopped.

"Mary! You quit that!" Bowers murmured crossly.

The lamb merely reached down and chewed energetically on Bowers's ear.

"Confound you—can't you let a feller sleep?" The hand that pushed the lamb away was gentle in spite of the exasperation of his tone.

The lamb backed away, eyed him attentively for several minutes as he lay prostrate, and then quite as though a tightly coiled spring had been released, leaped into the air and landed with all four feet bunched in the small of Bowers's back.

Bowers sat up and said complainingly as he grabbed the lamb by the wool and drew it towards him:

"There ain't a minute's peace when you're awake, Mary! If I done what I ort, I'd work you over. You're the worst nuisance of a bum lamb ever raised on canned milk."

The lamb, which Bowers had named regardless of its sex, stood motionless with bliss as he rubbed the base of what would some day probably be as fine a pair of horns as ever grew on a buck. At present they were soft and not more than an inch and a half in length as they sprouted through its dingy wool. Thin in the shoulders and rump, yet "Mary's" sides were distended until their contour resembled that of a toy balloon inflated to the bursting point.

Now as the lamb's long white lashes drooped until he seemed about to go to sleep and fall down under Bowers's soothing ministrations, the latter continued the one-sided conversation which was a part of their daily life together:

"You're a smart sheep, Mary—no gittin' away from it—but you're a torment, and you ain't no gratitude. Whur'd you been at if I hadn't heard you blattin' and went after you? A coyote would a ketched you before sundown. And ain't I been a mother to you, giving up all my air-tight milk to feed you? Warmin' it fer you and packin' you 'round like you was a million-dollar baby so the bobcats won't git you—kin you deny it? An' this is my thanks fer it—wake me up walkin' on me, to say nothin' of mornin's when you start jumpin' on my tepee, makin' a toboggan slide out'n it before any other sheep is stirrin'. Ain't you no conscience a-tall, Mary?"

"Ma-a-a-aa!"

The quavering plaintiff bleat evoked a look of admiration.

"Oh, you have—have you? I more'n half believe

you know what I'm sayin'. You're some sheep, Mary, an' if you jest stick 'round with me till you're growed I'll make a man of you. How'd you like a cigarette?"

"Ma-a-aa-aa!"

Bowers chuckled.

"Wait till I have my smoke an' then you kin have yourn, young feller."

He rolled and smoked half a cigarette while the lamb stood looking up into his face wistfully.

"I'll jest knock the fire out fer you first, then you kin have your whack out of it."

He shook the tobacco from the paper into his hand and the lamb ate it to the last fleck with gusto.

Bowers cried gleefully:

"You're a reg'lar roughneck, Mary! Doggone you! As you might say—you ain't no lady!"

The herder laughed aloud at his witticism and might have rambled on for some time longer if the crashing of brush had not attracted his attention. A man on horseback was picking his way through the quaking asp and Bowers awaited his approach with keen interest.

"How are you?" the stranger nodded.

"Won't you git off?"

Bowers strained his eyes to read the brand on the shoulder of the horse the man turned loose, but it told him nothing. While the stranger squatted on his heel, Bowers rubbed Mary's horns during an interval of unembarrassed silence.

"Bum?" inquired the stranger, eying Mary with a look which could not be called admiring.

"Yep." The garrulous Bowers had become suddenly reticent. The notion was growing that he did not like his visitor. He asked finally:

"Et yet?"

"Not sence daylight. I seen your tepee up toward

the top and thought maybe I could locate your wagon and git dinner."

"I'll feed anybody that's hungry," Bowers replied ambiguously.

The stranger asked innocently:

"Who does this Outfit belong to?"

"Miss Kate Prentice owns this brand."

"Oh—the 'Cheap Queen'!"

Bowers's head swung as though on a pivot.

"What did you say?"

"I've heerd that's what they call her."

Bowers's eyes narrowed as he answered:

"Not in my hearin'." Then he added: "Nobody can knock the outfit I'm workin' for and eat their grub while they're doin' it. Sabe?"

"Don't know as I blame you," the stranger conciliated.

"I'll go cook," said Bowers shortly, getting up.

The stranger urged politely:

"Don't do nothin' extry on my account."

"I ain't goin' to," Bowers responded. "If we had some ham we'd have some ham and eggs if we had eggs. Do you like turnips?"

"I kin eat 'em."

"My middle name is 'turnips,'" said Bowers. "I always cooks about a bushel!"

The look that his guest sent after him was not pleasant, if Bowers had chanced to see it, but since he did not, he was in a somewhat better humor by the time he hung out of the wagon and called with a degree of cordiality:

"Come and git it!"

The visitor arose with alacrity.

"Want a warsh?"

The stranger inspected a pair of hands that looked as if they had been greasing axles.

"No, I ain't very dirty."

"Grab a root and pull!" Bowers urged with all the hospitality he could inject into his voice, as the guest squeezed in between the table and the sideboard. "Jest bog down in that there honey, pardner—it's something special—cottonwood blossoms and alfalfy. And here's the turnips!"

Conversation was suspended until a pan of biscuits had vanished along with the fried mutton, when Bowers, feeling immeasurably better natured, inquired sociably as he passed the broom:

"Where have I saw you before, feller? Your countenance seems kind of familiar."

The stranger looked up quickly.

"I don't think it. I'm a long way off my own range."

He averted his eyes from Bowers's puzzled inquiring gaze and focused his attention upon the business of extracting a suitable straw from the politely tendered broom. When he had found one to his liking, he leaned back and operated with a large air of nonchalance.

"You're fixed pretty comfortable here," he commented, as his roving eye took in the interior of the wagon.

"'Tain't bad," Bowers agreed, prying into the broom for a straw that was clean, comparatively.

"Is them all kin o' yourn?" The stranger pointed to a wire rack suspended from a nail on the opposite side of the wagon in which was thrust some two dozen photographs, fly-specked and yellow, while the cut of the subjects' clothes bore additional evidence of their antiquity.

"Lord, no! I don't know none of 'em. There was a couple of travelin' photygraphers got snowed up here

several year ago and I bought ten dollars' worth of old pictures off 'em for company. I got 'em all named, and it's real entertainin' settin' here evenin's makin' up yarns about 'em that's more'n half true, maybe—Mis' Taylor over to Happy Wigwam says I'm kind of a medium."

Glancing at his guest he observed that his eyes were fixed intently upon a photograph in the center and his expression was so peculiar that Bowers asked, curiously:

"Ary friend o' yours in my gallery?"

"Not to say friend, exactly," was the dry answer, "but what-fer-a-yarn have you made up about that feller?"

"Well, sir," Bowers said whimsically, "I'm sorry to tell you but that feller had a bad endin'. He had everything done fur him, too—good raisin' and an education, but it was all wasted. That horse there was, as you might say, his undoin'. It was just fast enough to be beat everywhur he run him. But he kept on backin' him till it broke him—no, sir, he hadn't a dollar! Lost everything his Old Man left him and then took to drinkin'. His wife quit him and his only child died callin' for its father. After that he drunk harder than ever, and finally died in the asylum thinkin' he was Marcus Daly." He demanded eagerly, "How clost have I come to it?"

"Knowin' what I know, it makes me creepy settin' here listenin'."

"Shoo! I ain't that good, am I?" Bowers looked his pleasure at the tribute.

"Good?" ironically. "You oughta sew spangles on your shirt and wear ear-rings and git you a fortune-tellin' wagon. You're right about everything except that that horse never was beat while he owned him and he win about twenty thousand dollars on him,

and that the last time I saw that feller he could buy sixteen outfits like this one without crampin' him, and instead of goin' to the asylum they sent him to the state senate."

Bowers laughed loudly to cover his annoyance at having bitten.

"It's come about queer, though," he said, "your knowin' him."

The stranger seemed to check an impulse to say something further; instead, he volunteered to wipe the dishes.

"No, you go out and set in the shade—it's cooler."

The truth was, Bowers did not want the man in the wagon, for his first feeling of mistrust and antagonism had returned even stronger.

"That feller's liable to pick up somethin' and make off with it," he mused as the stranger obeyed without further urging. "I shore have saw them quare eyes of his somewhur. Maybe it'll come to me if I keep on thinkin'."

In the meanwhile the visitor dragged Bowers's saddle blanket into the shade of the wagon and stretched himself upon it. Pulling his hat over his eyes he soon was dozing.

Bowers, rattling the plates and pans inside the wagon, suddenly bethought himself of Mary. What was the lamb doing not to be about his feet begging for the condensed milk which he always prepared for it when his own meal was finished? He flirted the water from his hands and hung out of the doorway.

Mary, a few feet from the unconscious stranger, was regarding him with the gentle speculative look which Bowers knew to presage mischief. It was not difficult to interpret Mary's intentions, and Bowers was fully aware that it was his duty either to warn the sleeper or reprimand Mary. His eyes, however,

had the fondness of a doting parent who takes a secret pride in his offspring's naughtiness as he watched Mary. He did not like the stranger, anyhow, and the incident of the photograph still rankled.

"The Smart Alec," he muttered, grinning, "it won't hurt him."

The lamb backed off a little, made a run, and with its four feet bunched, landed in the pit of the stranger's stomach.

With an explosive grunt, the stranger's knees and chin came together like the sudden closing of a large pocket knife.

In spite of himself, Bowers snickered, but his grin faded at the expression which came to the stranger's face when he realized the cause of his painful awakening. It was devilish, nothing less than appalling, in its ferocity. Bowers had seen rage before, but the peculiar fiendishness of the man's expression, not knowing himself observed, fascinated him.

The lamb had backed off for another run when the stranger jumped for it. Bowers called sharply:

"Don't tech that little sheep, pardner!"

The answer was snarled through white teeth:

"I'm goin' to kick its slats in! I'm goin' to break every bone in its body."

"I wouldn't advise nothin' like that. Come here, Mary!" Bowers endeavored to speak calmly, but he was seized with a tremulous excitement when he saw that the stranger intended to carry out his threat.

"I'll pay you fer it," he panted as he tried to catch the lamb, "but I'm aimin' to kill that knot-head!"

Bowers dried his hands on his overalls and stepped inside the wagon. He returned with his shotgun.

"And I aim to blow the top of your head off ef you

try it," Bowers said, breathing heavily. "That little innercent sheep don't mean no harm to nobody. Sence we're speakin' plain, I don't like you nohow. I don't like the way you act; I don't like the way you talk; I don't like the way your face grows on you; I don't like nothin' about you, and ef I never see you agin it'll be soon enough. You'd better go while I'm ca'm, for when I gits mad I breaks in two in the middle and flies both ways!"

Panting from his chase, the stranger stopped and stood looking at Bowers in baffled fury. Then he turned sharply on his heel, caught his horse and swung into the saddle. He hesitated for the part of a second before spurring his horse a little closer.

"You kin take a message to your boss—you locoed sheepherder. Tell her it's from an old friend that knew her when she was kickin' in her cradle. Show her that photygraph of the feller with the runnin' horse and tell her I said it was the picture of her father, and that he's scoured the country for her, spendin' more money to locate her than she'll make if she wrangles woolies till she's a hundred. Tell her a telegram would bring him in twenty-four hours—on a special, probably. Give her that message, along with the love of an old, old friend what was well acquainted with her at the Sand Coulee!" He laughed mockingly, and with a malevolent look at Bowers, plunged into the quaking asp and vanished.

Bowers stared after him open-mouthed and round-eyed. He had placed his visitor. "The feller that smelled like a Injun tepee in the drug store the night Mormon Joe was murdered!"

The discovery that his visitor was the malodorous stranger of the drug store impressed Bowers far more than his mocking message to Kate concerning her father. That might or might not be true, but he was

entirely sure about the other.

His first impulse was to deliver the message, but upon second thought he decided that nothing would be accomplished by it, and it might disturb her. He argued that with a range war pending she already had enough worries. If only he could get word to Teeters somehow—or Lingle, even—to keep a lookout for the fellow, but since he was many miles off the line of travel and he dared not leave his sheep, there was small chance of notifying either.

It was a good many days before the incident was out of Bowers's mind for any length of time. He kept his shotgun handy and was on the alert constantly, listening, searching the surrounding country for a moving object, and muttering frequently, "What was he doin' here, anyhow—moggin' round the mountains—comin' from nowhur, goin' nowhur!"

But a month passed and nothing happened, either in Bowers's camp or at the others. Since the warning had implied that any attempt to move further would be stopped immediately, and yet all the wagons were now well up the mountain, both Kate and Bowers concluded that the threatening scrawl was intended only to annoy her.

"Ma-aa-aa!" Mary bleated like a fretful teething child, and held up his head for Bowers to rub the feverish horns as his foster parent sat on a box beside the wagon one lazy afternoon.

"I declare, Mary, I'll be most as glad when them horns cut through as if they growed on me! I could raise a baby by hand 'thout any more trouble than it's took to bring you up." The lamb stood stock still as he yielded to his importunities, and Bowers continued whimsically: "I been a father and mother to you, Mary, an' you might a-been an orphing through your own orn'riness if I hadn't throwed

down on that feller pretty pronto.

"No denyin' 'twould have made a preacher peevish to have you land in the pit of his stummick with them sharp hoofs of yourn. But you're only an innercent little sheep, and they wan't no sense in his tryin' to stomp on you.

"Well, I got to be stirrin' up them woolies. Sorry I got to tie you, but you're gittin' such a durned nuisance, with playin' half the night and slidin' down my tepee. I'll give you the big feed when I come down in the mornin', so say your prayers and go to bed like a good lamb orta."

Bowers tied Mary to the wagon wheel, and, with a final rub and pat and admonition, left the lamb, to start the herd feeding toward their bed-ground on the summit.

"Come out o' that, Mother Biddies! Better start now and go to fillin' up. I want them children of yourn to weigh sixty poun' each, come fall."

The sheep, which had been lying in the shade or standing in a circle with their heads together as a protection against the flies, obeyed slowly, and Bowers followed as they grazed their way toward his tepee gleaming white among the rocks on the top of the mountain.

Occasionally he stopped to pick up something and examine it—a curious pebble, a rock that might make his fortune, a bit of grey moss, which always made him wonder what there was about it, dry as punk, brittle and tasteless, to make sheep prefer it to far better feed, to his notion—salt sage, black sage, grease wood, or even cactus with the thorns pawed off. No accounting for sheep anyway—"the better you knew 'em the less you understood 'em."

"Git to the high hills, Sister!" He tossed a pebble at a lagging ewe. "Want to feed all day in the same

spot? Climb, there, Granny! Better look out or you'll git throwed in with the gummers and shipped afore you know it!"

While the sheep fed slowly toward the summit, Bowers sauntered after—tall, lank, neutral-tinted, his thoughts going round and round in the groove peculiar to herders—the sheep before him and their individual characteristics, the condition of the range, the weather, religion, the wickedness of "High Society," the items on the next list he would send to the mail-order house in Chicago.

And so the afternoon passed as had hundreds like it in Bowers's life until he sat down finally on a rock to watch the rays of the setting sun paint the clouds in ever-changing colors and lose himself in reflections, studying the gorgeous sea surrounding him.

It would be a great place up there for a feller's soul to float—provided he had one—restin' a while in that yaller one, or the rose-colored one up yonder, or takin' a dip into that hazy purple and disappearin'. Personally, he told himself, he believed that when he was dead he was dead as a nit, and he'd never seen anything about dying folks to make him think otherwise.

That Scissor-bill from back East in Ioway that died of heart failure jest slipped and slid off his chair, slow and easy like a sack of bran—he didn't show in his eyes any visions of future glory when he stretched on the floor behind the stove in the bunkhouse and closed 'em for good. Sometimes they kicked and struggled like pizened sheep in their sufferin', and again they went off easy and comfortable, but without any glimpses of Paradise brightenin' their countenances, so far as he could notice.

If he had a soul, all right; if he didn't, all right; that's the way he figgered it.

The lead sheep started for the bed-ground.

"Kick up your dust piles good, Mother Biddies, and git comfortable. Hurry up and blow out your lights so I can git to my readin'."

The light had faded, and the dingy gray-white backs became indistinguishable from the rounded tops of the sagebrush, as night came upon the mountain. With much sniffling, bleating, asthmatic coughing and crackling of small split hoofs, each sheep settled itself in practically the same little hollow it had previously pawed out to fit itself. A soft rumble came from the band as they stirred in their little wallows.

Then Bowers fired a barrel of his shotgun into the air as a reminder to possible coyotes in the rim rocks that he was present, and lighted the lantern in his tepee.

"I'll have to warsh that chimbly in a couple o' years," he commented as he set the lantern down and reached for a worn and tattered mail-order catalogue in the corner.

Fumbling under his pillow, he produced the stub of a pencil and a tablet, after which, crosslegged on his blankets and soogan, he pored over the catalogue. Jewelry, clothing, cooking utensils and upholstered furniture were on the list which Bowers, with corrugated forehead and much chewing of the pencil, made out laboriously. When the amount reached three hundred and sixty-five dollars, he hesitated over a further expenditure of nine for a manicure set and a pair of pink satin sleeve holders. That was a good deal of money to spend in one evening.

"Thunder!" he finally said recklessly. "No use to

deny myself! I ain't goin' to send it, anyway!"

Having written it all in proper form and affixed his signature, he folded the paper and slipped it under his bed along with some three dozen other such orders that never got any farther.

This was Bowers's evening diversion, one in which he experienced all the thrills of purchasing without the pain of paying. He entertained a peculiar feeling of friendship for the House whose catalogue had helped him through long winter evenings, when night came at four, and interminable spells of wet weather, so when he sent a *bona fide* order to Chicago he never failed to inquire as to the health of each member of the firm and inform them that his own was excellent at time of writing, adding such items concerning the condition of the range and stock as he thought would interest them.

Bowers now slipped the lantern inside a flour sack, went outside in his stocking feet, and wedged the lantern between two rocks. The light "puzzled" coyotes, according to his theory, and gave them something to think about besides getting into his sheep.

When he had folded his trousers under his head his preparations for the night were complete and, this accomplished, the almost immediate expulsion of his breath in little puffs was proof enough that he was sleeping the peaceful sleep of the carefree.

A brisk breeze came at intervals to sway the tepee and snap the loose flaps. Sometimes a lamb bleated in a sleepy tremolo; occasionally, instead of puffing, Bowers snorted; but mostly it was as still as an uninhabited world up there on the tip-top of the Rockies.

Suddenly Bowers half sprang from his blankets—wide-awake, alert, listening intently. He had a notion

that a sound had awakened him, something foreign, unfamiliar. Holding his breath, he strained his ears for a repetition. Everything was still. He stepped outside lightly. The sheep lay on their bed-ground, quiet and contented. Had he been dreaming? It must be. Too much shortening in the dough-gods probably. He'd have to stir up a batch of light bread to-morrow. It was curious, though—that strong impression of having heard something. He returned to his blankets and was puffing again almost immediately.

It was not much after half-past three when the first ewe got up, bleated for her lamb, and moved off slowly. Others rose, stood a moment as though to get the sleep out of their eyes, and followed her example. Ewes bleated for their lambs, lambs for their mothers, until quavering calls in many keys made a din to awaken any sleeper, while the whole mass of dingy, rounded woolly backs started moving from the bed-ground.

"Workin' like angels," Bowers muttered as he came out of the tepee dressed in his erstwhile pillow, to see the sheep spreading out before him.

He extinguished the lantern, replaced it in the tepee, and tied the flap, while the faint, gray streak in the east grew brighter.

"Ouhee! You pinto gypsy! Whur you roamin' to now? Think I want to climb up there and pry you out o' the rocks? Come back here 'fore I git in your wig. Ouhee! Mother Biddies! I'll whittle on your hoofs, first thing you know. You won't enjoy traveling' so fast, if you're a little tender footed.

"That's better—now you're actin' like ladies!"

The air was redolent of sheep and sagebrush, and pink and amber streaks shot up to paint out the dimming stars. Bowers drew a deep breath of

satisfaction. O man! but sheep-herding was a great life in summer—like drawing, wages through a vacation. If those "High Society" folks that the Denver *Post* told of, them worse than Sodomites, steeped in sin and extravagance, could know the joys of getting up at half-past three in the morning and going down at ten to eat off a fat mutton—

Bowers's rhapsody ended abruptly. He drew a hand across his eyes to clear his vision. Down below, where he was wont to look for the white top of the wagon, there was nothing but scattered wreckage! He heard the sound now that had awakened him—the detonation of a charge of dynamite! There was no need to go closer to learn the rest of the story.

Bowers's face twisted in a queer grimace. He cried brokenly in a grief that can be understood fully only by the lonely:

"Pore little Mary! Pore little feller! Pore little innercent sheep that never done no harm to nobody!"

CHAPTER XX

THE FORK OF THE ROAD

It would have looked, to any casual passerby, a pleasant family group that occupied the front porch at the Scissor Ranch house one breezy morning.

There was Mrs. Rathburn in a wide-brimmed hat, plying her embroidery needle and looking, from afar, the picture of contentment. Equally serene, to all outward appearances, was her daughter, with her head swathed in veiling against the complexion-destroying wind as she rocked to and fro while bringing her already perfect nails to the highest degree of polish with a chamois-skin buffer. Hugh Disston sat on the top step cleaning and oiling his shotgun with the loving care of the man who is fond of firearms.

But if the Casual Passerby had ridden closer he might have observed that Mrs. Rathburn was thrusting her needle back and forth through the taut linen inside the embroidery hoop with a vigor which amounted to viciousness; that Miss Rathburn drew the buffer so briskly across her nails that the encircling flesh was all but blistered with the friction; and that Disston as he oiled and rubbed let his gaze wander frequently to the distant mountains and rest there wistfully.

Furthermore, the Casual Passerby—a blood relative of the Innocent Bystander—would have been apt to notice that this act of Disston's seemed automatically to accelerate the movements of the embroidery needle and the chamois buffer, and speed up the rocking chairs.

Propinquity was not doing all that Mrs. Rathburn had anticipated. There were moments like the present when, with real pleasure, she could have run her needle to the hilt, as it were, in any convenient portion of Disston's anatomy. She seethed with resentment, and took it out upon the climate, the

inhabitants, the customs of the country, and Teeters —who gave her the careful but unenthusiastic attention he would have given to a belligerent porcupine.

Pique and disappointment smouldered also in the bosom of her fair daughter, who, if she had been less fair, might have been called sullen, since these emotions evidenced themselves in a scornful silence, which was not alleviated by the fact that Disston did not appear to notice it.

While the ladies attributed their occasional temperamental outbursts to the altitude, which was "getting on their nerves," it was no secret between them that their irritability was due to exasperation with Disston. With scientific skill and thoroughness they dissected him privately until he was hash, working their scalpels far into the watches of the night with unflagging interest. His words, his actions, his thoughts, as indicated by his changing expressions, were analyzed, yet, to the present, Mrs. Rathburn, trained specialist that she was in this branch of psychology, was obliged to confess herself baffled to discover his real feelings and intentions toward her daughter.

From the first, Mrs. Rathburn had suspected the "sheep person," and had cultivated Mrs. Emmeline Taylor who called for the purpose of obtaining supplementary details to the brief history that she had been able to extract from Disston and Teeters. What Mrs. Rathburn learned from that source was, temporarily, eminently satisfactory and soothing. It was too much to believe that Disston could be seriously interested in a woman of Kate Prentice's reputation and antecedents. Her daughter's account of her visit was equally gratifying, for Hugh Disston certainly was too fastidious to be attracted by a

woman so uncouth of appearance and manner as portrayed in the vivid description the lady had received of her from Beth.

Yet as she looked back it seemed to her that some subtle change had come over Hugh from the very first day in Prouty, when he had seen the Prentice person and colored. He had been eager to go and see her, and had not been too keen for Beth's company upon the occasion, she had imagined.

It was all a mystery, and, thoroughly discouraged, she was about convinced that they were wasting precious time and ruining their complexions.

Disston continued to polish vigorously, using the gun grease and cleaner until the barrels through which he squinted were spotless and shining. When it was to his satisfaction, Disston put the gun together and sat with it across his knees, staring absently at the spur of mountains which Beth Rathburn had come to feel she detested. She tingled with irritation. She wanted to say something mean, something to make him feel sorry and apologetic.

She did not quite dare to speak sneeringly of Kate with no apparent provocation, but a violent gust of wind that snatched off her veil and disarranged her carefully dressed hair furnished an excuse to rail against the country.

"Goodness!" she cried explosively, as she lifted the short ends of hair out of her eyes and replaced them. "Will this everlasting wind *never* stop blowing!"

The fact that Disston did not even hear added to her exasperation. The soft voice, which was one of her many charms, was distinctly shrill as she reiterated:

"I say, will this everlasting wind *never stop blowing*?"

"It is disagreeable," he murmured, without looking at her.

"Disagreeable? It's horrible! I detest the country and everybody in it!"

Mrs. Rathburn shook her head reprovingly, but at the same moment another violent gust swept around the corner and lifted not only that lady's broad-brimmed hat, but her expensive "transformation."

Mrs. Rathburn replaced it with guilty haste, and declared furiously:

"I must say I agree with my daughter—the country and its people are equally impossible."

"I'm sorry," Disston replied contritely. "I shouldn't have urged you to come, but I was hoping you would like it—its picturesqueness, the unconventionality, and the dozen-and-one other things which appeal to me so strongly. In my enthusiasm, perhaps I exaggerated."

"I can't see anything picturesque in discomfort," Miss Rathburn retorted. "There's nothing picturesque in trying to bathe in water that curdles when you put soap in it, and makes your hands like nutmeg graters; or in servants who call you by your first name; or in trying to ride scraggly horses that have no gaits and shake you to pieces; or anything even moderately interesting about a country where there are no trees to sit under and nothing to look at but sagebrush, and rocks, and prairie dogs, and mountains, and not a soul that one can know socially!"

"I had no notion you disliked it out here so much, Beth," he replied gravely.

But he was not sufficiently apologetic, not sufficiently humble. She went on in a tone in which spite was uppermost:

"And furthermore, if unconventionality could ever

make me look and act like that 'Sheep Queen' over there," she nodded towards the mountain, "I hope to leave before it happens."

"Hush, Beth!" Her mother's expostulation was lost upon her for, looking at Disston, she was a little dismayed by the expression upon his face when he turned and, leaning his back against the porch post, faced her, saying with a sternness which was foreign to him:

"It's quite impossible for you to understand or appreciate a woman like Kate Prentice, and you will oblige me, Beth, by refraining from criticising her, at least in my presence."

Hugh would as well have slapped her. She scattered the manicure articles in her lap as she sprang up and stamped a tiny foot at him:

"She is impossible! Unspeakable! And I believe you are in love with her!"

For an instant Disston looked at her with an expression which was at once angry and startled, but before he had framed an answer Teeters appeared in the doorway behind them and said soberly:

"Looks like somethin' serious is startin' over yonder." He nodded toward the mountains.

"What do you mean?" Disston asked quickly.

"One of Kate's sheep wagons was blowed up a few nights ago, and there's a story circulatin' that somebody's goin' to shoot up the Outfit."

Disston's face wore a frown of concentration.

"Teeters," in sudden decision, "I'm going up to see her. She may need us."

"But isn't it dangerous?" Mrs. Rathburn protested.

"Not unless he's mistook for one of the Outfit, then they might try a chunk of lead on him," Teeters reassured her.

Miss Rathburn, having recovered her poise

together with her drawl, was regarding the high luster on her nails when Disston came up on the porch before leaving.

"I am sorry I was rude, Beth," he said earnestly.

"Were you?" indifferently. "I hadn't noticed it."

"I did a contemptible thing to that girl once," he continued, "and I feel that the least I can do to make amends is to refuse to allow her to be spoken of slightingly in my presence."

"Quite right, Hughie. You are a credit to our southern chivalry." Miss Rathburn suppressed a yawn with the tips of her pink tapering fingers.

"When I come back," he spoke propitiatingly, "the day after to-morrow, probably we'll go and see that petrified tree of which Teeters told us."

"A lovely bribe," languidly, "but don't hurry, for mother and I are leaving to-morrow."

"You mean that?"

"Certainly."

"I won't believe it."

"You always were incredulous, Hughie."

"I don't suppose I can convince you that I am very fond of you, and that I shall feel badly if you leave like this?"

This was more like it:—Miss Rathburn lowered her beautiful lashes.

"You haven't tried, have you?" she asked softly.

She looked very desirable at the moment—pink and white and soft and fluffy—all that the traditions of his family demanded in a woman. He knew perfectly what was expected of him, and there was every reason why he should ask her to marry him, and none at all why he should not, yet somehow when he opened his lips to ask, "Will you let me?" the words choked him. He said, instead, with the utmost cordiality:

"Don't you dare do anything so unfriendly as to leave without saying good-bye to me. Will you promise to wait until I return?"

If she had obeyed her impulse she would have shrieked at him:

"No! no! no! Not a minute, if you go to see that woman!" She would have liked to make him choose between them, but she dared not put him to the test for fear that she would place herself in a position from which her pride would not allow her to recede.

Beth wept in chagrin and rage while Disston rode away buoyantly, marvelling at his own light-heartedness, tingling with the old-time eagerness which used to come to him the moment he was in the saddle with his horse's head turned toward Bitter Creek.

He had stubbornly fought his desire to visit Kate again. What was the use, he demanded of himself sternly. She did not want to see him and virtually had said so. She had changed radically; she cared only for her sheep—even Teeters admitted that much. Anything beyond a warm friendship between them was, of course, impossible. She was not of his world, she did not "belong," and had no desire to. She could no more preside at a dinner table or pour tea gracefully, as would be expected of his wife, than Beth could shear a sheep or earmark one.

These things and many others he had told himself a thousand times to stop the longing he had to saddle his horse and go to her. What a weakling he was, he thought contemptuously, that he could not put her out of his mind and do the obviously right and proper thing by asking Beth to marry him, and so end forever this disquieting conflict within him—a conflict that had not been in his calculations when he had planned a happy summer.

It was physical attraction, he argued, together with the interest aroused by her unusual personality, which drew him to Kate—a passing fancy, a curious, inexplicable infatuation; but, he assured himself stoutly, not at all the foundation upon which to build for permanency. Yet as he rode towards the mountains with his eyes fixed upon the low pass to which Teeters had directed him, he experienced the first real thrill of carefree happiness that had come to him since his arrival.

The trail was a long and a hard one. His horse lost a shoe and limped badly, so, as the day waned, he walked frequently to spare the animal. He was tired, but too eager to be conscious of it. He wondered what she would be doing when he found her, and whether he could surprise something like the old-time welcome from her. How her eyes used to sparkle when he rode up to her! He smiled to himself as he recalled her smile—frank, beaming, her face radiant with undisguised pleasure.

Kate was sitting on a rock on the backbone of a ridge when he drew in sight of her—a dark picturesque silhouette against the sky. The sheep fed below, and her horse, with a bedroll across its back, nibbled not far away.

Hugh stopped and looked at the lonely figure sitting motionless in the opaline-tinted light of the sunset, her chin sunk in her palm, her shoulders drooping. The tears rose to the man's eyes unexpectedly. It was not right, such solitude for a woman, he told himself vehemently.

It was singular, too, he reflected, how the mere sight of her revitalized him. Life took on a sudden interest, a zest that it never had elsewhere. He supposed it was because she was herself so vital. A feeling of exultation now swept over him—he forgot

his fatigue, that he was hungry, and was conscious only of the fact that he was going to be near her, to talk to her uninterruptedly—for hours, maybe. After that he would go back content, ask Beth to marry him, and recover from this fever, this unreasoning, uncontrollable longing to see Kate again, which made him weak to imbecility.

Thinking her own thoughts, Kate stared at the ground, or at the sheep feeding quietly below her. Her rifle leaned against the rock upon which she was sitting. Occasionally she searched the juniper-covered sides of an adjacent mountain where an enemy could find convenient hiding, but mostly she sat looking at the ground at her feet.

She had taken over the valuable buck herd in the face of Bowers's protest, and was the first to graze on the top of the mountain, though the other bands were now also close to the summit. If more trouble was coming, it would very likely come quickly. They were fighters, these Rambouillets, she was thinking as she looked at them absently, and recalled an instance where a herd of them had battered a full-grown coyote to a jelly. They had surrounded him and by bunting him in the ribs, back and forth between them like a football, had stopped only when there was not a whole bone left in his carcass. However, she reflected, the coyotes were mostly puppies yapping at the entrance of their den at this time of year, and the last wolf had been cleaned out of the mountains, so there really was not much danger from any source save these human enemies.

But even a fighting Rambouillet was not proof against a 30-30. Instinctively her eyes swept the surrounding country for some unfamiliar moving object. Well, that was what she was there for—to protect them. She did not expect any quarter because

she was a woman—or intend to give any. She meant to shoot to kill, if she had the opportunity.

It was in this survey that Kate saw Disston and recognized him instantly. She had a notion that even if her eyesight had failed her, her heart would have told her, for it jumped as if she had been badly frightened. She felt dizzy for a moment after she verified her first look—the world swam, as though she had been blinded. If she had followed her impulse, she would have held out her arms and ran to meet him crying, "Hughie! Hughie!" But her impulses, she remembered in time, always came back like boomerangs to hurt her, if she followed them, so, instead, she endeavored to pull herself together by recalling that he had been six weeks at Teeters' without coming to see her but the one time when he had brought that girl to laugh at her. Why had he come now, she wondered.

Kate's pride had come to be her strongest ally and she summoned it all in this emergency, so when Disston climbed to her, finally, leading his limping horse, she was awaiting him calmly, her enigmatic smile upon her face, which was but a shade paler than usual. Her composure chilled and disappointed him; he could not know that she had clasped her hands tightly about her knee to hide their trembling.

"I wanted to surprise you," he said regretfully.

"You have."

"You don't show it."

"Then I'm improving."

"I liked you as you were, Kate—warm-hearted, impulsive." He dropped the bridle reins and sat down beside her.

"That got me nothing," she replied curtly.

A shadow crossed his face.

"And you don't care for anything that doesn't get

you something?"

"Absolutely not."

"That doesn't sound like you," he said after a silence.

"I'm not 'me' any longer," she responded. "I made myself over to suit my environment. I get along better."

"What has changed you so much, Kate—what in particular?"

She hesitated a moment, then answered coldly:

"Nothing in particular—everything."

"You mean you don't want to tell me?"

"What's the use?" indifferently.

"I might help you."

"How?"

"In ways that friends can help each other."

"I've tried that," she answered dryly.

"You've grown so self-sufficient that you make me feel superfluous and helpless."

"A clinging vine that has nothing to cling to sprawls on the ground, doesn't it?"

Since he did not answer immediately, she reminded him:

"Better loosen your horse's cinch; he'll feed better."

He glanced at her oddly as he obeyed her. How practical she was! What she said was the right and sensible thing, of course, but was she, as she seemed, quite without sentiment?

He returned to his place beside her and they sat without speaking, watching the colors change on a bank of sudslike clouds and the shadows deepen in the gulches. It never occurred to the new Kate to make conversation, so she was unembarrassed by the silence. Save for an occasional whimsical soliloquy, she seldom spoke without a definite purpose

nowadays. To Disston, who remembered her faculty for finding something interesting or amusing in everything about which to chatter, the difference was noticeable.

It saddened him, the change in her, yet he was conscious that she still retained her strong attraction for him. With nerves relaxed, content, he had an absurd notion that he could sit beside her on that rock indefinitely, without speaking, and be happy.

Kate did not ask him the purpose of his visit, for her etiquette was the etiquette of the ranges, which does not countenance questions, and Disston, absorbed in the beauty of the sunset and his own thoughts, was in no mood to introduce the unpleasant subject of the dynamiting of the sheep wagon.

The pink deepened on gypsum cliffs and sandstone buttes of the distant Bad Lands, while purple shadows crept over the green foothills and blackened the canyons.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” he said, finally, in a half whisper.

“Yes,” she replied, huskily, wondering if Heaven itself had anything like this to offer.

It seemed as though without his volition his hand sought hers and covered it.

She left it so for a moment, then took hers away and got up abruptly.

“They are working up to the bed-ground and will lie down pretty soon. When they’re settled, I’ll go to camp and get you something to eat.” Her tone was matter-of-fact, casual. She stooped, and, picking up a pebble, tossed it at two bucks that were butting each other violently:

“Here—you! Stop it! You give me a headache to look at you.”

He did not even interest her, that was evident. Disston tried to assure himself that he would not have it otherwise, that anything else would be a misfortune in the circumstances; but self-deception was useless—his feelings were not a matter for argument or logic, they were of the heart, not the head, when he was near her, and his mind had nothing to do with them.

She walked away a little and stood apart with her face to the sunset, a lonely figure, silent, aloof, fitting perfectly into the picture. Disston tried to analyze his feelings, the emotions she inspired in him as he looked at her, but his lines of thought with their many ramifications always came back to the starting point—to the sure knowledge that he wanted her tremendously, that he yearned and hungered for her with every fiber of his nature.

She was the last woman in the world who would seem to need protection, yet he had a savage primitive desire to protect her, to put his arm about her and defy the world, if need be.

Beth's helpless femininity inspired no such passionate chivalry. He saved her annoyances, shielded her, helped her over the rough places, from habit—but this was different. And it had been so, he reflected, from that night at the Prouty House when he would gladly have fought those who had slighted and hurt her, when he would have shed blood, had his judgment not restrained him. Ever since then the least insinuation or slur against Kate had set his blood tingling, and Beth's ridicule had been one of the hardest things he had found to overlook in her. And, too, the curious serenity, the sense of completeness which came to him when she sat quietly beside him, puzzled him. He wondered if it was only a temporary state of mind, or would it last

forever if he were with her. He would conquer himself—of course, he must; and he had proved by his life thus far that he was strong enough to do anything he had to.

Suddenly Hugh felt a keen desire to know what she was thinking, that she was so long silent, and he asked her. He was not sure that she answered his question when she said prosaically:

"You had better go on down to camp and feed your horse—it's over the ridge there; make a fire and put on the tea kettle. I'll be down in half an hour or three-quarters."

Disston lingered to watch her as she pulled the bedroll from her horse; and, clearing a space with her foot, freeing it of sticks and pebbles, spread out the canvas, pulling the "tarp" over a pillow beneath which he noticed a box of cartridges and a six-shooter.

"For close work," she said, with a short laugh, observing his interest.

He did not join her; instead his brows contracted.

"I can't bear to think of you going through such hardships."

"This isn't hardship—I'm used to it—I like it. I like to get awake in the night and look at the stars and to feel the wind in my face. When it rains, I pull the tarp over my head, and I love to listen to the patter on it. The sheep 'bed' all around me, and some of them lie on the corners, so it's not lonely." She said it with a touch of defiance, as though she resented his pity and wished him to believe there was no room for it.

"You see," she added, "I'm a typical sheepherder, even to mumbling to myself occasionally."

The sheep in the meantime had grazed to the top of the ridge and had spread out over the flat

backbone for a few final mouthfuls before pawing their little hollows. Soon they would sink down singly and in pairs, by the dozen and half dozen, with a crackling of joints, their jaws waggling, sniffing, coughing, grunting from overladen stomachs, raising in their restless stirrings a little cloud of dust above the bed-ground.

As he stood to go, Disston pictured her night after night waiting in patient silence for the sheep to grow quiet and then creeping between her blankets to sleep among them.

He left her reluctantly at length, for he had a feeling that, since his time with her was short, each minute that he was away from her was wasted; but as it was her wish, he could do nothing less than comply and, obviously, she did not share his regret. So he followed her directions and was soon at the summer camp, established near a spring one lower ridge over.

A half hour passed—three-quarters. He smoked and looked at his watch frequently. The stars came out and the moon rose full. The fire burned down and the water cooled in the kettle. Whatever was detaining her? Impatient at first, Disston finally grew worried. He ate a little cold food that he found, and started to walk back to her.

He was well up the first ridge when a sharp report broke the night-stillness and brought him to an abrupt standstill. It was followed by another, then three, four—a number of shots in succession. It was not loud enough for a 30-30. It was the six-shooter! “For close work!” she had told him tersely.

If he had been in doubt before as to the exact word to apply to his feelings for Kate, there was no need to hesitate longer. What did it matter that she did not know how to pour tea gracefully and preside

at a dinner table? By God—he wanted her, and that was all there was to it!

He was breathless when he reached the top of the ridge and his heart was pounding with the exertion in the high altitude, but he gave a gasp of relief when he saw her standing in the moonlight with dead and dying sheep around her.

"What's the matter?" he called, when his breath came back to him sufficiently.

"Poison. Somebody has scattered little piles of saltpeter all over the summit. There's no cure for it, so I shot some of them to put them out of their agony."

In his relief at finding her unharmed, the loss of the sheep seemed of no moment and he did not realize what it meant to her until she said with a choke in her voice:

"They knew just where to hit me. I've scrimped and saved and sacrificed to buy those sheep—"

Her grief sent a flood of tenderness over him. He went to her swiftly, and taking the six-shooter gently from her hand laid it upon the ground.

"Come here," he said authoritatively, and drew her to him.

She did not resist, and her head dropped to his shoulder in a movement of disheartened weariness.

"Oh, Hughie—I'm so tired of fighting—so tired—of everything."

He smoothed her hair as he would have soothed a child, and said decisively—yet with a big tenderness:

"And you shan't do any more of it!"

He felt his heart breaking with the love he felt for her.

"Kiss me—Honey!" he said softly.

She winced at the old sweet term of endearment, then with a sharp intake of breath she raised her lips

to his. He was sure that no other woman's kiss could so draw the soul out of him. Beth seemed only a shadow—like someone long dead whose personality is recalled with an effort.

This was love—this was the sort of feeling the Creator intended men and women to have for each other—mysterious, inexplicable, yet real as Nature. It was as it should be. These thoughts passed through Disston's mind swiftly. Up there on top of the world, in the moonlight, any consideration which interfered seemed trifling and indefensible.

"You do love me?" He held her off a little and looked at her. He did not doubt it—he merely wanted to hear her say it.

She replied simply:

"Yes, Hughie. I have always."

"You're so unexpectedly sweet!" he cried, as he again drew her close to him. "I've never forgotten that about you." He laughed softly as he added, "I can't understand why everyone that knows you isn't in love with you."

"There's no one else who has ever seen this side of me. I am not even likable to most people."

"It isn't so! But if it were, it doesn't make any difference, for you're going to marry me—you're going home with me and live a woman's life—the kind for which you were intended."

The radiance that illuminated her face transformed and glorified it.

She was woman—all woman, at heart—he had not been mistaken, he thought rapturously as he looked at her.

She stared at him wide-eyed, dazzled by the picture as she breathed rather than whispered:

"To be with you always—never to be lonely again—to have some one that cared really when I was sick

or tired or heavy-hearted—never to be savage and bitter and vindictive, but to be glad every morning just to be living, and to know that each day would be a little nicer than the last one! It would be that way, wouldn't it, Hughie?"

"How could it be otherwise when just being together is happiness?" he answered.

"It's like peeking into Paradise," she said, wistfully.

"But you will—you'll promise me? You'll give up this?" There was a faint note of anxiety in his earnestness as he laid a hand upon her shoulder and looked at her steadily.

In the long space of time that she took to answer, the radiance died out of her face like a light that is extinguished slowly:

"I'll tell you in the morning, Hughie. I must think. I make mistakes when I do what my heart impels me to. My impulses have been wrong always. I rely upon my head nowadays. I am weak to-night, and I've just judgment enough left to know it."

"But, Kate!" he expostulated in a kind of terror. "There isn't anything to argue about—to consider. This isn't business."

She shook her head.

"I must think, Hughie. I'll tell you in the morning. You'd better go down to camp now," she urged gently. "There isn't anything to be done up here, for every sheep will die that got enough poison."

"I can't bear to think of leaving you alone up here," he protested vehemently. "Why not let me stay and you go down to the wagons?"

She shook her head.

"There's not the slightest danger. He's done his work for the present, and it may be a long time before I'm again molested."

"Whom do you mean?" he asked quickly.

"A 'breed' named Mullendore that hates me."

"Do you mean to say," incredulously, "that since you know who did it, he'll ever have another opportunity?"

"I can't prove it; and, besides," bitterly, "you don't know Prouty."

With a swift transition of mood she crept into his arms voluntarily, crying chokingly:

"Hold me close, Hughie! I feel so safe with your arms about me, as though nothing or nobody could hurt me ever!"

In the morning Kate drove down to the camp at daylight the few sheep that had not eaten enough of the saltpeter to kill them, or had missed it altogether—only a small percentage of the valuable herd that had started up the mountain.

Brusque, businesslike, she was as different from the girl who had clung to Hugh for love and sympathy as could well be imagined.

They had breakfast together in the cook tent, which in the summer camp was used as a dining tent also. It was while she was standing by the stove that she turned suddenly and said impulsively:

"Do you know, Hughie, I love to cook, this morning, and ordinarily I hate it! It's because it's for you—isn't it curious?" Her eyes were shining with a look of love that was warm and generous; then the tears filled them and she turned her back quickly.

"If I hadn't the same feeling about you, I might think so," he responded. "I'm simply aching to do something for you—to help you in some way—that's what I came for."

"Did you—really?" She looked at him gratefully.

"That—and because I couldn't stay away any longer. All the way up the trail I had a feeling that

you had hold of my heartstrings pulling me to you, and as if they would break if I didn't get to you faster. I can't describe it exactly, but it was as real as an actual physical sensation."

She looked her understanding, though she made no response.

When breakfast was over and they had washed the dishes together in a silence which each felt momentous, Kate said finally:

"You'd better tack a shoe on your horse before you go. If you don't know how, I'll show you." He took her hand and looked at her searchingly:

"Is that my answer?"

As she stood with her back against the table she gripped the edge of it tightly.

"I guess it is, Hughie. I've thought it all out and it seems best."

"I can't—I won't believe you mean that!" he exclaimed, passionately.

"But I do. There are many reasons why I can't leave here and do as you ask."

"And," incredulously, "the fact that we love each other doesn't count?" He shook his head. "I must say I don't understand. I didn't know that you were so happy here—"

"Happy!" The color flooded her face as she cried fiercely, "Mostly it's—hell!"

"I don't comprehend at all."

"In the first place, your world and mine are far apart—that girl you brought to the corrals made me see that clearer than ever before. I might, in time, adapt myself—I don't know. I'm not ignorant of the things one can learn from books, and I'm not dull, but it would be an experiment, and if it failed it might be like that experience at the Prouty House on a larger scale. I would humiliate you and make you

ashamed." Then, looking at him searchingly, she added: "Tell me the truth, Hughie—haven't you thought something of this yourself?"

"I realize, of course," he admitted candidly, "that naturally there would be situations which would be difficult for you at first; but what of that? You'll learn. You are more than intelligent—you have brains, and your instincts are right from first to last. I tell you I love you, and nothing else counts. I'm so sure of the result that I'm willing to risk the experiment."

Her eyes, fixed upon him, shone with pride, and there was a note of exultation in her voice as she cried:

"I hoped you would say that!"

He smiled back:

"You're tricky, Kate. You set traps for me. But," impatiently, "go on; if your other reasons are not more serious than this—"

She looked at him speculatively and doubtfully:

"I wonder, if I can make you see things from my point of view—if it's possible for you to understand how I feel. Our lives and experiences have been so different. I'm afraid I shall fail. It's just this—" an expression of grim purpose which he saw was not new to it settled upon her face—"I've set myself a goal; it's in sight now and I've got to reach it. If I stopped, I know that the feeling that I had been a quitter when a real temptation came to me would gnaw inside of me until I was restless and discontented, and I would have a contempt for myself that I don't believe ever would leave me.

"When people live alone a lot they get to know themselves—the way their minds work, their moods and the causes, their dispositions; and I know that whether my judgment is right or wrong I've got to

follow the trail stretching away before me until I've reached my destination."

"What is it you want to do, Kate? Why can't I help you?"

"I want success—money! It's the only weapon for a woman in my position. Without it she's as helpless as though her hands were shackled and left a target for every one who chooses to throw a stone at her. It's an obsession with me. I've sworn to win out here, by myself, single-handed; it's a vow as sacred as an oath to me! It means time, patience, hardships and more hardships; and after this I'm going to suffer because you've shown me what I'm turning my back on. But no matter," fiercely, "I can crucify myself, if necessary!"

"It isn't yet clear to me why success means so much to you," he said, bewildered.

"Because," she cried, "soon after you left I went through purgatory for that want of money, and because I was nobody—because I was 'Mormon Joe's Kate,' accused of murder, and the daughter of 'Jezebel of the Sand Coulee,' and have nobody for a father!"

"Why didn't you ask me to come when I telegraphed you!"

"I didn't dare—I was afraid to test you. If you, too, had failed me, it would have crushed me. Perhaps all this sounds absurd and melodramatic, but I can't help it.

"You know, everybody has some little quirk in his brain that makes him different—some trait that isn't quite normal. I've come to watch for it, and it's always there, even in the most commonplace people. It's the quirk which, when accentuated, makes religious fanatics, screaming suffragists and anarchists. My 'twist' takes the form of an

uncontrollable desire to retaliate upon those who have deliberately, through sheer cruelty and without any personal reason for their animosity, gone out of their way to hurt me."

That was it, then—she had been hurt—terribly!

Her eyes were like steel, her voice trembled with the intensity of the passion that shook her as she continued:

"I hate them in Prouty! I can't conceive of any other feeling towards the town or its inhabitants. I don't suppose it will ever come in my way to pay in full the debt I owe them, but I can at least by my own efforts rise above them and force their grudging recognition!"

"I understand now," Disston said slowly. "But, Kate, is it worth the price you'll pay for it?"

"I'm used to paying well for everything, whether it's success or experience," she replied bitterly. "As I feel now, it's worth the sacrifice demanded, and I'm willing to make it."

"It's like seeing a great musician concentrate his energies upon the banjo—he may dignify the instrument, but he belittles himself in doing it. Kate," he pleaded, "don't throw away any years of happiness! Don't hurt your own character for a handful of nonentities whose importance you exaggerate! I'm right, believe me."

"I am as I am, and I have to learn all my lessons by experience."

"It may be too late when you've learned this one," he said sadly.

"Too late!" She shivered. A specter rose before her that she had seen before—hard-featured, domineering, unloved, unloving, chafing in ghastly solitude, alone with her sheep and her money, and the best years of her life behind her. She saw herself

as her work and her thoughts would make her. For an instant she wavered. If Disston had known, he might have swayed her then, but, since he could not, he only said with an effort:

"If your love for me isn't big enough to make you abandon this purpose, I shan't urge you. I know it would be useless. You have a strange nature, Kate—a mixture of steel and velvet, of wormwood and honey."

Absorbed in the swiftly moving panorama that was passing before her, she scarcely heard him. She was gazing at a bizarre figure in a wreath of paper roses trip down a staircase, radiant and eager—to be greeted by mocking eyes and unsuppressed titters; at a crowded courtroom, staring mercilessly, tense, with unfriendly curiosity; at Neifkins with his insolent stare, his skin, red, shiny, stretched to cracking across his broad, square-jawed face; at Wentz, listening in cold amusement to a frightened, tremulous voice pleading for leniency; at a sallow face with dead brown eyes leering through a cloud of smoke, suggesting in contemptuous familiarity, "Why don't you fade away—open a dance hall in some live burg and get a liquor license?"; at Mrs. Toomey, pinched with worry and malnutrition, a look of craven cowardice in her blue eyes, blurting out in the candor of desperation, "Your friendship might hurt us in our business!"

She saw it all—figures and episodes passed in review before her, even to irrelevant details, and each contributed its weight to turn the scales in this crisis.

"It's the fork of the road," she said in curt decision, "and I've chosen."

There was something so implacable in her face and voice and manner that Disston felt like one shut

out behind a door that is closed and bolted; he had a sensation as though his heart while warm and beating had been laid upon the unresponsive surface of cold marble. The chill of it went all through him. With another woman than Kate he might still have argued. But he could only look at her sorrowfully:

"When you are older, and have grown more tolerant and forgiving, I'm afraid you will find that you have chosen wrongly."

"If ever I should grow tolerant and forgiving," she cried fiercely, "then I will have failed miserably."

CHAPTER XXI

“HEART AND HAND”

“Come in, Bowers.” Kate looked up from the market report she was reading as her trusted lieutenant scraped his feet on the soap box which did duty as a step to the tongue of the sheep wagon.

After a final glance at the report, during which Bowers eyed the mail sack with interest, she folded the sheet and turned to him inquiringly.

“I wisht you’d order some turpentine—'bout two quarts of it,” he said.

“What do you want with so much?” She reached for a pad and pencil to make a note.

“Ticks. I never seen the beat of ’em. I bet I picked a thousand off me a'ready this season. They ain’t satisfied with grabbin’ me from a sagebrush as I go by, but when they gits wind of me they trails me up and jumps me. All the herders is complainin’.”

“How’s the new herder doing?”

Bowers’s face clouded. “Dibert’s havin’ trouble with Neifkins’s herder—says the feller does most of his herdin’ in the wagon, and there would a been a ‘mix’ a dozen times if he hadn’t been with his sheep every minute. Dibert says it looks to him like the feller’s doin’ it on purpose.”

"I don't know but what I'd rather have it that way than for them to be too friendly. More 'mixes' come from herders visiting than any other cause, and I wouldn't run that band through the chutes for three hundred dollars. It would take that much fat off of them, to say nothing of the bother. Who is Neifkins's herder?"

"I ain't seen him. Dibert says he's an o'nery looker."

"Next time you go over, notify him that he's to herd lines closer. If he keeps on crowding, I'll take a dog and set his sheep back where they belong so they won't forget it. You can tell him. You think Dibert's all right, do you?"

"Well," Bowers replied judicially, "he's one of these fellers that would fight like hell fer his sheep one day, and the next, if you brought him prunes instead of the aprycots he'd ordered, he'd turn 'em loose to the coyotes to git hunks with you. He's all right, only he's crazy."

Kate shrugged a shoulder.

"Is there much water-hemlock in the gulch this summer?"

"Quite a bit of it—it's spreadin'. Neifkins has lost several sheep a'ready by poison, but it's careless herdin'."

"I should own that section," Kate commented. "It's public land. I could have it put up at auction and buy it in, but I suppose they'd run the price up on me just to make me pay for it. How are Svenson's lambs doing?"

"They're so fat they can't play—and Woods's got twenty-five hundred of the best wethers that ever blatted!"

Kate's eyes sparkled.

"I'm going to be a real Sheep Queen, Bowers, if

wool and mutton keep climbing. The price of wool is the highest in its history."

Bowers looked at her in mute admiration. He was always loyal, but when she was sociable and friendly like this he adored her. Alas, however, the times when she was so were yearly growing rarer.

Kate went on tentatively:

"I think I'll 'cut' for a hard winter. You know my motto, 'Better be sure than sorry.'"

"I wouldn't be surprised if 'twan't a humdinger—last winter was so open. I think we'd be safer if we ship everything that's fat enough."

Bowers always said "we" when he spoke of the Outfit, though he was still only a camptender working for wages.

Kate relied upon him to keep her informed of the details of the business, which she had less time than formerly to look after personally. His judgment was sometimes at fault, but she trusted his honesty implicitly and, though she gave him little of her confidence, it was so much more than she gave to any other person that he was flattered by it.

"Guess what that Boston woolbuyer is offering me?" She tapped a letter.

"No idee."

"Twenty-six cents."

Bowers whistled.

"Gosh a'mighty! You're goin' to take it, ain't you?"

"I'll get a quarter more, if I hold out for it."

His face fell a little.

"I'll get it!" Her voice had a metallic quality. "It's a fine long staple, and clean. If he won't, some one else will give it to me."

The sheep woman had the reputation now of being difficult to deal with, of haggling over

fractions, and it was of this that Bowers was thinking. To others he would never admit that she was anything but perfect, though to himself he acknowledged the hardening process that was going on in her. He saw the growth of the driving ambition which made her indifferent to everything that did not tend to her personal interest.

Outside of himself and Teeters, Kate took no interest whatever in individuals. There was no human note in her intercourse with those who worked for her. She cared for results only, and showed it.

They resented her appraising eyes, her cold censure when they blundered, her indifference to them as human beings, and they revenged themselves in the many ways that lie in a herder's power if he cares to do so.

They gave away to the dry-farmers in the vicinity the supplies and halves of mutton she furnished them. In the lambing season they left the lambs whose mothers refused to own them to die when a little extra effort would have saved them. When stragglers split off from the herd they made no great attempt to recover them. They shot at coyotes and wildcats when it was convenient, but did not go out of their way to hunt them.

She was just but not generous. She never had spared herself, and she did not spare her herders. "Hard as nails" was the verdict in general. In her presence they were taciturn to sullenness; among themselves they criticised her constantly, exaggerating her faults and taking delight in recounting her failures. She was too familiar with every detail of the business for her men to dare to neglect her interests too flagrantly, but they had learned to a nicety how high their percentage of

losses might run without getting their “time” for it.

Bowers knew of this silent hostility, which was so unnecessary, but he dared not speak of it. He could only deny that she had faults and resent it with violence when the criticisms become too objectionable.

If Kate had known of the antagonism, it would have made no difference—she would rather have taken the losses it entailed than to conciliate. She would have argued that if she was harsh, imperious, it was her privilege—she had earned it.

Life for Kate had resolved itself into an unromantic routine—like extracting the last penny for her wool that was possible, shipping on favorable markets, acquiring advantageous leases, discharging incapable herders and hiring others, eliminating waste and unnecessary expenditures, studying range conditions against hard winters.

“Any mail for the herders?” Bowers asked, innocently, since she showed no disposition to give him her confidence farther.

He watched her intently as she sorted the mail, tossing him a paper finally from which he removed the wrapper with a certain eagerness. He peered into it with a secrecy that attracted her attention, and, looking at it hard, Kate recognized it as the publication of a matrimonial agency.

“Bowers, you surprise me!” She regarded him quizzically.

Bowers started guiltily.

“Aw—it’s one they sent me,” he said disparagingly—“jest a sample copy.”

“Bowers, I think you’re lying,” she accused him good-humoredly. “Tell me the truth—didn’t you send for it?”

He squirmed and colored.

“I did write to ’em—out of cur'osity.”

“Don’t forget that married men are not hired into this Outfit,” she reminded him, smiling. “I’d be sorry to lose you.”

“Gosh a'mighty!” he protested vigorously. “I ain’t no use fer women!”

The subject seemed to interest him, however, for he continued with animation:

“They’s always somethin’ about ’em I don’t like when I git to know ’em. I’ve knowed several real well—six or eight, altogether, countin’ two that run restauraws and one that done my warshin’. I got a kind o’ cur'osity about ’em, but I don’t take no personal interest in ’em. Why—Gosh—a'mighty—”

Bowers nearly kicked the stove over in his embarrassed denial.

Kate looked after him speculatively as he made his escape in a relief that was rather obvious. His protests had been too vehement to be convincing. Was he growing discontented? Didn’t her friendship satisfy him any longer?

There was something of the patient trust of a sheepdog in Bowers’s fidelity. “The queen can do no wrong,” was his attitude. Kate was so accustomed to his devotion and admiration that it gave her a twinge to think of sharing it.

She called after him as he was leaving:

“If you meet that freighter, tell him for me he’ll get his check if he gets in again as early as he did last trip. I won’t have a horse left with a sound pair of shoulders.”

“And I fergot to tell you that somebody’s ‘salted’ over in Burnt Basin,” he answered, turning back. “There’s a hunerd head o’ cattle eatin’ off the feed there. We’ll need that, later.”

“Tsch! tsch!” Kate frowned her annoyance at the

information.

"Be sure and warn Neifkins's herder as soon as you can get around to it," she reminded him.

"You bet!" Bowers responded cheerfully, and went on.

Yes, she certainly would miss Bowers if anything happened that he left her, she thought as she turned inside to her market report and her letters.

It was days, however, before Bowers found the opportunity to go to Dibert's camp with supplies and incidentally warn Neifkins's herder, if he was still crowding. Now as he jolted towards the fluttering rag, thrust in a pile of rocks to mark the location of Dibert's sheep-wagon, his thoughts, for once, were not of sheep or anything pertaining to them. He was, forsooth, composing for the matrimonial paper an advertisement which should be sufficiently attractive to draw a few answers without making himself in any way liable. He thought he might with safety say that he was a single gentleman, crowding forty, interested in the sheep industry, who would be pleased to correspond with a plump blonde of about thirty. He would not go so far as to say that his object was matrimony, since, of course, it was not, and the declaration might somehow prove incriminating. The Denver *Post* was full of suits for breach of promise and it behooved him to be wary.

Bowers felt like a fox, at the adroit wording of the advertisement, and chuckled at his cunning. He would notify the postmaster in Prouty to hold out his mail for him and thus escape further "joshing" from Kate, who would be sure to observe letters addressed to him in feminine writing.

The matrimonial paper had proved to be in the nature of a debauch to Bowers, who had worn it to tatters poring over its columns. The "petite blondes"

and “dashing brunettes” who enumerated their charms without any noticeable lack of modesty furnished food for his imagination. He selected brides, as the description pleased him, with the prodigal abandon of a sultan.

However, the idea of an advertisement of his own, dismissed promptly at first, grew upon him. The thought of getting something in the mail besides a catalogue and the speeches of his congressman, of having something actually to look forward to, appealed to him strongly the more he considered it. Bowers craved a little of the warmth of romance in his drab existence and this was the only way he knew of obtaining it.

Smiling at the brash act he contemplated, Bowers threw the brake mechanically as the front wheels of the wagon sank into a chuck-hole and the jolt all but landed him on the broad rump of Old Peter.

As he raised his eyes he saw a sight charged with significance to one familiar with it.

Neifkins’s sheep were coming down the side of the mountain like a woolly avalanche. In the shape of a wedge with a leader at the point of it, they were running with a definite purpose and as though all the dogs in sheepdom were heeling them. The very thing against which he had come to warn the herders was about to happen—the band was making straight for Dibert’s sheep, which were still feeding peacefully on the hillside.

With an imprecation that was not flattering to either herder, Bowers wrapped the lines around the brake and leaped over the wheel to head them if it were possible. But they seemed possessed by all the imps of Satan, as they came on bleating, hurdling boulders, letting out another link of speed at Bowers’s frantic shoutings.

The leaders of the two bands were not fifty feet apart when Bowers, realizing he could not get between them, reached for a rock with a faint hope that he might hit what he aimed for. His prayer was answered, for the ewe in the lead of Neifkins's band blinked and staggered as the rock bounced on her forehead. With a surprised bleat she turned and started back up the mountain, the rest of the band following.

The perspiration was streaming from under Bowers's hat as his eyes searched the surrounding country. Not a sign of either herder! A cactus thorn that had penetrated his shoe leather did not improve Bowers's temper. As he sat down to extract it, he considered whether it would be advisable to pound Dibert to a jelly when he found him or wait until they got a herder to replace him.

The man's horse and saddle were missing in camp, Bowers discovered, so it was fairly safe to assume that he was over visiting Neifkins's herder.

After Bowers had brought the supply wagon up and unloaded, he secured the horses and started on foot up the mountain.

From the summit he could see the white canvas top of Neifkins's wagon gleaming among the quaking asp well down the other slope of the mountain. No one was visible, but as he got closer he saw Dibert's horse tied to the wheel. Bowers felt "hos-tile."

"What you doin' here?" he demanded unceremoniously, as Dibert, hearing the rocks rattle, all but tumbled out of the wagon in his eagerness.

"I never was so tickled to see anybody in my life!" he cried.

"I'm about as pleased to see you as a stepmother welcomin' home the first wife's children," Bowers replied, eyeing him coldly. "You ain't answered my

question."

The herder nodded towards the wagon:

"He's come down with somethin'. Clean off"—he touched his forehead—"I dassn't leave him."

Bowers immediately went into the wagon, where, after a look at the man mumbling on the bunk, he said laconically:

"Tick bite."

The brown blotches, flushed forehead, and burning eyes told their own story.

As Bowers continued to look at the sick man, with his unshaven face and mop of oily black hair, so long that it was beginning to curl, Dibert commented:

"He ain't what you'd call pretty—I've no idee he has to keep a rock handy to stone off the ladies."

But Bowers was searching his mind in the endeavor to recall where he had seen those curious eyes with the muddy blue-gray iris. It came to him so suddenly that he shouted it:

"I know him! It's the feller that blowed up my wagon! It's the—that killed Mary!"

CHAPTER XXII

MULLENDORE WINS

Kate sat on the side bench listening to Mullendore's disjointed mumblings. It was now well towards midnight and she had been sitting so for hours in the hope that he might have a lucid moment, but to the present her vigil had been unrewarded. Mostly his sentences were a jumble relative to trapping or sheep. Again, he lay inert with his eyes fixed upon her face in a meaningless stare.

Gusts of wind shook the wagon and swayed the kerosene lamp in its bracket, while a pounding rain beat a tattoo on the canvas cover. The tension was telling on Kate and a kind of nervous frenzy grew upon her as the time dragged by and she was no nearer learning what she had hoped to learn—than when she had had Mullendore brought to her camp.

She and Bowers had taken turns guarding him, and in growing despair she had watched him weaken, for each day the chances lessened that his mind would clear; and now Kate sat staring back into his unblinking eyes asking herself if it was possible that his crime was to be buried with him and she must go on the rest of her life bearing the onus of his guilt? The answer to every question she wanted to know was locked in the breast of the emaciated man lying on the bunk.

Bowers had proved to be correct in his diagnosis. The headache, backache, stiff neck and muscles with which Mullendore's illness had started were the forerunner of brown blotches, fever and jangling nerves. A virulent case of spotted fever, it was pronounced by "Doc" Fussel, who doubted that he would recover.

"I'd knock him in the head and put him to bed with a shovel, if 'twere me," Bowers had grumbled when he had helped move Pete Mullendore over to Kate's headquarters.

"We've got to make him talk," Kate had replied grimly. "We've got to get the truth somehow, Bowers, before he goes."

Kate had no prearranged plan as to the course she would pursue if Mullendore became rational, but trusted to her instinct to guide her. She was certain only of one thing—that if he had a spark of manhood in him she would reach it somehow. Though he inspired in her a feeling which was akin to her repugnance for creeping things, and there were moments when something like her childish terror of the half-breed trapper returned, she was determined that there were no lengths to which she would not go, in the way of humbling her pride, to attain her end.

The clock, ticking loudly on its nail, said midnight, and still Mullendore, deaf and blind to all save the fantastic world into which he stared, mumbled incoherently.

At last, unable longer to sit quietly, Kate arose and leaned over him.

"Do you remember the Sand Coulee, Pete?—the Sand Coulee Roadhouse where you used to stop?" she asked softly.

His mumblings ceased as if her voice had penetrated his dulled ears. Then his lips moved:

"The Sand Coulee Roadhouse—the Sand Coulee —"

"Where you trapped. Remember the bear hides you brought in that spring Katie left?"

"The pack's slippin' agin—them saddles is far and away too narrer—and them green hides weigh like lead—" He ran his words together like a person talking in his sleep.

"You load too heavy—you load to break a horse's back—Katie Prentice always told you that."

A troubled frown grew between his eyes as though he was groping, vainly groping for some elusive thought.

"Katie told me—Katie Prentice—" His voice trailed off and ended in a breath.

She made a gesture of despair, but repeated persistently:

"She told you that you ought to be ashamed to pack a horse like that. Three hundred pounds, Pete Mullendore! You haven't any feeling for a horse."

"Killed Old Blue and left him on the trail. My, but you're gittin' growed up fast. Ain't you got a kiss for Pete?"

She leaned closer.

"Would you do something for me if I kissed you—if Katie Prentice kissed you, Pete Mullendore?"

She repeated her words, speaking in a whisper, with careful distinctness.

"Will you tell Katie something that she wants to know, if she kisses you, Pete Mullendore?"

"Goin' to take you back to the mountings next trip—learn you to tan hides good—with ashes and deer brains—all—same—squaw—make good squaw out o' you—Katie—break your spirit first—you brat—lick you till I break your heart."

Katie's hands clenched.

"My mother wouldn't let me go with you!"

A shadowy cunning crossed his face.

"You'll go, when I say so. I got the whip-hand o' Jezebel."

"You're bragging, Pete Mullendore. My mother's not afraid of you."

"Jest a line on a postal—ud bring the Old Man on a special. You're more afraid of the Old Man than you are of dyin'—ain't it the truth, Isabelle?" he mumbled.

"You're only talking to hear yourself—you wouldn't know where to write. You've forgotten the name of the town where the 'Old Man' lives. You can't remember at all, can you, Pete?"

A frown lined his forehead while she waited with parted lips, afraid to move lest she start him rambling elsewhere again.

"You couldn't say the name of the town where Katie Prentice's father lives!"

Bending over him, rigid, tense, it seemed as though she would draw the answer from him through sheer will power.

He rolled his head fretfully to and fro, looking into her eyes with dilated pupils that burned in yellow bloodshot eyeballs. The wind rattled loose wagon bolts and scattered the ashes on the hearth in a puff, while Kate with a thumping heart waited for a response.

"*Think!*" she urged. "Say it out loud, Mullendore—the name of the town you'd put on the postal if you were going to write to the 'Old Man.'"

His lips moved to speak, and then somewhat as if the habit of secrecy asserted itself even in his delirium, he checked himself with an expression of obstinacy on his face.

Kate's hand crept to his shoulder and clutched it tight.

"Tell me, Pete!" She shook him hard. "Say it—quick!"

He muttered thickly:

"What for?"

"You're a liar, Pete Mullendore!" she taunted. "You don't know. You haven't any idea where Katie Prentice's father lives!"

The gibe brought no response; yet slowly, so gradually that it was not possible to tell when it

began, a look that was wholly rational came into his eyes. He blinked, touched his dry lips with his dry tongue and, turning his head, recognized her without surprise.

"Git me a drink."

She held a dipper to his lips.

He fixed his eyes upon her face.

"I been sick?"

"Spotted fever."

He stirred slightly.

"What's this?" A weak astonishment was in his voice as he felt a rope across his arms and chest.

"To keep you in bed."

"I been—loony?"

She nodded.

He looked at her quizzically.

"Emptied my sack?"

"You've talked."

He lay motionless, staring at her fixedly; then, as if arriving at a conclusion:

"Guess I didn't say much."

"You said plenty," significantly.

"But not enough, eh?" he jeered.

She regarded him silently.

"Where am I, anyhow?"

"In my camp."

"Oh." He considered a moment, then mocked, "Got religion?"

"Not yet," curtly.

"Jest wanted me close? Ol' friends are the best friends—ain't they?" He grinned weakly at her.

"Pete," slowly, "there are some questions I want to ask you."

"Thought it was about time for the pumps to start. What do you want to know?"

Kate's heart leaped. She endeavored to steady her

voice, to keep out of her face the eagerness with which she trembled, as she replied:

"I want to know who my father is—where he is, if he's alive. Oh, Pete!" Her hands came together beseechingly, "Tell me that—I beg of you tell me about him."

Satisfaction glistened in his eyes.

"I thought that would be it! The only civil words I ever got out of you when you was a kid was when you hoped to make me loosen up and talk to you about him." Then he asked again with an expression she could not interpret, "You're sure you'd ruther I give up that than anything else on earth?"

"Yes, Pete!" she gulped. "It means so much to me."

"I guess yes. The ground wouldn't be good enough for your feet if the 'Old Man' had you."

"Is that the truth? He'd care for me like that? Oh, Pete!"

"Care? He'd worship you. Them Prouty folks would bite themselves if they could see your Old Man," he chuckled faintly.

"He is still living, then? Oh, Pete!" She extended two pleading hands impulsively, "Don't make me wait!"

Something other than fever glittered in his eyes, and there was more than satisfaction in his voice when he said:

"That's somethin' like it—somethin'—not quite! It's sweeter nor music to hear you beg. But, damn you, you ain't humble enough yet!"

"What do you want me to do?" she cried. "I'll—I'll get down on my knees, if only you'll tell me what I want to know!"

"That's it!" in shrill excitement. "Get down on your knees. I ain't forgot that you called me a

‘nigger’ once, and hit me with a quirt. It’ll kinda wipe it out to see you crawlin’ to Pete, that you always treated like dirt. Git down on your knees and beg, if you want me to talk!”

She sank to the floor of the wagon without a word.

He looked at her queerly as she knelt. There was intense gratification in his voice, “You do want to know, when you’ll swaller that.”

“Yes, Pete,” humbly, “I do.”

His thin hands lay inert upon the soogan. His head turned weakly while he kept his eyes upon her as though enjoying the situation to the utmost. There was a silence in which he seemed both to be gathering strength and considering how to begin.

“He’s the kind of a feller—your Old Man—that don’t have to holler his head off to git himself heard. They’d listen in any man’s country when he talks. He don’t talk much, but what he says goes—the kind that can always finish what he starts.

“He’s six feet, and there wasn’t any man in the country could handle him in those days. I’ve seen him throw a three-year-ol' steer like you’d slap over a kid. He was easy and quiet, commonly, like one of them still deep rivers that slip along peaceful till somethin’ gits in its way. The patientest feller I ever see with dumb brutes, and a patience that wasn’t hardly human, even with folks. But when he did break loose—well, them that thought he was 'harmless’ and went too far on account of it never made the same mistake twice.”

He continued with evident relish:

“That’s where he fooled her—Isabelle—she didn’t read him right. She thought he was ‘soft’ because she had her way with him.”

“They were married, Pete?”

"Married, right enough—he never thought any other way about her. She was all-the-same angel to him," he grinned. "She never was straight—we all knowed that but him, but she was slick, and she was swingin' her throwrope for him in about a week after they brought her in from the Middle West to teach the school in that district. Anybody that said a word ag'in' her to him would have gone to the hospital. So he went ahead and married her—while she laffed at him to his own hired men.

"If he'd worked her over with a quirt about onct a month, instead of wonderin' what he could do for her next, he might have had her yet.

"If he made a door-mat out of hisself before, it was worse after you come. He was the greatest hand for little things that ever I see—colts, kittens, calves, puppies and a baby! He walked the floor carrying you on a pillow for fear you'd break.

"It was too slow for Isabelle—that life—and only one man to fetch and carry for her. We used to make bets among ourselves as to how long 'twould last, and the short-time man won out. She liked 'em 'tough,' she said—no white-collared gents for her; and she got what she was lookin' for when she throwed in with Freighter Sam that hauled supplies from the railroad to the ranch.

"They skipped out between daylight and dark and made as clean a getaway as ever was pulled off. But where she made her big mistake was takin' you along. If it hadn't been for that, he wouldn't a-walked a half mile to bring her back. Twenty-four hours put ten years on him, and he never squeaked. But if he'd caught that freighter he'd took him by the heels and swung him like you'd knock a rabbit's brains out agin a post.

"He went over the country with a fine-tooth

comb, hopin' to git you back. A couple of times he almost closed in on 'em, but they managed to give him the slip and headed north while mostly he hunted south and west.

"You was well growed before I run into 'em. Freighter Sam used to bang her head agin the door jamb about twict a week, and they got along good until he fell for a hasher in an eatin' house and quit Isabelle cold. She hit bottom pretty pronto after that." Mullendore stopped.

"But my father, Pete;—tell me more about him!"

He eyed her with a quizzical and appraising look before he replied:

"You favor the Old Man as much as if you was made out of the mud that was left when they was done workin' on him. Your eyes, your mouth, your chin—the way you walk and stand—the easy style you set a horse. As the sayin' is, 'You're the spit out of his mouth.' God A'mighty! Wouldn't he spile you if you was with him!"

"But you don't tell me where he is, Pete!"

He ignored the interruption and said with slow malice, watching her face:

"I've often thought what a shame it was that you two never got together—a hankerin' for each other so."

Something in his tone struck terror to her heart.

"But you're going to tell me, Pete? You are! You are!" She crawled closer to the bunk, on her knees.

A passionate satisfaction glittered in his eyes.

"Yes! it's a plumb pity that you and him never happened to meet up."

There was cold cruelty in his tantalizing voice.

"You mean—you mean—" she stammered with colorless lips—"that—that you're only tormenting me again—you don't intend—"

"That depends." His pupils dilated, his white teeth gleamed.

"But you promised, Pete! Haven't you any honor —not a speck?"

"I git what I want any way I can git it. That's me —Mullendore."

"Tell me what you want! Is it money, Pete?"

"Money! Hell! What's money good for to me? Money's only to blow after you've got enough to eat. What do you spose I want? I want you!"

"What do you mean?"

"Just that." An oath came between his clenched teeth. "I'm stuck on you! I want you so I hate you, if you can understand that—and always have. I'd like to take you off like a dog packs a bone away for himself. I've dealt you and your sheep all the misery I could, because every step you took up was just so far from me. What I've done," savagely, "is nothin' to what I'll do when I git out of this, if you don't say yes."

Kate's face, that had gone scarlet, was a grayish white as she got up slowly from her knees.

Her breathing was labored as she demanded:

"You—mean—that—you'll—not—tell me anything more unless I do what you ask?"

"You got it right."

Kate's nerves and self-control gave way as a taut string snaps. In the center of a black disc she saw only the mocking eyes and evil face of Mullendore.

"I'm going to kill you, Pete! I'm—going—to choke you—to death! You—shan't torment me—any more!"

Her strong hands were close to his throat while he shrank from the white fury in her face. Suddenly her arms dropped to her sides. Such a feeling of physical repulsion swept over her that she could not touch him even in her rage.

"Lost your nerve?" he mocked. "Old Pete wins again, eh, Kate?"

She did not answer but stepped out on the wagon tongue that the cool rain might patter in her face. Her knees were shaking beneath her and she felt nauseated—sick with a feeling of absolute defeat.

CHAPTER XXIII

WHEN THE BLACK SPOT HIT

Teeters moved in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.

Outwardly, there would seem to be no possible connection between his presence in the living room at Happy Wigwam making himself even more than ordinarily agreeable, and the confession he desired to wring from the murderer of Mormon Joe.

Years of "Duding," however, had given Teeters a confidence in himself and his diplomacy which would seem to be justified, for, as he rightly argued, "A man who can handle dudes can do anything."

Now, he knew that if he had come to Mrs. Taylor and bluntly asked the use of her supernatural gifts in Kate's behalf she would have refused him.

Kate had gone to Teeters in despair after her failure with Mullendore, hoping that he might have something to suggest which had not occurred to her. She had told him all that had happened, and among other things, that she knew now that the "breed" had negro blood in him.

"It probably accounts for his secret belief in an old-fashioned, brimstone hell," she had added. "He denies it, of course, but I'm sure it's the one thing he's really afraid of."

The information had impressed Teeters.

"You go back and keep the varmit alive until I git there," he had advised her. "I got a black speck in my brain, and every time it hits the top of my head I get an idea—I think it's goin' to strike directly."

The present visit was evidence that it had done so. The situation was one which demanded all his subtlety, but what possible bearing the deep interest with which he was eying the garment Mrs. Taylor was repairing could have upon it, the most astute would have found it difficult to imagine.

The bifurcated article of wearing apparel was of outing flannel, roomy where amplitude was most needed, gathered at the waist with a drawstring, confined at the ankle by a deep ruffle—a garment of amazing ugliness.

"I suppose," Teeters ventured guilelessly, "them things is handier than skirts to git over fences and do chores in?" Then, with an anticipatory air, he waited.

He was not disappointed. Mrs. Taylor laid down her work and, throwing back her head, burst into laughter that was ringing, Homeric, reverberating through the house like some one shouting in a canyon. It continued until Teeters was alarmed lest he had overdone matters.

She subsided finally and, wiping her streaming

eyes on a ruffle, shook a playful finger at him:

"Clarence, you are killing—simply killing!"

Teeters did not deny it. He had not yet recovered from the fear that he might be. But he had accomplished what he had intended—he had furnished Mrs. Taylor with the "one good laugh a day" which she declared her health and temperament demanded.

After a pensive silence Teeters looked up wistfully:

"I wonder if you and Miss Maggie would sing somethin'. I git a reg'lar cravin' to hear good music."

Mrs. Taylor laid down her work with a pleased expression.

"Certainly, Clarence. Is there anything in particular?"

"If it ain't too much trouble, I'd like, 'Oh, Think of the Home Over There.'"

"I'm delighted that your mind sometimes turns in that direction. I've sometimes feared, Clarence, that you were not religious."

Mr. Teeters looked pained at the suggestion.

"I don't talk about religion much," he replied earnestly, "but there's somethin' come up the last few days that set me thinkin' pretty serious."

Mrs. Taylor looked her curiosity.

"It's a turrible thing," Teeters wagged his head solemnly, "to see a feller layin' on his death-bed denyin' they's a Hereafter."

"Why, how dreadful! Who is it?"

"A sheepherder. He says they ain't no hell—nor nothin'."

"The po-oo-or soul! Is there any way I could talk to him?"

"I was hopin' you'd say that, but I didn't like to ask you, seein' as he's a sheepherder."

"They're human beings, Clarence," reproved Mrs. Taylor.

"I've heerd that questioned," declared Teeters, "but anyhow, a person with a heart in him no bigger than a bullet would have to be sorry to see this feller goin' to his everlasting punishment without repentin'. He's done murder."

"Murder!"

"I'll tell you about it to-morrow on the way over."

"Where is he?"

"At Kate Prentice's—at headquarters."

Mrs. Taylor stiffened.

"I shouldn't care to go there, Clarence." Seeing that his face clouded, she added: "Of course, if your heart is set upon it—the woman wouldn't construe it as a 'call' and return it, would she?"

"I hardly think so," replied Teeters dryly.

As a result of this conversation, the following morning Kate saw Teeters driving up Bitter Creek with a second person on the seat beside him. She had just come down from Burnt Basin and was not in too good a humor. Bowers, who was staying with Mullendore, came out of the wagon when he heard her and asked:

"How was it lookin'?"

"The spring was trampled to a bog," she said in an exasperated voice, "and the range is covered with bare spots where that dry-farmer has salted his cattle. I'll throw two bands of sheep in there, and when I take 'em off there won't be roots enough left to grow grass for five years. If it's fight he wants, I'll give him all he's looking for." Her brow cleared as she added:

"Teeters is coming up the road and bringing some one with him." She nodded towards the wagon,

"How is he?"

"I doubt if he lasts the day out."

Kate frowned when she recognized Mrs. Taylor. They passed occasionally on the road to Prouty, but always without speaking. Kate never had forgiven the affront at the Prouty House, while Mrs. Taylor preserved her uncompromising attitude towards "rough characters."

Mrs. Taylor looked like a grenadier in a long snuff-brown coat and jaunty sailor hat as she descended from the buckboard without using the step. The benign cow-like complacency of her face always had irritated Kate, and now, as she advanced with the air of a great lady slumming, Kate felt herself tingling.

"How do you do, my dear?" She extended a large hand with a brown cotton glove upon it.

Kate's hand remained at her side, as she said coldly:

"How do you do, Mrs. Taylor?"

Mrs. Taylor's manner said that it was the gracious act of an unsullied woman extending a hand to a fallen sister when she laid her brown cotton paw upon Kate's arm and quavered pityingly:

"You po-oo-or soul!"

"You stupid woman!" Kate's eyes at the moment looked like steel points emitting sparks.

Mrs. Taylor drew herself up haughtily and was about to retort, but thought better of it. Instead, she declared with noble magnanimity:

"I am not angery. I have not been angery in thirty years. You are very rude, but I can rise above it and forgive you, because I realize you've had no raising."

"I hope," said Kate hotly, "that you realize also that you are not here by my invitation."

Mrs. Taylor looked as if she was not only about to

forget that she was a saint but a lady, while Teeters had a sensation of being rent by feline claws.

It seemed like a direct intervention of Providence when Bowers hung out of the door of the wagon and called excitedly:

"I believe he's goin'!"

The exigencies of the moment, and curiosity, combined to make Mrs. Taylor overlook temporarily that she had been insulted, and she hastened with Teeters to the dying man's side.

Emaciated, yellow, Mullendore was lying with closed eyes when they entered.

"Say, feller—" said Teeters, hoping to rouse him.

Only Mullendore's faint breathing told them that he was living.

Mrs. Taylor laid her hand upon his damp forehead and withdrew it quickly.

"The po-oo-or soul! I'll sing something."

"It might help to git *ong rapport* with the sperrits," agreed Teeters.

As Mrs. Taylor droned a familiar camp-meeting hymn, Mullendore opened his eyes and looked at her dully:

"Who are you?" he whispered.

Mrs. Taylor quavered, "I've come to bring the Truth to you."

Mullendore looked at her, uncomprehending.

Teeters thrust himself in the sick man's line of vision and elucidated:

"Feller, I'm sorry to tell you you ain't goin' to 'make the grade'—they's no possible show fur you—an' Mis' Taylor here, who's a personal friend, you might say, of all the leadin' sperrits in the Sperrit World, has come to kind of prepare you—"

Mullendore's lips moved with an effort:

"There ain't nothin' after this."

"Oh, my!" Teeters ejaculated in a shocked voice. "Don't say heathen things like that! If you'd seen half of what I've saw you couldn't nowise doubt."

"There ain't no hell—there ain't no comin' back." The voice was stronger, and querulous.

Teeters wagged his head in horrified reproach.

"Mis' Taylor, do you think the sperrits are goin' to take holt?"

Turning to the lady who hoped to be his mother-in-law, Teeters's eyes started in his head. He was familiar with weird gyrations of the kitchen table, and messages received through the medium of the ouija board, but he never had seen the mysterious force which Mrs. Taylor referred to as her "control" evidence itself in any such fashion as this.

With her lank six feet sunk upon the side bench and her supine hands lying limply in her lap, Mrs. Taylor's chest was rising and falling in convulsive heaves; the nostrils of her large flat nose were dilated, and her wide mouth, with its loose colorless lips, was slightly agape. Her eyes were open and staring fixedly straight ahead. Mrs. Taylor was in a trance.

Teeters had long since given over trying to explain what he did not understand, but in a vague way he regarded Mrs. Taylor as an unconscious fakir, whose spiritual communications bore the earmarks of something she had learned in a quite ordinary way.

There was, however, nothing of charlatanry in her present state. Teeters was convinced of that. She caught and held the gaze of Mullendore's dull eyes. Suddenly she stiffened out like a corpse galvanized into life by an electric charge, then again sank back, and said thickly between labored breaths:

"It is turgid—dark—all is confusion—spirits are

assembling—they are spirits of unrest—there is no peace—no happiness. There is horror in every distorted face—they have met—violent deaths—they want to talk—they clamor to be heard—they—"

"It's a lie!" Mullendore's whisper was shrill, aspirate. "There ain't no other world! There ain't no comin' back!"

"Clouds roll up—" she went on, "clouds of red smoke—they shut the spirits out—new ones come—dim at first—but I can't see—yet. Wait!"

The woman's stare seemed to carry her through and beyond the wagon cover into the invisible world she peopled with the dead. Her body was rigid; her face had the ossified gray look of stone; the labored jerks in which she spoke racked her body with the effort that it cost.

"Now—they're coming! The smoke rolls back a bit—I see—quite plain—Oh! Oh!" A look of horror froze on her gray face, and her voice rose to a shriek. "He says he's Mormon Joe! He cries—Confess! Confess!"

To Mullendore with his inflamed brain and nerves jangling like a network of loose wire, she seemed like a direct emissary from the place of torment, which was as real to him as the wagon in which he lay.

The half-breed had tried to convince himself by saying over and over mechanically: "There ain't no hell—there ain't no comin' back—there ain't nothin' after this,"—but the denial was only of the lips—atavism was stronger than his will. He believed, as much as he believed that on the morrow the sun would rise, in a real and definite hell, filled with the shrieking spirits of the damned. In these final hours it had required all his weakened will to hide his fears and keep his tongue between his teeth. Now, like a man clinging by his finger tips to some small crevice

in a cliff, he suddenly gave up. As he relaxed his grip he whispered with the last faint remnant of his strength:

"I own up—I set the gun—I—I—"

Teeters slipped an arm about his shoulders and raised him up.

"Where did you git it, Mullendore?"

His answer was a breath.

"Toomey."

"One thing more—Where does Kate Prentice's father live? His address—quick!" Teeters shook the wasted shoulders in his haste.

The muddy blue-gray iris was divided in half by the closing upper lids. Beneath the glaze there seemed a last malicious spark. Then his tongue clicked as it dropped to the back of his mouth, and Mullendore was dead.

CHAPTER XXIV

TOOMEY GOES INTO SOMETHING

Few in Prouty denied that there were forty-eight hours in the day that began about six o'clock on Saturday night and lasted until the same hour

Monday morning. If there had been some way of taking a mild anesthetic to have carried them through this period, many no doubt would have resorted to it, for oblivion was preferable to consciousness during a Sunday in Prouty.

It could not, strictly, be called a Day of Rest, because there was not sufficient business during the week to make any one tired enough to need it.

When the church bells tinkled, the Episcopalians bowed patronizingly to the Presbyterians, the Presbyterians condescendingly recognized the Methodists, the Methodists, by a slight inclination of the head, acknowledged the existence of the Catholics. This done, the excitement of the day was over.

The footsteps of a chance pedestrian echoed in Main Street like some one walking in a tunnel. Children flattened their noses against the panes and looked out wistfully upon a world that had no joy in it.

The gloom of financial depression hung over Prouty like a crepe veil. If Prouty spent Sunday waiting for Monday, it spent the rest of the week waiting for something to happen. Prouty's attitude was one of halfhearted expectancy—like a shipwrecked sailor knowing himself outside the line of travel, yet unable to resist watching the horizon for succor.

The Boosters Club still went on boosting, but its schemes for self-advertisement resembled a defective pin-wheel, which, after the first whiz, lacks the motive powers to turn further. The motive power in this instance was money. Prouty wanted money with the same degree of intensity that the parched Lazarus wanted water.

Real estate owners in Prouty regarded their

property without enthusiasm, for there were few residences not ornamented with a "plaster" in the form of a mortgage. Abram Pantin's boast that he never "held the sack" was heard but seldom, for there was more than a reasonable doubt that he was able to collect the interest on his farm mortgages, to say nothing of the principal.

The town was at a stage when merely to eat and go on wearing clothes was cause for self-congratulation. It was conceded that a person who could exist in Prouty could live anywhere. Its citizens seemed to partake of the nature of the cactus that, grubbed up and left for dead, always manages somehow to get its roots down again.

The Prouty *Grit* still called the attention of the world to the country's natural resources, but Mr. Butefish's editorials had a hollow ring, like the "spiel" of the sideshow barker, who talks in anticipation of a swift kick from a dissatisfied patron.

Major Prouty, who had hoped to die in his boots, picturesquely, had passed away quietly in his bed with acute indigestion from eating sour-dough sinkers of his own manufacture. It was cold the day he was buried, so not many went to the funeral, and the board which had been put up to mark his grave, until the town could afford a suitable monument, had blown over. A "freighter" had repaired his brake block with a portion of the marker, so no one except the grave digger was sure where the Major lay.

Jasper Toomey at this period of his career was engaged in the real estate business. About ninety per cent of Prouty's residences were listed with him. In the beginning, while taking descriptions of the properties and making a confidential note of the lowest possible sums which would be accepted, he was busy and optimistic. But, this completed,

business subsided suddenly. His few inquiries for properties came from buyers who had no cash available. The breath he expended in “working up deals” which came to nothing when the critical point was reached would have floated a balloon.

Toomey had no office, but conducted his affairs in winter from the chair by the radiator in the southwest corner of the Prouty House. In summer, he moved to the northeast corner of the veranda. To borrow five dollars nowadays was a distinct achievement, and his sallow face had taken on the habitual expression of a hungry wolf waiting for strays and weaklings. Mrs. Toomey still anticipated the day when “Jap would get into something.”

As much worse as was Sunday than Monday, just so much worse was winter than summer in Prouty. Winter meant more coal, warmer clothes, high-priced food, and a period of hibernating until it was over. So it was in a kind of panic that Prouty suddenly realized that fall had come and another winter would soon be upon them. Thus, in a mood of desperation, the officers of the Boosters Club sent out notice of an important meeting to its members. It was urged most earnestly that each should come prepared to offer a new suggestion for the improvement of financial conditions in Prouty. The fact that the need was thus publicly admitted evidenced the urgency of the situation.

It seemed as though every plan that human ingenuity could devise had been already discussed, and shelved for the very excellent reason that there never was any capital with which to give the projects a try-out. While the members subscribed with glad and openhanded generosity, to collect the subscriptions was another matter.

Heretofore suggestions had come sporadically;

now it was believed that as the concentrated wills of powerful minds are alleged to have moved inanimate objects, somewhat in the same fashion concerted effort on the part of the Boosters Club might result in something tangible.

The meeting was called for Monday night, and with only twenty-four hours in which to think of something for Prouty's salvation, the heads of households taxed their brains diligently for an original idea to offer.

No such perturbation obtained in the Toomey family, however, where Mr. and Mrs. Toomey chattered in gay excitement, the like of which they had not experienced since their memorable trip to Chicago. With his hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets, Toomey swaggered, resembling nothing so much as a pheasant strutting and drumming on a log for his mate's edification, and, not unlike the female bird of sober coloring, Mrs. Toomey looked and listened with a return of much of her old-time admiration, though the cause for Toomey's present state of exultation was, in its inception, due to her own suggestion.

"I'll show these pinheads something," Toomey boasted. "The day'll come," he levelled at his wife an impressive finger, "when they'll nudge each either and say, 'There goes Toomey's Dog!'"

Mrs. Toomey sighed happily, "It's like a story!"

"Nothing comes to you unless you go after it," Toomey declared, in the voice of a man who has succeeded and is giving the benefit of his experience to the less fortunate.

"I wish you could be there when I spring it," he chortled.

Yet the occasion for this rare exuberance in the Toomey family was merely a few courteous lines

signed “John Prentiss,” inside the businesslike blue-gray envelope resting conspicuously on top of the clock on the mantelpiece. They had read and re-read it, extracting from it the last ounce of encouragement possible.

Mrs. Toomey had come across John Prentiss’s card in a drawer she was cleaning and the thought had come to her that therein lay a possibility which never had been tested. After all these years it might not be possible to reach him, and when he was found it might not be possible to derive any benefit from the scant acquaintance, but it was worth trying, and if there was a way, Jap would find it, so she had shown him the card and he had joined her in marveling at their negligence.

After due reflection, Toomey had written to Prentiss recalling the circumstances of their meeting and the fact that he had evidenced an interest in their country, and renewing his invitation for a visit. He went at some length into the details of the defunct irrigation project at Prouty, which if properly completed and managed was a sure and big winner. He had options on stock which gave him the controlling interest, he stated, and had little doubt that the remainder could be acquired easily. He urged Prentiss to come at his earliest convenience and look it over.

Toomey sent the letter to the hotel in Chicago which Prentiss had given as one of his permanent addresses and it was duly forwarded. After the lapse of a reasonable time, the answer had come from Denver. It had contained proper expressions of appreciation for the invitation, a wish to be remembered cordially to Mrs. Toomey, and concluded with the statement that his desire to see that section of the country had in no wise abated

and, if possible, he would do so in the early winter, at which time he would be glad to look into the merits of the irrigation project.

Noncommittal, but friendly, the letter sent the blood racing through Toomey's veins like a stiff drink of brandy. It stimulated his imagination like strong coffee and evoked the roseate dreams of hasheesh. Even Mrs. Toomey, cautious and conservative as she was by nature and through many disappointments, could not resist the contagion of her husband's enthusiasm.

To say that Toomey looked forward with eagerness to this meeting of the Boosters Club is to express it inadequately. He counted the hours when he should be reinstated in the position which he had occupied when he first came to Prouty. Unexpressed, but none the less present, was a desire to show his teeth at those who had humiliated him by lending him money.

The Boosters Club now occupied a storeroom which it had rent free until such time as its owner should acquire a tenant. This privilege had been granted some three years previous, and there seemed no imminent danger of the club being obliged to vacate.

Behind a fly-specked window an equally fly-specked sheaf of wheat from North Dakota, and an ear of corn of gargantuan proportions from Kansas, proclaimed the Club's belief that similar results might be obtained from the local soil—when it had water. There was a sugar beet of amazing circumference that had been raised in an adjacent county, and a bottle of sand that the Club was certain contained a rare mineral, if it were possible to get an honest assay on it. They exhibited also a can of pulverized gypsum, of which there was a

sufficient quantity in sight in the vicinity to polish the brass trimmings of the world's navies, if a "live wire" could be induced to take hold of its development. A miniature monument of rock faintly stained with copper rose in the center of the window, and a buffalo skull lent a note of historic interest.

The walls inside were decorated with the Club's slogan, "Boost for Prouty." The undertaker's chairs were still doing duty, since there was so much truth in that person's plaintive wail that "the climate was so damned healthy that nobody ever died," there was seldom other use for them.

There was a pine table upon a raised platform, behind which Hiram Butefish remained, as before, the Club's honored President.

In the corner was a stove which had been donated by the Methodist minister, because, presumably, of a refractory grate which it was found impossible to operate without profanity.

Into these comfortable and spacious quarters, a goodly number of Prouty's representative citizens came singly and in squads upon the occasion of this important meeting.

Each member had kept his own solution of Prouty's problem closely guarded, so no man knew what his neighbor had to offer until that one's turn came to divulge it. In truth, it had been a long time since a meeting of such piquancy and interest had been called.

After some little preliminary business, Hiram Butefish, with a candor which never before had distinguished his public utterances upon this subject, declared flatly that Prouty was in a precarious, not to say desperate, condition. The county treasury was empty, the town treasury was empty, and the warrants of either had little more value than the

stock certificates of an abandoned gold mine. What were they going to do about it? Should they sit quietly and starve like a lost tribe wandering in the desert? Did they wish to see their wives naked and their children hungry? No! Mr. Butefish smote the table until the crack in the water pitcher lengthened. Then by all that was Great and Good, somebody had to think of something!

Mr. Butefish had only said what everybody knew, but his manner of saying it sent a chill over every one present.

"Doc" Fussel, whose sales during the day had been a package of rat poison and a bottle of painkiller, looked like a lemon that has lain too long in the window, when he arose and diffidently offered his suggestion for the relief of Prouty. The doctor's voice when he was frightened had the rich sonorous tones of a mouse squeaking in the wall, and now as he ventured the suggestion that Prouty's hope lay in raising peppermint, his voice was inaudible beyond the fifth row of chairs. In the rear of the room they caught the words "mint" and "still," and were under the impression that he was advocating the manufacture of counterfeit money and moonshine whiskey. As a matter of fact, the doctor advised the purchase of large tracts of land which could be flooded and transformed into bogs. These bogs were to be planted in peppermint, for which, he averred, there was an insatiable demand. The world had yet to have too much peppermint. So long as there were babies there would be colic, and so long as there was colic there would be a need for peppermint; therefore, reasoning along the dotted line from A to Z, there always would be a market. Peppermint was the one industry requiring small capital which had not been overdone. He could go to Illinois and

purchase a secondhand still of which he knew, at small cost. A bottling works for preparing and labeling the essence could be established in Prouty, and there was no reason why, in time, Prouty should not become the recognized peppermint center of America.

When the doctor sat down, after giving the back of the chair which he gripped a farewell wring that all but tore it loose from its sockets, Mr. Butefish arose and congratulated him upon the novelty of his suggestion and recommended that it be investigated carefully.

There was excellent reason to believe that Walter Scales, at no remote date, had been handling kerosene and saltfish, for the air in his vicinity was redolent of these commodities as he arose when called upon as the next in order.

Before speaking of the remedy for the present stagnant condition of "the fairest spot that the sun ever shone upon," Mr. Scales stated that he wished to protest thus publicly against the practice which now obtained of pitching horseshoes in the main street of Prouty. There was nothing, he declared vehemently, which made so bad an impression upon a stranger as to see the leading citizens of a community pitching horseshoes in its principal thoroughfare.

Passing on to the purpose for which he had risen, Mr. Scales averred that it was probable that he would be considered an impractical visionary when he made known his proposition; nevertheless, it had been long in his mind and no harm would come from voicing it. To his notion, the thing most needed to revitalize Prouty was an electric car-line. This line should start at the far end of town, somewhere down by the Double Cross Livery Stable, possibly, and end at an artificial lake and amusement park a few miles

out in the country—he waved his arm vaguely. A street car whizzing through Prouty would put new life in it, and so hungry were its inhabitants for entertainment that he had no doubt whatever that the amusement park would make ample returns upon the investment.

Mr. Butefish made a note of Mr. Scales's vision, but very much questioned as to whether Prouty was ripe for a street railway, since—he admitted reluctantly—such a project might be a little ahead of the immediate requirements.

Other suggestions followed—among them, the possibility of opening up an outcropping of marble in a canyon sixteen miles from Prouty. The marble, though badly streaked with yellow, would, it was opined, serve excellently for tombstones. Also, there was a clay peculiar to a certain gulch in the vicinity which was believed by the discoverer to contain the necessary qualities for successful brick-making.

Then "Gov'nor" Sudds arose in a flattering silence to give the Club the benefit of his cogitations. Something large always could be expected of the "Gov'nor." Although he lived in three figures, he thought in seven, and not one of the Gov'nor's many projects had been capitalized at less than a million.

Conrad has said that listening to a Russian socialist is much like listening to a highly accomplished parrot—one never can rid himself of the suspicion that he knows what he is talking about. The same, at times, applied to the Gov'nor. He said nothing so convincingly that always it was received with the closest attention.

Now, as Sudds stood up, large, grave and impressive, he looked like a Roman Senator about to address a gathering in the Forum. No one present could dream from his manner that he had that day

received a shock, the violence of which could best be likened to a well-planted blow in the pit of the stomach. As a hardy perennial candidate for political office, he had become inured to disappointment, but the present shock had been of such an unexpected nature that for hours Mr. Sudds had been in a state little short of groggy. The maiden aunt of seventy, upon whose liberal remembrance he had built his hopes as the Faithful hug to themselves the promise of heaven, had married a street car conductor and wired for congratulations. He had pulled himself together and staggered to the meeting where, though still with the sinking sensation of a man who has inadvertently stepped through the plastering of the ceiling, he was able to dissemble successfully.

Clearing his throat, the Gov'nor fixed his eyes upon “Hod” Deefendorf, owner of the Double Cross Livery Stable, and demanded:

“Among all the voices of Nature is there a more pleasing or varied sound than that of falling water?”

He paused as though he expected an answer, so “Hod” squirmed and ventured weakly that he “guessed there wasn’t.”

The Gov'nor continued: “The gentle murmur of the brook, the noisy rumble of rapids, the thundering roar of mighty cataracts—can you beat it?” In a country where the school children giggled at sight of an umbrella, the question seemed irrelevant, so this time no one replied.

“Consider the rivulet as it glints and glistens in ceaseless change, the fairy mists of shimmering cascades, the majestic sweep of waterfalls—has Nature any force more potent for the use of man than falling water? No! None whatever! And I propose that we yoke these racing tumbling forces back there in yon mountains and make them work

for us!”

The members exchanged glances—the Gov'nor was living up to their expectations of him.

“That accomplished, I propose,” the Governor declared dramatically, “to take nitrogen from the air and sell it to the government!”

He looked triumphantly into the intent upturned faces into which had crept a look of blankness. There were those who thought vaguely that nitrogen was the scientific name for mosquito, while others confused it with nitre, an excellent emergency remedy for horses.

“They’ve done it in Germany,” he continued, “and used it in the manufacture of high explosives. Is there any gentleman present who will tell me that what’s been done in Germany, can’t be done in Wyoming?”

The applause was tumultuous when he had further elucidated and finished. To get something out of nothing made a strong appeal to Prouty. It was criminal for Sudds to waste his abilities in a small community. They wondered why he did it.

Hiram Butefish, who succeeded the orator, felt a quite natural diffidence in giving to the Club his modest suggestion, but as he talked he warmed to his subject.

“I am convinced,” declared Mr. Butefish, “that the future of Prouty lies in fossils.”

“Human?” a voice inquired ironically.

“Clams,” replied Mr. Butefish with dignity. “Also fish and periwinkles. Locked in Nature’s boozem over there in the Bad Lands there’s a world of them. I kicked ’em up last year when I was huntin’ horses, and realized their value. They’d go off like hot cakes to high schools and collectors. We could get a professor in here cheap—a lunger, maybe—to

classify 'em, and then we'd send out our own salesman. We can advertise and create a market.

"Gentlemen," solemnly, "we have not one iota of reason to be discouraged! With thousands of acres available for peppermint; with more air to the square inch than any place else in the world, with an inexhaustible bed of fossils under our very noses, all we need to fulfill the dreams of our city's founder is unity of effort and capital. In other words—MONEY!"

"And the longer you stay in Prouty the more you'll need it!"

The jeering voice from the rear of the room belonged to Toomey.

The Club turned its head and looked at the interrupter in astonishment. He was sitting in the high-headed arrogance with which once upon a time they had all been familiar. Though momentarily disconcerted, Mr. Butefish collected himself and retorted:

"Perhaps you have something better to offer, Toomey."

"If I hadn't I wouldn't offer it," he replied insolently.

The thought that came instantly to every mind was that Toomey must have had a windfall. How else account for this sudden independence? This possibility tempered the asperity of Mr. Butefish's answer, though it still had plenty of spirit:

"We are ready to acknowledge your—er—originality, Mr. Toomey, and will be delighted to listen."

To Toomey it was a rare moment. He enjoyed it so keenly that he wished he might prolong it. Uncoiling his long legs, he surveyed his auditors with a tolerant air of amusement:

"I presume there are no objections to my mentioning a few of the flaws that I see in the schemes which have been outlined?"

"Our time is limited," hinted Mr. Butefish.

"It won't take long to puncture those bubbles," Toomey answered, contemptuously.

Certainly he had made a raise somewhere!

"We will hear your criticisms," replied Mr. Butefish, with the restraint of offended dignity.

"In the first place, everybody knows that the soil in this country sours and alkalies when water stands on it." Toomey spoke as a man who had wide experience. He looked at "Doc" Fussel, who shrivelled with the chagrin that filled him, when Toomey added, "That settles the peppermint bog, doesn't it?

"Take the next proposition: What's the use of car-lines that begin nowhere and end nowhere? A cripple could walk from one end of the town to the other in seven minutes. You couldn't raise enough outside capital to buy the spikes for it.

"Take fossils—a school boy would know that the demand for fossils is limited, and who is sure that the bed is inexhaustible until it's tested. When the government is taking nitrates out of the air in Prouty to make ammunition, you and I will be under the daisies, Governor."

If looks could kill, Toomey would have died standing. But he continued emphatically:

"The salvation of Prouty is water. By water I mean the completion of the irrigation project. Gentlemen—I am here to state unreservedly that I can put that enterprise through, providing the stockholders will give me an option upon fifty-one per cent. of the stock. I must have the controlling interest."

Could he have an option? *Could* he! Only the restraining hand of a neighbor upon his coat tail prevented Walt Scales from hurdling the intervening chairs to reach Toomey to thrust his shares upon him. Hope and skepticism of the genuineness of his assertions commingled in the faces upon which Toomey looked, while he waited for an answer. He saw the doubt and took Prentiss's letter from his pocket. Shaking it at them, he declared impressively:

"This communication is from a party I have interested—an old friend of mine of wealth and standing, who will finance the project providing it is as represented, and under the condition I have just mentioned." Toomey himself so thoroughly believed what he said that he carried conviction, although nowadays his veracity under oath would have been questioned.

The prospect of unloading his stock made Hiram Butefish as thirsty as if he had eaten herring, and, overlooking the glass in his excitement, he drank long and deep from the water pitcher before he said tremulously:

"Undoubtedly that can be arranged, Mr. Toomey."

It was obvious that the Boosters Club shared its president's opinion. Each quivered with an eagerness to get at Toomey which was not unlike that of a race horse fretting to be first over the starting line. They crowded around him when the meeting was ended, offering their congratulations and their stock to him, but taking care to avoid any mention of the various sums that he owed each and all.

As for Toomey, it was like the old days when his appearance upon the streets of Prouty was an event, when they called him "Mister" and touched their hat-brims to him, when he could get a hearing without blocking the exit.

He left the Boosters Club with his pulses bounding with pride and importance. He had “come back”—as a man must who has imagination and initiative. They could “watch his smoke,” could Prouty.

There was not a member present who did not reach his home panting, to shake his wife out of her slumbers to tell her that, at last, Toomey had “got into something.”

CHAPTER XXV

THE CHINOOK

Emblazoned on the front page of the Omaha paper upon which Mr. Pantin relied to keep him abreast of the times was the announcement that both mutton and wool had touched highwater mark in the history of the sheep-raising industry.

Mr. Pantin moved into the bow window where the light was better and read the article carefully. The Australian embargo, dust-storms in the steppes of Russia, rumors of war, all had contributed to send prices soaring. When he had concluded, he took the stub of a pencil from his waistcoat pocket and made a computation in neat figures upon the margin. As he

eyed the total his mouth puckered in a whistle which changed gradually to a grin of satisfaction.

"You can't keep a squirrel down in a timbered country," Mr. Pantin chuckled aloud, ambiguously.

A pleased smile still rested upon his face when Mrs. Pantin entered.

"Priscilla, will you do me a favor?"

"Abram," reproachfully, "have I ever failed you? What is it?"

"The next time you have something going on here I want you to invite Kate Prentice."

Mrs. Pantin recoiled.

"What!"

"Don't squawk like that!" said Mr. Pantin, irritably. "You do it often, and it's an annoying mannerism."

"Do you quite realize what you are asking?" his wife demanded.

"Perfectly," replied Mr. Pantin, calmly. "I've passed the stage when I talk to make conversation."

"But think how she's been criticised!"

Mr. Pantin got up impatiently.

"Oh, you virtuous dames—"

Mrs. Pantin's thin lips went shut like a rat-trap.

"Abram, are you twitting me?"

Mr. Pantin ignored the accusation, and observed astutely:

"I presume you've done your share of talking, and that's why—"

"She is impossible, and what you ask is impossible," Mrs. Pantin declared firmly.

"It's not often that I ask a favor of you, Prissy." His tone was conciliatory.

Mrs. Pantin met him half way and her voice was softer as she answered:

"I appreciate that, Abram, but there are a few of

us who must keep up the bars against such persons. Society—"

"Rats!" ejaculated Mr. Pantin coarsely.

The hand which she had laid tenderly upon his shoulder was withdrawn as if it harbored a hornet.

"I don't understand this at all—not at all," she said, icily. "However," very distinctly, "it is not necessary that I should, for I shall not do it." She folded her arms as she confronted him.

Mr. Pantin was silent so long that she thought the battle was over, and purred at him:

"You can realize how I feel about it, can't you, darling?"

"No, by George, I can't! And I'm not going to either." He slapped the table with Henry Van Dyke in ooze leather for emphasis. "I want Kate Prentice invited here the next time she's in town. If you don't do as I ask, Priscilla, you shan't go a step—not a step—to Keokuk this winter."

"Is that an ultimatum?" Mrs. Pantin demanded.

Mr. Pantin gave a quick furtive look over either shoulder, then declared with emphatic gusto:

"I mean every damn word of it!"

Mrs. Pantin stood speechless, thinking rapidly. There was nothing for it evidently but to play her trump card, which never yet had failed her. She wasted no breath in further argument, but threw herself full-length on the davenport and had hysterics.

Only a few times in their married life had Mr. Pantin risen on his hind legs, speaking figuratively, and defied her. In the beginning, before he was well housebroken, he was careless in the matter of cleaning his soles on the scraper, and had been obstinate on the question of changing his shirt on Wednesdays, holding that once a week was enough

for a person not engaged in manual labor. Mrs. Pantin had won out on each issue, but it had not been an easy victory. Mr. Pantin had been docile so long now that she had expected no further trouble with him, therefore this outbreak was so unlooked for that her fit was almost genuine.

Having hurled his thunderbolt, Mr. Pantin stood above his wife regarding her imperturbably as she lay with her face buried in a sofa pillow. Unmoved, he even felt a certain interest in the rise and fall of her shoulder blades as she sobbed. Actually, she seemed to breathe with them—"like the gills of a fish," he thought heartlessly—and wondered how long she could keep it up.

"It's no use having this tantrum, Prissy," he said inexorably.

Tantrum! The final insult. Mrs. Pantin squealed with rage and gnawed the corner of the leather pillow.

"You might as well come out of it," he admonished further. "You'll only make your eyes red and give yourself a headache."

"You're a brute, Abram Pantin, and I wish I'd never seen you!"

Mr. Pantin suppressed the reply that the wish was mutual. Instead, he picked up the leather button which flew on the floor when Mrs. Pantin doubled her fist and smote the davenport.

"I doubt very much if she'd come, even if you ask her," said Pantin. It was a stroke of genius.

"Not come!" The eye which Mrs. Pantin exposed regarded Mr. Pantin scornfully. "Not come? Why, she'd be tickled to pieces."

But of that Mr. Pantin continued to have his own opinion.

Mrs. Pantin sat up and winked rapidly in her

indignation.

"She's made if I take her up, and the woman isn't so stupid as not to know it, is she?"

"She may not see it from that angle," dryly. "At any rate, you'll be pleasing me greatly by asking her."

Mrs. Pantin looked at her husband fixedly:

"Why this deep interest, Abram?"

Flattered by the implied accusation, Mr. Pantin, however, resisted the temptation to make Mrs. Pantin jealous, and answered truthfully:

"I admire her greatly. She deserves recognition and will get it. If you are a wise woman you'll swallow your prejudices and be the first to admit it."

Mrs. Pantin raised both eyebrows—her own and the one she put on mornings—incredulously.

"She's the kind that would win out anywhere," he added, with conviction.

Mrs. Pantin stared at him absently, while the tears on her lashes dried to smudges. She murmured finally:

"I could have pineapple with mayonnaise dressing."

To conceal a smile, Mr. Pantin stooped for his paper.

"Or would you have lettuce with roquefort cheese dressing, Abram?"

"You know much more about such things than I do—your luncheons are always perfect, Prissy. Who do you think of inviting to meet her?"

Mrs. Pantin considered. Then her eyes sparkled with malice, "I'll begin with Mrs. Toomey."

In the office of the *Grit*, Hiram Butefish was reading the proof of his editorial that pointed out the many advantages Prouty enjoyed over its rival in the

next county.

There was no more perfect spot on the footstool for the rearing of children, Mr. Butefish declared editorially. Fresh air, pure water, and a moral atmosphere—wherein it differed, he hinted, from its neighbor. There Vice rampant and innocent Youth met on every corner, while the curse of the Demon Rum was destroying its manhood.

Mr. Butefish laid down the proof-sheet, sighed deeply, and quite unconsciously moistened his lips.

He was for Reform, certainly, but the thought would intrude that when Vice moved on to greener fields it took with it much of the zest of living. In the days when a man could get drunk as he liked and as often as he liked without fear of criticism, sure of being laid away tenderly by tolerant friends, instead of, as now,—being snaked, scuffling, to the calaboose by the constable—

The arrival of the mail with its exchanges interrupted thoughts flowing in a dangerous channel.

The soaring price of wool, featured in the headlines, caught his attention instantly, since, naturally, anything that pertained to the sheep industry was of interest to the community. Mr. Butefish used his scissors freely and opined that the next issue of the *Grit* would be a corker. Then an idea came to him. Why not make it a sheep number exclusively? Give all the wool-growers in the vicinity a write-up. Great! He'd do it. Mr. Butefish enumerated them on his fingers. When he came to Kate Prentice, he hesitated. Would Prouty stand for it—the eulogy he contemplated? In a small paper one had to consider local prejudices—besides, she was not a subscriber.

While Mr. Butefish debated, a spirit of rebellion rose within him. Ever since he had established the

paper he had been a worm, and what had it got him? It had got him in debt to the point of bankruptcy—that's what it had got him—and he was good and sick of it! He was tired of grovelling—nauseated with catering to a public that paid in rutabagas and elk meat that was "spoilin' on 'em." He hadn't started in right—that was half the trouble. If he had dug into their pasts and blackmailed 'em, they'd be eating out of his hand, instead of pounding on the desk in front of him if he transposed their initials. He would have been a power in the country in place of having to drag his hat brim to 'em, lest they take out their advertisement of a setting of eggs or a Plymouth Rock rooster.

He'd show 'em, by gorry! He'd show 'em! Mr. Butefish jabbed his pen into the potato he used as a penwiper, instead of the ink, in his fury. He wrote with the rapidity of inspiration, and words came which he had not known were in his vocabulary as he extolled Kate and her achievements. Emotion welled within him until his collar choked him, so he removed it, while the pen spread with the force he put into the actual writing. And when he had finished, he walked the floor reading the editorial, his voice vibrating, tingling with his own eloquence. The article snorted defiance. Mr. Butefish tacitly waved the bright flag of personal freedom in the face of Public Opinion. He bellowed his liberty, as it were, over Kate's shoulder. He strode, he swaggered—he had not known such a glorious feeling of independence since he left off plumbing. And he could go back to it if he had to! Mr. Butefish stopped in the middle of the floor and showed his teeth at an invisible audience of advertisers and subscribers.

The article came out exactly as written. Reflection did not temper Mr. Butefish's attitude with caution.

The bruised worm not only had turned, but rolled clean over.

The following week, Kate rode into Prouty in ignorance of the flattering tribute which the editor had paid her. Coming at a leisurely gait down Main Street she looked as usual in pitiless scrutiny at the signs which told of the collapse of the town's prosperity. She saw without compassion the graying hair, the tired eyes of anxiety, the lines of brooding and despondency deepening in faces she remembered as carefree and hopeful, the look of resignation that comes to the weaklings who have lost their grip, the emptiness of burned-out passion, the weary languor of repeated failure—she saw it all through the eyes of her relentless hatred.

But to-day there was a something different which, in her extreme sensitiveness, she was quick to see and feel. There was a new expression in the eyes of the passersby with whom she exchanged glances. Eyes which for years had stared at her with impudence, indifference, or ostentatious blankness now held a sort of friendly inquiry, something conciliatory, which told her they would have spoken had they not been met by the immobile mask of imperturbability that she wore in Prouty.

"Why the chinook?" Kate asked herself ironically.

The warm wave met her everywhere and she continued to wonder, though it did not melt the ice about her heart that was of many years' accumulation.

Kate had sold her wool, finally, through a commission house, and at an advance over the price at which she had held it when Bowers had advised her to accept the buyer's offer. She expected the draft in the three weeks' accumulation of mail for which she had come to Prouty. When the mail was handed

out to her, she looked in astonishment at the amount of it. At first glance, there appeared to be only a little less than a bushel. The postmaster, who had forgotten Bowers's instructions, grinned knowingly as he passed out photographs and sweet-scented, pink-tinted envelopes addressed to the sheepherder in feminine writing.

"So he had done it!" Kate mused as she crowded them all into the leather mail sack which bulged to the point of refusing to buckle. The letter she expected was among the rest, and, as she looked at the draft it contained, a smile that had meant not only gratification but exultation lurked at the corners of her mouth. She led her horse to the bank and tied it. Mr. Wentz came nimbly forward to the receiving teller's window as she entered, and flashed his eloquent eyes at her.

"You're quite a stranger!" he greeted her tritely, and added, "But we've been reading about you."

Kate looked her surprise.

"In the *Grit*—haven't you seen it? A great boost! Butefish really writes vurry, vurry well when he puts his mind to it."

This explained the warmer temperature, she thought sardonically, but said merely:

"I haven't seen the paper." Then changing the subject: "I've decided to increase the size of my account with you, Mr. Wentz. I'll leave this draft on open deposit, though it may be considerable time before I need it." She passed it to him carelessly.

Since leaving the laundry, where he had been as temperamental as he liked, and taken it out on the wringer, Mr. Wentz had endeavored to train himself to conceal his feelings, and imagined he had succeeded. But now the wild impulse he felt to crawl through the aperture and embrace Kate told him

otherwise.

Kate watched the play of emotions over his face in deep satisfaction. There was no need of words to express his gratitude—which was mostly relief.

"I appreciate this, Miss Prentice, I do indeed. I am glad that you do not hold it against us because upon a time we were not able to accommodate you."

"A bank must abide by its rules, I presume," she replied noncommittally.

"Exactly! A bank must protect its customers at all hazards."

"And the directors."

Mr. Wentz colored. Did she mean anything in particular? He wondered. He continued to speculate after her departure. It was a random shot, he decided. If it had been otherwise she scarcely would be giving him her business now, especially to the extent of this deposit—which he was needing—well, nobody but Mr. Wentz knew exactly how much.

There was a quizzical smile upon Kate's face as she passed down the steps of the bank and turned up the street on another errand. She was walking with her eyes bent upon the sidewalk, thinking hard, when her way was blocked by Mrs. Abram Pantin extending a high supine hand with the charming cordiality which distinguished her best social manner. Mrs. Pantin slipped her manner on and off, as the occasion warranted, as she did her kitchen apron.

The suddenness of the meeting surprised Kate into a look of astonishment.

"This is Miss Prentice, isn't it?"

"That's the general impression," Kate answered.

Mrs. Pantin registered vivacity by winking rapidly and twittering in a pert birdlike fashion:

"I've so much wanted to know you!"

The reply that there always had been ample opportunity seemed superfluous, so Kate said nothing.

"I've been reading about you, you know, and I want to tell you how proud we all are of you and of what you have accomplished. This is Woman's Day, isn't it?"

Since she seemed not to expect an answer, Kate made none and Mrs. Pantin continued:

"I've been wanting to see you that I might ask you to come to me—say next Thursday?"

Mrs. Pantin's manner was tinged with patronage.

Kate's silence deceived her. She imagined that Kate was awed and tongue-tied in her presence. The woman was, as Prissy had assured Abram, "tickled to pieces."

In the meanwhile, interested observers of the meeting were saying to each other cynically:

"Nothing succeeds like success, does it?"

This time, apparently, Mrs. Pantin expected an answer, so Kate asked bluntly:

"What for?"

"Luncheon. At one—we are very old-fashioned. I want you to meet some of our best ladies—Mrs. Sudds—Mrs. Neifkins—Mrs. Toomey—and others."

As she enumerated the guests on her fingers the tip of Mrs. Pantin's pink tongue darted in and out with the rapierlike movement of an ant-eater.

Kate's face hardened and she replied curtly:

"I already have had that doubtful pleasure upon an occasion, which you should remember."

Mrs. Pantin flushed. Disconcerted for a moment, she collected herself, and instead of protesting ignorance of her meaning, as she was tempted, she said candidly:

"We must let bygones be bygones, Miss Prentice,

and be friends. We are older now, and wiser, aren't we?"

Kate clasped her hands behind her, a mannerism with which offending herders were familiar, and regarded Mrs. Pantin steadily.

"Older but not wiser, apparently, else you would have known better than to suggest the possibility of friendship between us. You are a poor judge of human nature, and conceited past my understanding, to imagine that it is a matter which is entirely optional with you." With the slow one-sided smile of irony which her face sometimes wore, she bowed slightly. Then, "You will excuse me?" and passed on.

CHAPTER XXVI

TAKING HER MEDICINE

The moon was up when Kate got in from town, for she had not hurried. There was no one there to greet her except the sheep dog that ran out barking. She unsaddled, turned the horse in the corral, and picked up the mail sack heavy with Bowers's missives.

She had not eaten since noon, but she was not

hungry, and she went to her wagon immediately. Opening the door she stood there for a moment. The stillness appalled her. How could such a small space give forth such a sense of big emptiness, she wondered. Everything was empty—her life, her arms, and, for the moment, even her ambitions. Unexpectedly the thought overwhelmed her.

Throwing down the mail sack and tossing her hat upon it, she sank on the side bench where she folded her arms on the edge of the bunk and buried her face in them. For a long time she remained so, motionless, in the silence that seemed to crush her.

When Kate arose finally it was as if she were lifting a burden. Undressing slowly, she lay down on the bunk and looked out through the window at the white world swimming in moonlight. Ordinarily, she shut her eyes to moonlight, it had a way of stirring up emotions which had no place in her scheme of life. It always made her think of Disston, of the light in his eyes when he had looked at her, of the feeling of his arms about her, of his lips on hers when he had kissed her. At such times it filled her with a longing for him which was a kind of sweet torture that unnerved her and made the goal for which she strove of infinitesimal importance.

But that was one of the tricks of moonlight, she told herself angrily, to dwarf the things which counted, and with its false glamour give a fictitious value to those which in reality were but impediments. To-night the arguments were hollow as echoes. It was like telling herself, she thought, that she was going to sleep when she knew she was not. She yearned for Disston with all the intensity of her strong nature, and her efforts to conquer the longing seemed only to increase it.

“God!” She sat up suddenly and struck her breast

as though the blow might somehow stop the pain there, and asked herself fiercely: “Must I live forever with this heartache? Isn’t there some peace? Some way of dulling it until my heart stops beating?” She stretched out her arms and her voice broke with the sob that choked her as she cried miserably:

“Oh, Hughie! Hughie! I love you, and I can’t help it!”

She felt herself stifling in the wagon and flung aside the covering. Thrusting her bare feet into moccasins and slipping on a sweater, she stepped into the white world that had the still emptiness of space.

The sheep dog got up from under the wagon and stood in front of her with a look of inquiry, but she gave no heed to him; instead, after a moment’s indecision, she walked swiftly to the hillside where a shaft of marble shone in the moonlight. The sheep dog was at her heels, and when she crawled beneath the wire that fenced the spot where Mormon Joe had turned to dust, it followed.

Mormon Joe was only a name, a memory, but he had loved her unselfishly and truly. Kate clasped her arms about the shaft and laid her cheek against it as if in some way she might draw consolation from it. But its coldness chilled her. Then, with her face upturned in supplication, as though his soul might be somewhere in the infinite space above her, she cried aloud in her anguish as she had in another and different kind of crisis:

“Uncle Joe, I’m lost! I don’t know which way to go—there’s no signboard to direct me. Please, please, if you can, come back and help me—please—help Katie Prentice!”

The sheep dog with his head on his paws watched her gravely. In the corral below there was the sound

of stirring horses; otherwise only silence answered her. No light, no help came to her. Her hands dropped gradually to her sides. It was always so—in the end she was thrown back upon herself. Nothing came to her save by her own efforts. There were no miracles performed for Kate Prentice. A sullen defiance filled her. If this was all life had for her she could stand it; she could go on as usual taking her medicine with as little fuss as possible. That's all life seemed to be—taking the medicine the Fates doled out in one form or another. To live bravely, to die with all the courage one could muster, were the principal things anyhow. She got up from her knees by the sunken grave slowly and stood erect once more, holding her chin high in self-sufficient arrogance. She would take the best out of life as it offered and be done with ideals that ended in emotional hysteria like this present experience. Life was a compromise anyhow. If she couldn't have the substance, she would have the shadow. If she couldn't have friendships given her, she'd buy imitations that would answer. If love and romance were not for her, she'd accept the expedient that offered and be satisfied!

Bowers was not due at headquarters for several days, so as soon as Kate found the leisure she set out to take his mail to him, anticipating with some enjoyment his confusion when he saw the extent of it. She came across him out in the hills, engaged in some occupation which so absorbed him that he did not hear her until she was all but upon him.

"Oh, hello!" His face lighted up in pleased surprise when he saw her. "I was jest skinnin' out a rattlesnake for you."

"Were you, Bowers?" She looked at him oddly. "You are always doing something nice for me, aren't

you?"

"This is the purtiest rattler I've seen this season," he declared with enthusiasm. "Look at the markin' on him. I thought it ud show up kind of nifty laid around the cantle of your saddle. A rattlesnake skin shore makes a purty trimmin', to my notion. Don't know what he was doin' out of his hole so late in the season. He was so chilled I got him easy—an old feller—nine rattles and a button."

Kate got off her horse and sat down to watch him while Bowers enumerated the possibilities of snake skins as decorations.

"I brought your mail to you," she said when he had finished.—"Letters."

"Now who could be writin' to me?" he demanded in feigned innocence.

"I'm curious myself, since there's a bushel," she answered dryly.

Bowers looked up at the bulging mail sack and colored furiously. Then he blurted out in desperate candor:

"I ain't honest, but I won't lie—I been advertisin'."

"What for?"

The perspiration broke out on Bowers's forehead.

"I thought I'd git married, if anybody that looked good to me would have me."

"You're not happy, Bowers?" she asked gently.

"I ain't sufferin', but I ain't livin' in what you'd call no seventh heaven."

Kate smiled at the grim irony of his tone.

"It's not up to much, this life of ours out here," she agreed in a low voice.

"Nothin' to look forward to—nothin' to look back to," he said bitterly.

"I understand," Kate nodded.

"I never had as much home life as a coyote," he continued with rebellion in his tone. "A coyote does git a den and a family around him every spring." And he added shortly, "I'm lonesome."

They sat in a long silence, Kate with her hands clasped about a knee and looking off at the mountain. She turned to him after a while:

"Do you like me, Bowers?"

"I shore do."

Then she asked with quiet deliberation:

"Well enough to—marry me?"

Bowers looked at her, speechless. He managed finally:

"Are you joshin'?"

"No."

A prairie dog rose up in front of them and chattered. They both stared at him. Bowers reached over and took her gloved fingers between his two palms—in the same fashion a loyal subject might have touched his queen's hand.

"That's a great thing you said to me, Miss Kate. I never expected any such honor ever to come to me. I'd crawl through cut glass and cactus for you. I guess you know it, too, but anything like that would be a mistake, Miss Kate. I ain't in your class."

"My class!" bitterly. "What is my class? I'm in one by myself—I don't belong anywhere." She paused a moment, then went on: "We needn't pretend to love each other—we're not hypocrites, but we understand each other, our interests are the same, we are good friends, at least, and in the experiment there might be something better than our present existence."

"I want to see you happy," he replied slowly. "I haven't any other wish, and, right or wrong, I'll do anything you say, but I'm as shore as we're settin' here that you'll never find it with me. I thought—I

hoped that Disston feller—”

She interrupted sharply:

“Don’t, Bowers, don’t!”

Understanding grew in his troubled eyes as he looked at her quivering chin and mouth.

“So that was it!” he reflected.

Thick volumes of smoke rolled up from the engine attached to the mixed train that stood on the side-track which paralleled the shipping corrals at Prouty, to sink again in the heavy atmosphere presaging a storm. The clouds were leaden and sagged with the weight of snow about to fall.

Teeters’s cattle bawled in the three front cars and the remaining “double deckers” were being loaded with Kate Prentice’s sheep. She had followed her early judgment in cutting down the number of her sheep for a hard winter and, in consequence, the engine had steam up to haul the longest stock train that had ever pulled out of Prouty.

Bowers and his helpers were crowding the sheep up the runway into the last car when Kate rode up. She looked with pride at the mass of broad woolly backs as she sat with her arms folded on the saddle horn and thought to herself that if there were any better range sheep going into Omaha she would like to see them. She had made no mistake when she had graded up her herds with Rambouillets.

Bowers saw her and left the chute.

“Teeters is sick,” he announced, coming up.

Kate’s face grew troubled. She and Teeters had shipped together ever since they had had anything to ship, for it had been mutually advantageous in many ways; but particularly to herself, since he looked after her interests and saved her the necessity of making the trip to the market herself.

“Somethin’ he’s et,” Bowers vouchsafed. “The

doctor says it's pantomime pizenin', or some sech name—anyhow, he's plenty sick."

"Where is he?"

Bowers nodded across the flat where they had been holding the sheep while waiting for their cars.

Kate swung her horse about and galloped for the tent where Teeters lay groaning in his blankets on the ground.

Teeters was ill indeed—a glance told her that—and there was not the remotest chance that he would be able to leave with the train.

"I guess I'll be all right by the time they're ready to pull out," he groaned.

Kate made her decision quickly.

"I'll go myself. You're too sick. You get to the hotel and go to bed."

Teeters protested through a paroxysm of pain:

"You can't do that, Miss Kate. It's a tedious dirty trip in the caboose."

"I can't help it. I've too much at stake to take a chance. There's a big storm coming and I've got to get these sheep through in good shape. Don't worry about me and take care of yourself."

The engine whistled a preliminary warning as Kate dropped the tent flap and swung back on her horse. Calling to Bowers to have the train held until she returned, she galloped to the Prouty House and ran up the stairs to her room, where she thrust her few articles in the flour sack that she tied on the back of her saddle when it was necessary to remain over night in town.

The last frightened sheep had been urged up the chute and the door was closed when she threw her belongings on the platform of the caboose and informed Bowers that she was going along. He too protested, but her mind was made up.

"We're going to run into a storm, and if we're sidetracked I want to be along. It's not pleasant, but it has to be done."

It was useless to argue when Kate used that tone, so Bowers had to content himself with thinking that he would make her as comfortable as circumstances would allow.

Kate stood in the doorway with her flour sack in her hand looking at Prouty as the brakes relaxed and the wheels began to grind. It was not exactly the way in which she had pictured her first trip into the world, but, with a cynical smile, it was as near the realization as her dreams ever were.

Kate had not ridden more than a hundred miles on a train in her life, and her knowledge of cities was still gathered from books and magazines. As she had become more self-centered and absorbed in her work, her interest in the "outside" gradually had died. She told herself indifferently that there was time enough to gratify her curiosity.

She sighed as she watched the town fade and then a snowflake, featherlike and moist, swirled under the projecting roof and melted on her cheek, to recall her to herself. She swung out over the step and looked to the east where the clouds hung sagging with their weight. Yes, it was well that she had come.

Behind the plate-glass window of the Security State Bank its president stood with his hands thrust deep in his trousers' pockets watching the long train as, with much belching of smoke, it climbed the slight grade. There were moments when Mr. Wentz cursed the Fate that had promoted him from his washing machine, and this was one of them.

Neifkins, hunched in a leather chair in the banker's office, had an obstinate look on his sunburned face.

"I'd give about half I'm worth if that was your stock goin' out," said Wentz, as he reseated himself at his desk.

Neifkins grunted.

"I heard you the first time you said that." The stubborn look on his face increased. "When I'm ready to ship, I'll ship. I know what I'm about—ME."

Wentz did not look impressed by the boast.

Neifkins added in a surly tone:

"I don't need no petticoat to show me how to handle sheep."

Wentz answered with a shrug:

"Looks to me like you might follow a worse lead. She's contracted for all the hay in sight and shoved the price on what's left up to sixteen dollars in the stack. What you goin' to do if you have to feed?"

"I won't have to feed; I'll take my chance on that. It's goin' to be an open winter," confidently.

"It's startin' in like it," Wentz replied dryly, as he glanced through the window where the falling snowflakes all but obscured the opposite side of the street. Then, emphatically: "I tell you, Neifkins, you Old Timers take too big risks."

"I suppose," the sheepman sneered, "you'd recommend my gettin' loaded up with a few hundred tons of hay I won't need."

"I'd recommend anything that would make you safe." Wentz lowered his voice, which vibrated with earnestness as he leaned forward in his chair: "Do you know what it means if a storm catches you and you have a big loss? It means that only a miracle will keep this bank from goin' on the rocks. We're hangin' on by our eyelashes now, waiting for the payment of your first big note to give us a chance to get our breath. I have the ague every time I see a hard-boiled hat comin' down the street, thinkin' it's a bank

examiner. You know as well as I do that you've borrowed to the amount of your stock, and way beyond the ten per cent limit of the capital stock which we as a national bank are allowed to loan an individual—that it's a serious offense if we're found out."

"If I don't," Neifkins replied insolently, "it ain't because you haven't told me often enough."

"But you don't seem to realize the position we're in. If you did, you'd play safe and ship. It's true enough that you might make more by holding on, but it's just as true that a big storm could wipe you out." His voice sank still lower and trembled as he confessed: "It's the honest God's truth that any two dozen of our largest depositors could close our doors to-day. I beg of you, Neifkins, to ship as soon as you can get cars."

Neifkins squared his thick shoulders in the chair.

"Look here—I don't allow no man to tell me how to run my business! When that note comes due I'll be ready to meet it, so there's no need of you gettin' cold feet as reg'lar as a cloud comes up." He arose. "This storm ain't goin' to last. May be a lot of snow will fall, but it won't lay."

Neifkins' sanguine predictions were not fulfilled, for the next day the sagging wires broke and Neifkins floundered through snow to his knees on his way down town. It lay three feet deep on the level and was still falling as though it could not stop. Every road and trail was obliterated. All the surrounding country was a white trackless waste and Prouty with its roofs groaning under their weight looked like a diamond-dusted picture on a Christmas card.

There was less resonance in Neifkins' jubilant tone when he stamped into the bank and declared that it was a record-breaker of a snow fall.

Wentz asked sullenly, as he paced the floor: “How about the sheep, if this keeps up?”

“I got herders that know what to do—that’s what I pay ’em for.”

“Knowing what to do won’t help much, with the snow too deep for the sheep to paw, and a two-days’ drive from hay, even if you could get through.” There was the maximum of exasperation in the president’s voice.

Neifkins replied stubbornly: “I’ve pulled through fifty storms like this and never had no big loss yet.”

“But you’ve never had so much at stake. You’ve got us to consider—”

“Don’t you fret!” Neifkins interrupted impatiently. “You’ve worried until you’re all worked up over somethin’ that hasn’t happened and ain’t goin’ to.”

With this assurance, which left no comfort in its wake, Neifkins went out where the first icy blast of the predicted blizzard lifted his hat and whisked it down the street.

The wind completed what the heavy snow had failed to do. Telephone and telegraph poles lay prone for a quarter of a mile at a stretch. It piled in drifts the snow already fallen and brought more. The blizzard enveloped Prouty until it required something more than normal courage to venture out of doors. It was the courage of desperation which ultimately sent Neifkins out in an attempt to get hay to his sheep. There was small resemblance between the optimist who had assured Wentz so confidently that everything would be all right and the perspiring and all but exhausted Neifkins who wallowed in snow to his arm-pits in an effort to break trail for the four-horse team whose driver was displaying increasing reluctance to go on with the load of baled hay stalled some mile and a half from town.

"We might as well quit," the driver called with a kind of desperate decision in his tone as he made to lay down the reins. "I can't afford to pull the life out of my horses like I got to do to make even a third of the way to-day."

Dismayed by his threat to go back, Neifkins begged:

"Don't quit me like this. I got six thousand sheep that'll starve if we don't git this hay through."

The driver hesitated. Reluctantly he picked up the lines:

"I'll give it another go, but I'm sure it's no use. The horses have pulled every pound that's in 'em, and now this wheeler's discouraged and startin' to balk. Besides, if anybody asks you, the road is gettin' no better fast."

The latter prediction in particular was correct, and their progress during the next hour could be measured in feet. The sweat trickled down the horses' necks and legs, their thick winter coats lay slick to their sides, and their breath came labored from their heaving chests. Two and sometimes three out of the four were down at a time.

The fight was too unequal; to pit their pygmean strength longer against the drifts and the fury of the elements was useless. Even Neifkins finally was convinced of that, and was about to admit as much when, without warning, wagon, driver and horses went over a cut-bank, where the animals lay on their backs, a kicking tangled mass.

It was the end. For a second Neifkins stood staring, overwhelmed with the realization that he was worse off by a good many thousand dollars than when he had come into the country—that he was wiped out—broke—and that the thin ice upon which the Security State Bank had been skating would now

let it through.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SHEEP QUEEN

The long mixed train crawling into the stockyards at Omaha, with its ice-encased wheels, its fringe of icicles pendant from the eaves, and snow from the wind-swept plains of western Nebraska piled on the roofs, looked like an Arctic Special.

Kate stood on the rear platform of the swaying caboose looking with wearied unkindled eyes at the myriad lights of the first city she had ever seen. Those eyes were dark-circled with fatigue, her face streaked with soft coal soot, while the wrinkled riding skirt in which she had slept was soiled and torn. Her fleece-lined canvas coat was buttoned to the throat, and she leaned negligently against the rail, watching from under the broad brim of her Stetson the twinkling lights increase.

It had been Kate's intention when she left Prouty to catch a fast passenger train and meet her sheep at a feeding station a few miles outside of Omaha, but the violence of the storm had changed her plans and

she had remained to spend many tedious hours waiting on side-tracks, and this, together with the work of unloading to feed and water, and insufficient sleep, had brought her as near exhaustion as she ever had found herself.

There was no eagerness in the sheep woman's face, only the impersonal curiosity of a spectator at a display in which he had no part. She accepted as a matter of course the fact that she would be here, as she was at home, an outsider, an alien.

Kate saw nothing interesting or unusual in what she had done—it was all in the day's work. She was merely one of innumerable stock raisers bringing the results of months and years of patient effort to the great stock market of the west. As she looked listlessly at the dark silhouette of tanks and towers, skyscrapers and gable roofs, at countless threads of smoke going straight up in the still air from the great hive of industry and life, she wondered at her apathy, at the fact that there was no anticipation in her mind.

Her face darkened. Had Prouty, along with other things, robbed her of the capacity for enjoyment? Had it crushed out of her the last remnant of the spirit of youth? Was she old, already hopelessly old at heart?

Her feeling toward the town gradually had crystallized into a cold animus, silent and unwavering, but now, as she suddenly whirled about and looked into the red winter sunset where, back there, beyond the Beyond, Prouty lay, a wave of hatred surged over her, to make her tingle to the finger tips.

Usually Prouty was personified in her mind as a hulking coward, bullying the weak, fawning upon the strong, with no guiding principle in life save self-

interest, but to-night, as she visualized it across the intervening miles, snow-bound, wind-swept, desolate, it was in the guise of a shivering pauper, miserable in his present, fearful of his future.

Her grip tightened on the rail of the swaying caboose and all the envenomed bitterness of her nature was in her choking voice as she said between her teeth:

"Curse you and curse you and curse you! I hate you! You've robbed me of the happiness that belonged to my youth. You've destroyed my faith in human kind. Whatever of sweetness there was in my nature you have turned to gall. When my Day comes I'll strike you without mercy—I'll beat you to the earth if it's in my power!"

It was fully night before they were able to get right-of-way into the yards, and Kate drew a deep breath of relief when the grinding wheels finally stopped. She and Bowers swung down together from the high step to the cinder path which lay between their own cars and a train of cattle bawling on a parallel track. As they stumbled along in the darkness toward the engine they heard brisk footsteps coming from that direction.

"Low bridge!" Bowers warned jocularly as they drew close.

In stepping aside to avoid Bowers the pedestrian bumped into Kate.

"I beg your pardon!" The voice was pleasant—deep.

Kate murmured a commonplace.

At the instant a brakeman hung out from the handrail of a car of the cattle train and swung his lantern. Instinctively Kate and the man with whom she had collided looked at each other in the arc of light. In their haste they had scarcely slackened their

steps, and it was only a second's glimpse that each had of the other's face, but it was long enough to give to each a sense of bewildered surprise. The look they had exchanged was the look one man gives to another—level, fearless—for there never was anything of coquetry in Kate's gaze, and the impression she had received was of poise, patience and worldly wisdom tinged with a sadness in which there was no bitterness.

The man walked on a pace, stopped and swung about abruptly. Evidently he could see nothing in the darkness—he could hear only the retreating footsteps on the cinder path. Then suddenly, aloud, sharply, out of his bewilderment he cried:

"By God! That woman looks like me!"

Kate and Bowers walked on without comment upon the incident, but when they had reached the yard, Bowers detached himself from Kate's side and made a rush to the nearest light where, turning his back with a secretive air, he took from the inner pocket of his inside coat the worn and yellowed photograph that Mullendore had recognized in Bowers's wagon. He looked at it long and hard.

Kate was too engrossed in directing and helping with the work of unloading, counting the sheep that had smothered, looking after those that had been injured in transit, feeding, watering, to be conscious of the attention she attracted among the helpers and others in the yards.

There had been "sheep queens" in the stockyards before—raucous-voiced, domineering, sexless, inflated to absurdity by their success—but none with Kate's personal attractiveness and her utter lack of self-consciousness. As she walked about on the long platform beside the pens, tall, straight, picturesque, with her free movements, her wide gestures when

she used her hands, together with her quiet air of authority, she was the most typical and interesting figure that had come out of the far west for a long time.

When the last thing was done that required her personal attention, Kate went to a nearby hotel recommended by one of the employees of the stockyard. It was third-rate and shabby, unpretentious even in its prime, but it looked imposing to Kate, who never had seen anything better than the Prouty House.

The loose tiling clacked as she walked across the office to the clerk's desk. That person eyed her dubiously as she laid the flour sack containing her belongings on the counter and registered. He saw in Kate only a woman peculiarly dressed, with a tanned and not too clean face, dishevelled hair, weary-eyed, and alone at a late hour. He missed altogether the indefinable atmosphere of character and substantiality which a more discerning and experienced person would have recognized at once.

"Baggage?" curtly, as she returned him the pen.

She indicated the grimy flour sack.

A supercilious eyebrow went up.

"You'll have to pay in advance. Six bits."

Kate reddened.

"Is that customary, or because you don't like my looks?"

Taking umbrage at the asperity of her tone, he replied impudently:

"Well—I don't know you from a crow, do I?"

Kate's eyes flashed.

"You will before I leave Omaha."

He laughed incredulously as he took a key from the rack.

Kate followed him up the dirty stairway through a

dingy hall to a still dingier room in the back of the house. Long and narrow, it looked like a kalsomined cave illumined by a lightning bug in a bottle when he turned the electric switch. She was too tired, however, to be critical and in her utter weariness lost consciousness as soon as her head touched the pillow and slept dreamlessly until the dawn came feebly through the coarse lace curtain that, stiff and gray with dust, hung at the one window of the room.

She rubbed her eyes and looked in bewilderment at the unfamiliar surroundings. Then she remembered, and the trip with all its attendant circumstances came back. She speculated as to the probable amount the sheep had shrunken on the way, how they would compare with other consignments in the yards, whether the market conditions were favorable or otherwise, what the commission agents whom she had known through correspondence for many years would be like.

Her experience with the night clerk came to mind and her frown at the recollection of his insolence changed to a puzzled look as she thought of her retort. Whatever had prompted her to make the empty boast that he would know her before she left Omaha? It was as unlike her as anything she could imagine, but it had seemed to say itself.

She had a subconscious feeling that there was still something else of which she wished to think before getting up, and as she searched her mind it flashed upon her—the stranger who had bumped into her in the dark. Of course, that was it! She heard his pleasant voice plainly and saw his face with great distinctness as revealed by the brakeman's light. While she recalled his features individually—his eyes, his mouth, his chin, and the meaning they conveyed, his manner with its mixture of friendliness

and reserve, she mechanically rubbed her forehead with her finger tips as though the action might assist in catching some elusive memory that was just beyond her reach. Her brows knit in perplexity and she murmured finally:

"He didn't seem a stranger, somehow—and yet—he was, of course. It would not be possible for me ever to forget a man like that. It seemed as if—" there was bewilderment in her face as she laid her hand upon her heart—"as if, somehow, I knew him here."

Kate's belief that no better sheep of their class than hers would be found in the stockyards was justified by subsequent events. Her shipment not only "topped the market," but she received for her yearling lambs fourteen dollars and sixty-five cents a head—the highest paid since the Civil War. This high rate was due not only to European disturbances, but to the quality and condition of the sheep; and, therefore, apart from the attention which she naturally would have attracted, she was, as the owner, an object of interest in the yards as well as in the stock exchange offices and the bank.

Basking in the reflected sunshine of his employer's success, Bowers came as near strutting as was possible for one of his retiring temperament.

Kate was finding a new experience in her meeting with the members of the firm to which she had consigned her sheep, and others with whom her business brought her in contact about the crowded Exchange. These prosperous, clean-cut men, alert, incisive of speech and thought, were an unfamiliar type. Their undisguised approbation, their respect, their eagerness to be kind brought a new sensation to Kate, who had grown up and lived in an atmosphere of prejudice. There were moments when the tears

were absurdly close to her eyes.

Aside from the circumstances which in any event would have attracted more than a little attention to Kate, the extent of the recognition and the courtesy extended to her was a personal triumph. Her simplicity and good sense, her reserve, together with a kind of timid, questioning friendliness, her unconsciousness of being in any way unusual, made her an instantaneous and complete success with those she met the following day, and a celebrity in the yards.

Her business was finished within a few hours and when she made her adieu, Kate looked for Bowers to tell him that she was leaving for Prouty on a night train, presuming that he would wish to do likewise. But Bowers appeared to have vanished as entirely as though he had been shanghaied and was a hundred miles at sea. It was singular that he had not first learned her plans before leaving the stockyards.

The omission hurt Kate, for they had talked much of what they would do and see when they reached Omaha. Bowers, with his superior knowledge of city life, was to show her about; they were to dine together in one of the best restaurants, to see a play and look in the shops. Kate never had been on a street car or in a “machine,” so she had counted on him to pilot her from South Omaha to the city proper. Disappointed and hurt by Bowers’s neglect, she wandered aimlessly about the streets in the vicinity of her hotel, stopping occasionally to look at the cheap wares displayed in the windows of the small shops of South Omaha.

The hurrying passersby slackened their steps to stare at her in candid interest, and she wondered if it were possible that her conspicuousness had anything to do with Bowers’s mysterious disappearance. It

seemed an ungenerous thought, but how else account for it, knowing as she did that he had no friends, no business in Omaha, and in the past there never had been a time when he had not preferred her society to that of everyone else?

The elation consequent upon her day of triumph gradually oozed out, to be replaced by the sense of dreariness that comes from being alone in a crowd. Then, too, she had a feeling of contempt for herself for the swift dreams of something different aroused by the day's events. Optimism had come to be synonymous with weakness to Kate. Now, as she stared indifferently at a display of tawdry blouses, she was asking herself if she had not yet learned her lesson, but that upon the strength of a little ephemeral happiness she must needs begin and build air castles again.

The waning day was cloudy, the crossings deep with slush, the pavements damp, and the chill of her wet soles made her shiver, adding the last touch to her forlornness and the depression which Bowers's desertion had induced. She dreaded returning to her cheerless room, but she could not walk the streets indefinitely, so she bought a magazine to read until it was time to dine alone in some one of the neighborhood's cheap restaurants. The night clerk was already on duty and through the fly-specked plate-glass window of the office saw her coming. Dashing from behind the desk, he skated recklessly across the tiles to open the door.

"Say—you're all right!" His tone was emphatic and sincere.

Kate eyed him without enthusiasm.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded.

"Tell you what?"

He held up the afternoon newspaper that he had

in his hand.

Kate's own face looked back at her from the front page and her name in the headlines met her astonished eyes. The picture, which had been made from a snapshot, was excellent, and the text was a highly colored recital of her achievements obtained from Bowers.

The clerk's tone conveyed his admiration as he confessed:

"Looks like you knew what you was talkin' about when you said I'd know who you was before you left Omaha."

Sitting on the edge of her bed Kate read the article again, but her first feeling of elation did not return. With her hands clasped about one knee, in her characteristic attitude, she stared at a festoon of dusty cobwebs hanging from the ceiling, and there gradually crept over her a feeling of lassitude.

She had established a record price with the best trainload of range sheep that ever had come into the stockyards; she had been accepted as an equal in achievement and intelligence by every one of the worthwhile men with whom she had come in contact; and as a climax to the day's events she was proclaimed a successful woman in the public prints. Yet, in the silence of the cheerless room, she was cognizant of the fact that nothing inside of her was changed thereby. There remained in her heart the same dreary emptiness.

Two tears slipped slowly down her cheeks. She brushed them away with the back of her hand, looked at her watch, and got up. She had no appetite, but ordering food in a restaurant would help the time to pass. After rubbing such mud as she could from her boots, she smoothed her hair before the mirror and put on her hat. The sheep woman was

the cynosure of the respectful gaze of many eyes as she came down the stairs.

Outside all the world was going home with eager, hurrying feet and she paused, looking indifferently up and down the street. The nearest restaurant was not inviting, but it answered well enough. After a few mouthfuls, Kate crumpled the paper napkin, paid her bill, and walked dispiritedly back to the hotel.

More often than not, the momentous happenings in life come without warning, and with no stage-setting to enhance the dramatic effect. Certainly there was nothing in the announcement of the now too friendly clerk that "she had a visitor who looked like new money," to prognosticate that once Kate had crossed the threshold of the red-plush parlor, her life would never be the same again.

It was Bowers, of course—she thought—Bowers come too late to take her to the restaurant whose delectable "grub" was one of his boasted memories of Omaha. Her conclusion was correct that Bowers was there, wearing his new clothes like a disguise, his eyes shining with eagerness. But it was not Bowers that Kate saw in the dim light as she stepped through the doorway—it was the man who at intervals had been strongly in her thoughts all day, for whom she had unconsciously kept a lookout, impelled by an inexplicable desire to see him again and remove that perplexing, haunting sense of having seen him somewhere before.

Kate felt herself trembling when the man arose from the sofa facing the door. As if by divination she recognized some impending event of importance to herself. He was no casual caller brought by idle curiosity, she was sure of that.

There was in his eyes a tremendous hope, and a yearning tenderness in his face which seemed to

draw her into his arms. It required an effort of will to remain passive as he approached.

Without explanation or apology, he put his hand under her chin and raised it with all gentleness, studying meanwhile every lineament of her face.

Kate watched the light of conviction grow in his eyes. Then she felt an arm about her shoulder and herself being drawn close against her father's heart as he exclaimed brokenly:

"My baby-girl, grown up! My *Kate*!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SURPRISE OF MR. WENTZ'S LIFE

After an absence from Prouty of several weeks, Kate stepped off the train alone one afternoon and furnished the town with the liveliest sensation of its kind that it had known since the Toomeys had gone "on East."

Through the cooperation of the telephone and of breathless ladies dashing across lots and from house to house, the town, by night, had a detailed description of the clothes which had altered Kate's appearance beyond belief.

Mrs. Abram Pantin expressed the opinion that Kate's Alaskan-seal coat which, in reality, represented the price of a goodly band of sheep, was merely native muskrat rather skilfully dyed.

This verdict rendered before the Thursday afternoon session of the Y. A. K.'s, which had gathered to hear a paper by Mrs. Sudds upon the Ming Dynasty, afforded its members immense relief. Their fears, too, that the smart ear-rings Kate wore might be real pearls were assuaged by Mrs. Neifkins, who declared she had seen their counterpart in Butte for seventy-five cents.

But the fact had soaked into the average citizen

that Kate had “arrived.”

Among those who admitted this was Mrs. Toomey, who lingered at the breakfast table the morning after Kate’s return, thinking of many things while she absently clinked her spoon against the edge of her cup. Jap had just left after an animated argument as to whether policy demanded the entertainment at dinner of the barber and his wife, who contemplated buying a sewing machine of a make for which Toomey was now the agent. Recalling the time when they had refused invitations right and left because there was no one in Prouty whom they had cared to know, a smile of bitterness came to her lips. Since then, she had eaten the pie of humbleness to the last crumb. She had become a self-acknowledged toady, a spineless sycophant, and for what? For the privilege of being invited to teas, bridge whists, of being sure of a place in the local social life.

This morning she was doubting the wisdom of her choice. Kate’s sincere unswerving friendship might have been compensation enough for the anguish of being “left out.” Yet she could not exactly blame herself, for who could have foreseen that things would turn out like this? It was not remorse that Mrs. Toomey felt, but regret for not arraying herself on the side which ultimately would have brought her the most benefits.

Mrs. Toomey never had been able to gather anything from Kate’s expression upon the few occasions that they had met since the girl had called her a “Judas Iscariot” and left the house, but she recalled that at each later encounter she had experienced the same sense of uneasiness.

Was the feeling due to a guilty conscience, she asked herself, or was an implacable hatred that was

biding its time, concealed by Kate's enigmatic face?

Mrs. Toomey concluded that this theory was farfetched—that it was not human nature to retain resentment for even a real wrong through such a lapse of years. Time took the keen edge off of everything, including the bitterest enemy. And yet, in spite of this comforting reassurance, there remained an inexplicable feeling of disquietude when she thought of the woman to whom she had proved an ingrate and a cowardly friend.

While Mrs. Toomey's mind was thus engrossingly occupied, Jasper was having his own troubles in the Security State Bank.

Stimulated by three cups of strong coffee, Toomey had left the house full of hustle and hope—a state which was apt to continue until about eleven o'clock when the effect wore off, and then he might be expected home with another iridescent bubble punctured, and himself gloomy to the point of suicide.

To-day Toomey's feet as a means of locomotion seemed all too slow as he covered the distance intervening between his home and the bank. His black eyes were brilliant with caffeine and the excitement attendant upon a large and highly satisfactory idea which had come to him in the night.

Having obtained a hearing, he rolled a cigarette with tremulous fingers while he unfolded his plan to Mr. Wentz. The banker listened with equanimity as he sat on the back of his neck with his fingers interlaced across his smart bottle-green waistcoat. Wentz's lack of enthusiasm only increased Toomey's eagerness. He leaned forward and declared with all vehemence:

"Look at the territory I could cover, if I had an automobile! With a sideline of fruit trees, I can get

an order of some kind out of every family in the northern part of the state. It's a cinch, Wentz. I'm giving you a chance to make a good loan that you can't afford to let pass."

Mr. Wentz yawned with marked weariness.

"What's a bank for if not to encourage legitimate enterprises in the community upon which it depends for its business? There isn't a flaw in this proposition, Wentz! Can you show me one?"

"It's perfect from your side," Wentz agreed, "but where would we get off if every family in the northern part of the state didn't happen to need fruit trees or a sewing machine? We'd have a worn automobile on our hands and another of your familiar signatures on our already too large collection of promissory notes. Can't see it, Jap."

Disappointment as well as Wentz's words stung Toomey more deeply than he had been touched for a long time. A rush of blood dyed his sallow face as he grabbed his hat and started for the door. Opening it partly, he turned and flung a retort over his shoulder.

"I'll tell you what I think, Vermin!" Mr. Wentz winced. This perversion of his name had darkened his childhood days and he never had outgrown his antipathy to it. "I think," Toomey went on, "that you're shaky as the devil—that Neifkins' big loss put such a crimp in you that an honest bank examiner could close your doors! I'll bet my hat against a white chip that even a boys'-size 'run' could shut your little two by twice bank up tight as a drum!"

It was a random shot, but the president's face showed that it went home. He gathered himself immediately, but not before Kate who, on coming in brushed shoulders with the departing Toomey, had heard the speech and noted its effect.

So Neifkins had had a big loss! She grasped the full significance of it at once and exultation filled her heart.

Wentz looked at the “Sheep Queen” hard as she advanced. Astonishment and admiration were in his eyes when he recognized her at last. It was beyond belief that a mere matter of clothes could effect such a transformation as this. She looked the last word in feminine elegance. Filled with the wonder of it, he forgot for a moment the specter which had been his sleeping and waking companion for some weeks past and which had confronted him with the substance of reality at Toomey’s taunt.

The banker went to meet Kate with an outstretched hand.

“You’ve been gone a long time; I’ve been wondering when we’d see you back.”

“I’ve been east,” she replied, casually.

“The trip’s did wonders for you. You look—well, bloomin’ isn’t hardly strong enough. Miss Prentice, I want you to meet my wife—you must.”

“Thanks—so much.” A certain dryness momentarily disconcerted Mr. Wentz.

With a shade of chagrin Mr. Wentz returned to his desk, telling himself inelegantly that she was “feeling her oats.”

Kate filled out a check in a deliberate and careful way and passed it in to the cashier, who had been noting the details of her appearance with unqualified interest. Her eyes had an increased brilliancy and there was a faint flush on her cheeks, but otherwise there was nothing in her impassive face to show how fast her heart was beating as she waited in the silence to learn if the blow she meant to strike had been well-timed or not.

She was not kept long in suspense. The swift

consternation which made the cashier's color fade when he grasped the fact that the check was for the full amount of her deposit told her all she wished to know. The shadow of her enigmatic smile rested on her lips.

She was curiously aware of every sound—the ticking of the flat clock against the wall, the scratching of Wentz's pen, the steps of passersby on the sidewalk—as she waited for what seemed an unconscionable time for the cashier to speak. Panic was in his eyes when he finally raised them from the check. He stood uncertainly for a moment, then turned and walked quickly to the president's desk.

Wentz read it without lifting his head as it lay before him. He continued to stare at it as though he had been stunned, while Kate with her eyes fixed upon his face thrummed lightly on the counter with her finger tips. He had pictured something like this a thousand times, yet now that it actually had come he seemed as little prepared to meet it as if it were a crushing and complete surprise.

He lifted his head as though with an effort.

"Will you step here, please?" His voice sounded thick.

The cashier quickly withdrew while Wentz arose slowly and opened the gate.

As Kate sank slowly into the depths of a leather covered chair, the much-discussed coat, a fitting garment for a princess, with its ample cut and voluminous unstinted hem, swirled gracefully about her feet. Her gloves, her close-fitting hat with its well-adjusted veil drawn over her carefully-dressed hair—everything, to the smallest detail of the subdued elegance of her toilette—suggested not only discriminating taste but unlimited means with which to indulge it.

The Sheep Queen toyed idly with a gold mesh-bag suspended by a chain about her neck, and her face was sphinx-like as she waited for Wentz to speak.

The check fluttered as the banker picked it up at last and held it between his two trembling hands.

"Is it necessary, Miss Prentice, that you have this money at once?"

Kate replied evenly:

"No—I can't say that. Why?"

He hesitated and the color swept hotly over his face.

"It will be an accommodation to us if you will wait a few days."

"In what way?"

Her calmness reassured him and he replied with a little less constraint:

"This is a large sum for a small bank, and I don't mind telling you confidentially that the payment of this check will leave us a little—er—short."

Kate raised her beautifully arched eyebrows and questioned:

"Yes?"

Wentz drew a deep breath of relief.

"You see, I inferred that you would be leaving this with us for a considerable length of time and, anyway, I was sure that you would be considerate if it was not quite—not quite convenient to pay the full amount at once."

"What made you think that?" she asked softly.

"Oh, our friendly relations, and all that," he replied more easily.

"Aren't you taking a great deal for granted, Mr. Wentz?"

The timbre of her voice—the deadly coldness of it—made him start. He had the sensation of an icicle being drawn slowly the length of his back.

"Why, I—I don't know," he stammered. "Am I?"

"Do you recall any reason, as you look back, why I should grant this favor that you ask?"

Mr. Wentz distinctly squirmed.

"N-no."

"Quite the contrary, if you'll recollect."

"I hope," with a deprecatory gesture of his white hand, "you are not laying that up against us, Miss Prentice? Surely you can understand that a bank must protect itself."

Kate's eyes which had been violet were gray now.

"But not to the extent that you did when you tried to put the screws on me for Neifkins' benefit. With every means at your command you endeavored to take advantage of my necessity. And yet"—she gripped the fat arms of the leather chair as she threw off her mask of impassivity and cried in a voice that was hoarse with the emotion with which she shook —"that's not the real reason that I'm going to close your doors, that I'm going to wreck you and your bank and give the finishing blow to this already bankrupt town! It's for a woman's reason that I am going to take my revenge.

"You weren't content to make a pauper of me. No, you couldn't be satisfied with that, but you must hurt my woman's pride—you must cut me to the quick with your studied insolence, the disrespect of your eyes, your manner, your tone, your speech, every time that business brought me here!

"You couldn't resist the temptation to hit me when I was down. It was so easy, and there was so little chance of being hit back. Besides, it gave you an agreeable feeling of importance, after having been so long ignored or patronized yourself. That's why, Mr. Wentz," the words sounded sibilant through her shut teeth, "you're going to honor my check to-day—

now—or suspend."

Wentz listened dumbfounded. The slight question which once had been in his mind as to whether or not she harbored resentment had long since been removed by her continued patronage and her even courtesy. He never had dreamed of such a vindictive, deep-rooted animosity as this.

When he could speak he half started from his chair and cried sharply:

"Miss Prentice! Kate! You won't do that!"

"Won't I?" Her short laugh was hard as with a nervous movement she got up, and walking behind it, laid her folded arms on the back of the big leather chair. "Do you think I've been planning and working to this end all these years to weaken at your first outcry? To watch you squirm is a part of the reward I promised myself, Mr. Wentz."

He thrust out a supplicating hand:

"Give us time—just a little time—that's all I ask! We'll tide over somehow if you'll—"

Kate interrupted bitterly:

"There's a familiar ring to that. My own words exactly, if you will recollect—and you sneered in my face." She looked at him with narrowed eyes and her voice was flint: "The time you'll get is the time it will require for me to go before a notary and swear that your bank is insolvent—twenty minutes—a half hour at most."

"For God's sake—" His face was chalky when he sprang out of his chair as though to stop her forcibly when she laid her hand upon the gate. "Isn't there some other way—some concession that we can make?"

Wentz did not breathe, in the tense moment that she seemed to hesitate.

"Yes," she flashed, "there is one way to save your

bank; turn over to me your and Neifkins' stock, which will give me the control."

Wentz stood mute.

She demanded imperiously:

"Yes or no?"

"You—you would retain me as president?" he asked, heavily.

Her answer came with the decisive snap of a rapid fire gun.

"Certainly not. You demonstrated your unfitness to occupy a position of such responsibility when you allowed yourself to be influenced by a man of Neifkins' stripe, to say nothing of the lack of knowledge of human nature which you have shown in your dealings with me.

"The man who enabled me to block your game when you thought you had me down and out—not through any particular kindness of heart or chivalry, but because he had the gift of insight into character—the discernment to recognize a safe loan—will take your place. Abram Pantin, if he wants it, will be this bank's next president."

Wentz looked his amazement.

So that was the source from which her money had come! The bank's ancient enemy had taken what any other man in Prouty would have considered an extremely long chance. Wentz never had blamed himself, but this news made him wince. Pantin—the fox—rather anyone else! A rebellious expression came over the man's face. With Abram Pantin in his chair his humiliation would be complete.

"I won't do it!" he blurted.

"Then you'll suspend. I don't bluff. There isn't a plea you can make, or a single argument, that will have any weight. There's but this one way to save your reputation and your bank. Do you quite realize

what failure means, coming at this time? It means the finishing touch to a nearly bankrupt town. It means that the temper of your depositors will be such that you're liable to be lynched, when they learn that you might have kept the bank open and did not. Think twice, Mr. Wentz."

"God, but you're cold-blooded!" He groped for the chair and sat down.

"You pay me a compliment," she answered, mockingly. "I take it you consent?"

He muttered sullenly:

"There's nothin' else. Yes."

CHAPTER XXIX

TOOMEY DISTINGUISHES HIMSELF

It had not been possible for Prentiss to go with Kate to Prouty but he had promised to come as soon as he could arrange his affairs. This had required something like two weeks, and in the interim the excitement attendant upon Kate's return had simmered down. She had not been in Prouty since, but Prentiss, having notified her of the day of his arrival, was now awaiting her appearance with an

impatience that evidenced itself in the frequency with which he looked at his watch.

As Prentiss stood at the window of the Prouty House looking down Main Street, his face wore a smile that was at once amused and kindly.

So this was Kate's environment, or a part of it—where she had grown to womanhood. The very pavements seemed invested with a kind of sacredness because they had known the imprint of her feet.

It was little short of idolatry—this man's love for his daughter—representing as it did all the pent-up affection of his life, and as he had poured that out prodigally so he had lavished his wealth upon her, laughing in keen enjoyment at her dismayed protests.

"Why, girl, you don't understand at all! What is money for, if not to spend on some one you love?"

The weeks they had spent together had been a wonderful experience for himself as well as for Kate. There were times when he still could not quite realize that this astonishing young woman was his own flesh and blood.

With the experience and intelligent comprehension of a man, she yet was one of the most innately feminine women he had ever known—in her tastes, her small vanities, her quick and comprehensive sympathies; while her appreciation of all that was fine and good, whether in human conduct, the arts, or dress, was a constant marvel. Her childish enjoyment of the most ordinary pleasures was a constant delight and he found his greatest happiness in planning some new entertainment, receiving his reward in watching her expression.

But there was one thing about Kate that puzzled Prentiss, and troubled him a bit: he had observed

that while she talked freely of her mother and the Sand Coulee Roadhouse, of Mullendore and the crisis which had sent her to Mormon Joe, of the tragedy of his death, of her subsequent life on the ranch, of her ups-and-downs with the sheep, of anything that she thought would be of interest to him, of her inner self she had nothing to say—of friends, of love affairs—and he could not believe but that that a woman of her unmistakable charm must have had a few. Furthermore, he found that any attempt to draw her out met a reserve that was like a stone wall—just so far he got into her life and not a step beyond.

She reminded him, sometimes—and he could not have said why—of a spirited horse that has been abused—alert for blows, ready to defend itself, suspicious of kindness until its confidence has been won.

Kate had expanded and bloomed in the new atmosphere like a flower whose growth has been retarded by poor soil and contracted space. Her lips had taken on a smiling upward curve that gave a new expression to her face, and now her frequent laugh was spontaneous and contagious. Her humor was of the western flavor—droll exaggeration—a little grim, while in her unexpected turns of speech, Prentiss found a constant source of entertainment.

He had told her of the Toomeys and the circumstances in which they had met; also of the letter endeavoring to interest him in the irrigation project.

“Do you know them?” he had asked, and she had replied merely, “Somewhat.”

When questioned as to the merits of the project, she had answered evasively, “Of my own knowledge I know nothing.” But he could not fail to observe the sudden stillness which fell upon her, the

inscrutability of expression which dropped like a mask over her animated face. The name of Prouty alone was sufficient to bring this change, as if at the sound of the word a habit of reserve asserted itself.

Prentiss thought of it much, but contented himself with believing that all in good time he would have his daughter's entire confidence.

The afternoon train had been extraordinarily late, bringing him in long after dark, so the news of the arrival of this stranger of undoubted importance had not been widely disseminated as yet. In any event, it had not reached Toomey, who banged the door violently behind him as he strode into the office of the hotel. His brow was dark and it did not belie his mood. He was indignant, and with reason enough, for he had just learned that he had dined the barber futilely, since the ingrate had purchased elsewhere a sewing machine of a rival make.

As Toomey was about to take his accustomed seat, his glance chanced to light upon Prentiss's distinguished back.

He stopped abruptly, staring in a surprise which passed swiftly from incredulity to joy. "The 'Live One!' Prentiss, at last!"

If he had followed his impulse, Toomey would have cast himself headlong upon the newcomer's prosperous bosom, for a conventional handshake seemed inadequate to express the rapture that sent him to Prentiss's side in a rush.

"Mr. Prentiss, as I live! Why didn't you let me know?" It did not for a moment occur to Toomey that Prentiss was in Prouty for any other purpose than to see him.

Roused from a slight reverie, Prentiss turned and responded vaguely:

"Why, how are you Mr.—er—"

"Toomey," supplied that person, taken somewhat aback.

"Ah, to be sure!" with instant cordiality. "And your wife?"

"She will be delighted to learn you are here. I wish you had come direct to us."

The reply that he was going to his daughter's ranch was on his tongue's end, but something checked it—the recollection perhaps of the singular change which had come over Kate's face at the mention of the Toomeys' name; instead, he expressed his appreciation of the proffered hospitality and courteously refused.

Glad of the diversion while he was obliged to wait, Prentiss sat down in one of the chairs Toomey drew out and listened with more or less attention while he launched forth upon the subject of the project which would bring manifold returns upon the original investment if it was handled right—the inference being that he was the man to see to that.

It was the psychological moment to buy up the outstanding stock. The finances of the town and its citizens were at the lowest ebb—on the verge of collapse, in fact, if something did not turn up. Furthermore—he imparted the information in a voice lowered to a confidential pitch—he had it from a reliable source that the bank itself had been caught in a pinch and had been obliged to transfer its stock to a depositor to save itself.

Toomey expatiated upon the merits of the proposition and the subsequent opportunities if it went through, until a feverish spot burned on either cheek-bone. And the burden of his refrain was that never since Noah came out of the ark, "the sole survivor," and all the world his oyster, as it were, had there been such a chance to "glom" everything

in sight for a song.

If Prentiss's eyes twinkled occasionally, Toomey was too intent upon presenting his case in the strongest possible light to notice it; nor did he desist until Prentiss displayed signs of restlessness. Then, not to crowd his luck, he let the subject drop and sought to entertain him with a running fire of humorous comments upon the passersby.

Toomey excelled at this, forgetting, as is frequently the case, that no one of those whom he lampooned was as fitting a subject for ridicule as himself.

During a pause he observed:

"By the way, there's a woman of your name living about here."

"So I've heard."

"No connection, of course—different spelling, but not apt to be in any case." There was a covert sneer in his voice.

"How's that?" casually.

"She—" with a shrug—"well, she isn't up to much."

Prentiss stirred slightly.

"No?"

Toomey detected interest and lowered his voice.

"In fact, she's no good."

Prentiss sat quite still—the stillness of a man who takes a shock in that way.

"They call her the 'Sheep Queen,' but we Old Timers know her as 'Mormon Joe's Kate.' She shipped a while back, and just come home all dolled up. Made a little money, no doubt, but any pinhead could do that, the way prices are. She'll never get 'in,' though."

"'In' where?"

"In society. For a little burg," with pride, "you'd

be surprised to know how exclusive they are here." The speech showed what, among other things, the years in Prouty had done to Toomey.

A half-inch of cigar burned to ashes between Prentiss's finger-tips before he spoke.

"So—the Sheep Queen is ostracized?"

"Well—rather!" with unctuous emphasis. "My wife tried to take her up—but she couldn't make it stick. Found it would hurt us in our business, socially, and all that."

Prentiss raised his cigar to his lips and looked at Toomey through slightly narrowed lids which might or might not be due to smoke as he asked:

"Just what was her offense?"

Toomey laughed.

"It would be hard to say as to that. She came here under a cloud, and has been under one ever since. She has no antecedents, no blood, and even in a town like Prouty such things count. Her mother was Jezebel of the Sand Coulee, a notorious roadhouse in the southern part of the state; her father was God-knows-who—some freighter or sheepherder, most like."

"Interesting—quite. Go on."

Toomey did not note the constraint in Prentiss's voice and proceeded with gusto:

"She followed off a fellow called Mormon Joe, and trailed in here in overalls behind the little band of ewes that gave them their start. He took up a homestead back in the hills and they lived on about as near nothing as anybody could, and live at all—like a couple of white Indians sleeping in tents and eating out of a frying pan.

"A chap that was visiting me one summer brought her to a dance here at the Prouty House—did it on a bet that he hadn't sand enough. She came downstairs

looking like a Christmas tree. Everybody gave her the frosty mitt and they had to leave."

Prentiss watched a smoke ring rise before he asked:

"Why did they do that?"

"So she wouldn't make the same mistake again."

Toomey laughed, and added:

"They took a 'fall' out of her every time they could after that. There was something about her that invited it," he added reflectively, "the way she held her head up, as if she defied them to do their worst, and," chuckling, "they did."

Prentiss thrust a forefinger inside his collar and gave it a tug as though it choked.

"This Mormon Joe—what became of him?"

The gleeful light went out of Toomey's face.

"He was killed in a shack down here."

"How?"

"A trap-gun."

"By whom?"

Toomey recrossed his long legs and sought a new position for his hands with the quick erratic movements of nervousness. He hesitated, then replied:

"They suspected her."

"Why?"

"She was the only one to benefit."

"There was no proof?"

"No."

"What do you think?"

Toomey deliberated a moment:

"I believe her innocent, myself," he finally replied.

"So she grew up out there in the hills without any friends or social life," Prentiss commented, musingly.

"There was always a camptender and a

sheepherder or two about," Toomey answered with slurring significance.

Prentiss brushed the ashes from his cigar.

"And Prouty had no sympathy with her in her loneliness, but considered her a legitimate target—somebody that everybody 'took a fall out of,' you say?"

There was a quality in his voice now which made Toomey glance at the man quickly, but it was so elusive, so faint, that he could not be certain; and reassured by his impassive face he went on:

"Why shouldn't they? What would anybody waste sympathy on her kind for?" His thin lips curled contemptuously.

Again Prentiss sat in the stillness in which not a muscle or an eyelid moved. He seemed even not to breathe until he turned with an impressive deliberateness and subjected Toomey to a scrutiny so searching and prolonged that Toomey colored in embarrassment, wondering the while as to what it meant.

"I presume, Mr. Toomey," Prentiss finally inquired with a careful politeness he had not shown before, "that it would mean considerable to you in the way of commissions on the sale of stock if this project went through?"

Toomey's relief that he had not inadvertently given offense was so great that he almost told the truth as to the exact amount. Just in time he restrained himself and replied with elaborate indifference:

"I'd get something out of it for my time and work, of course, but, mostly, I'm anxious to see a friend get hold of a good thing."

This fine spirit of disinterested solicitude met with no response.

"I presume it's equally true, Mr. Toomey, that the completion of the project means considerable to the town?"

"Considerable!" with explosive vehemence. "It's got where it's a case of life or death. The coyotes'll be denning in the Security State Bank and the birds building nests in the Opera House in a year or two, if something don't turn up."

"How soon can you furnish me with the data you may have on hand?"

"About six minutes and four seconds, if I run," Toomey replied in humorous earnestness.

Prentiss's face did not relax.

"Get it and bring it to my room—at once." His voice was cold and businesslike, strongly reminiscent now of Kate's.

CHAPTER XXX

HER DAY

Kate stood before a teetering knobless bureau reflecting upon the singular coincidence which should place her in the same room for her second social affair in the Prouty House as that to which she

had been assigned upon her first. The bureau had been new then and, to her inexperienced eyes, had looked the acme of luxurious magnificence. She recalled as vividly as though the lapse of time consisted of days, not years, the round eager face, that had looked out of the glass.

She had been only seventeen—that other girl—and every emotion that she felt was to be read in her expressive face and in her candid eyes. It was different—the face of this woman of twenty-eight who calmly regarded Kate.

She turned her head and took in the room with a sweeping glance.

It was there, in the middle of the floor, that she had torn off and flung her wreath; it was in the corner over there that she had thrown her bunting dress. On the spot where the rug with the pink child and the red-eyed dog used to be, she had stood with the tears streaming down her cheeks—tears of humiliation, of fierce outraged pride, feeling that the most colossal, crushing tragedy that possibly could come into any life had fallen upon her.

It came back to the last detail, that evening of torture—the audible innuendos and the whispering behind hands, the lifted eyebrows and the exchange of mocking looks, the insolent eyes of Neifkins, and the final deliberate insult—she lived it all again as she stood before the mirror calmly arranging her hair.

And Hughie! Her hands paused in mid-air. Could she ever forget that moment of agony on the stairs when she thought he was going to fail her—that he was ashamed, and a coward! But what a thoroughbred he had been! She could better appreciate now the courage it had required.

Afterward—in the moonlight—on the way home

—his contrition, his sympathy, his awkward tenderness. “I love you—I’ll love you as long as I live!” Her lips parted as she listened to the boyish voice—vibrating, passionate. He had come to her again and she had sent him away for the sake of the hour that was shortly to arrive. She had reached her goal. More than she had dared hope for in her wildest dreams had come to her at last. She had money, power, success, a name. A choking lump rose in her throat.

It was no longer of any use to refuse to admit it to herself—she wanted Hugh. She wanted him with all her heart and soul and strength, nothing and no one else. She threw herself upon the uninviting bed, and in the hour when she should have been exultant Kate cried.

Throughout Prouty, among the socially select, the act of dressing for the function at the Prouty House was taking place. This dinner given to Prentiss by the members of the Boosters Club was the most important event from every viewpoint that had taken place since the town was incorporated. It would show the bankrupt stockholders where they were “at,” since Prentiss had reserved the announcement of his decision regarding the irrigation project for this occasion. In addition, he had asked the privilege of inviting a guest, which was granted as readily as if he had requested permission to appear in his bathrobe, for they had no desire to offend a man who in their minds occupied an analogous position with the ravens that brought food to Elijah starving in the wilderness.

Prentiss had been investigated and his rating obtained. All that Toomey had claimed for him was found to be the truth—he was an indisputable millionaire, with ample means to put through

whatever he undertook. The effect of Prentiss's presence was noticeable throughout the town, and innumerable small extravagances were committed on the strength of what was going to happen "when the project went through."

But in no person was the change so marked as in Toomey, who felt that he had come into his own at last. As an old and dear friend of Prentiss's his prestige was almost restored. He fairly reeled with success, while, with no one daring to refuse him credit because of the influence he was presumed to exert, he ate tinned lobster for breakfast—to show that he could.

If Prentiss suspected that he was being made capital of, exploited and exhibited like a rare bird, there was nothing in his manner to indicate that he entertained the thought. While it was true that his first friendliness towards Toomey never came back, his impersonal, businesslike courtesy in their intercourse was beyond reproach.

A report had been current that Kate and "Toomey's millionaire" knew each other—some one in the Prouty House had seen them meet—but as she returned almost immediately to the ranch and had not been in town since, the rumor died for want of nourishment. No one but Mrs. Toomey gave it a second thought. But she gave it many thoughts; it stuck in her mind and she could not get it out.

To her, the resemblance between the two was very noticeable, and another meeting with Prentiss made her marvel that no one observed it but herself. In spite of the different spelling of the name, was there, perchance, some relationship? The persistent thought filled her with a vague disquietude. It was so strongly in her mind while they dressed for the affair at the Prouty House that Toomey's conversation was

largely a soliloquy.

Surveying himself complacently in the glass, it pleased Mr. Toomey to be jocose.

"Say, Old Girl, how long will it take you to pack your war-bag when I get this deal pulled off? It's a safe bet that this cross roads can't see me for dust, once I get that commission in my mitt." He turned and looked at her sharply. "What's the matter now, Mrs. Kill-joy? Where's it hurting the worst?"

Mrs. Toomey continued to powder the red tip of her nose until it showed pink.

"You're about as cheerful as an open grave—takes all the heart out of me just to look at your face. Speak up, Little Sunbeam, and tell Papa what you got on your chest?"

Mrs. Toomey laid down the powder puff.

"What if there should be some slip-up, Jap? We're letting ourselves in for a dreadful disappointment if we count on it too much."

He shook off her hands from his shoulders with an exasperated twitch.

"You're the original Death's Head, Dell! Don't you suppose I know what I'm talking about? It'll go through," confidently. "What's made you think it won't?"

Mrs. Toomey hesitated, then timidly:

"I can't get it out of my head, Jap, but that he's related to Kate, and if that should happen to be so—"

"Good Lord! So you've dug that up to worry about? Look here—if he'd had any interest in her he'd have knocked me cold the first day he arrived."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Toomey asked quickly.

"Just that. Her name happened to come up, and I didn't mince my words in telling him about her past."

"Oh, Jap! Whatever made you do that?"

His thin lips curled.

"Why shouldn't I? Damn her—I hate her, somehow. The upstart—the gutter-snipe!"

She laid her hand across his mouth.

"You—shock me, Jap! I don't understand why you are so—venomous toward Kate. Sometimes," she looked at him searchingly, "I've wondered if you've injured her."

"What do you mean?" He breathed hard, in sudden excitement.

She stood for a moment twisting a button on his coat—her eyes downcast. Finally:

"Nothing—much."

In the office of the Prouty House, redolent of the juniper and spruce boughs which took the bareness from the walls, the guests hungrily watched the hands of the clock creep towards the fashionable hour of eight.

"Among those present" was Mr. Clarence Teeters, circulating freely in a full dress coat and gray trousers—the latter worn over a pair of high-heeled cowboy boots and the former over a negligee shirt, beneath the cuffs of which two leather straps for strengthening the wrists peeped out. Fresh from the hands of the barber, Mr. Teeters' hair, sleek, glossy, fragrant, and brushed straight back, gave him a marked resemblance to a muskrat that has just come up from a dive.

With a sublimated confidence that was sickening to such citizens as had known him when he worked for wages and wore overalls, and particularly to Toomey, who took Teeters' success upon the ranch where he himself had failed as a personal affront, Mr. Teeters flitted among the ladies, as impartial as a bee in a bed of hollyhocks, tossing off compliments

with an ease which was a revelation to those who remembered the time when his brain stopped working in the presence of the opposite sex quite as effectually as though he had been hit with an axe.

Toomey not only resented Teeters' presence but the informality of his manner toward Prentiss, which Toomey regarded as his special prerogative. He already had had an argument with Sudds as to the advisability of including Teeters among the guests, and now during a lull his judgment was fully verified.

Mr. Teeters with a proud glance at the gaily draped room and at the table decorated with real carnations and festoons of smilax, which were visible through the double doors opening into the dining room, inquired of Prentiss with hearty friendliness:

"Say, feller, don't this swell lay-out kinda take you back to Chicago or New York?"

What further indiscretions of speech Teeters would have committed only his Maker knows, for at the moment the clerk at the desk called his name in an imperative voice. As the recipient of a telegram, Teeters had the attention of everybody in the room, and none could fail to observe his excitement as he folded the telegram and returned it to its envelope.

"I got me a dude comin' in on the train," addressing Sudds. "Could you fix a place for him to eat? The train bein' late like this, he won't git any supper otherwise. I wasn't expectin' of him for a month yet."

With an invitation thus publicly requisitioned, as it were, there was no alternative but to assent.

The hands of the office clock were close to eight when, as though on a signal, the hubbub of social intercourse ceased and eyes followed eyes to the top of the stairs where two white-slippered feet showed

through the rungs of the balustrade and a slim hand sparkling with jewels slipped gracefully along the polished rail. Then she appeared full length, in a white dinner gown—clinging, soft, exquisite in its simplicity and the perfection of its lines. With pearls in her ears and about her throat, her hair drawn back in a simple knot, Kate looked like one of the favorites of fortune of whom the Proutyites read in the illustrated magazines and Sunday supplements. The least initiated was conscious of the perfect taste and skilful workmanship which had conspired to produce this result. Kate descended slowly, with neither undue deliberation nor haste, upon her lips the faint one-sided smile which was characteristic.

The moment was as dramatic as if the situation had been planned for the effect, since there were few present to whose minds did not leap to the picture of that other girl who had come bounding down the stairs, grotesque of dress and as assured and joyous in her ignorance as a frisky colt.

In a continued silence which no one seemed to have the temerity or the presence of mind to break, the Sheep Queen turned at the foot of the stairway, and the various groups separated on a common impulse to let her pass. She went straight to Prentiss, whose greeting was a smile of adoring tenderness.

“Am I late, father?”

The sharp intake of breath throughout the room might have come from one pair of lungs. “Father!” The rumor was true then! Amazement came first, and then uneasiness. What effect would the relationship have upon their personal interests? Had she any feeling which would lead her to use her influence to their detriment?

Kate and her father would have had more than their share of attention anywhere, for they had the

same distinction of carriage, the same grave repose. Either one of them would have stood out in a far more brilliant assembly than that gathered in the Prouty House.

The social training Mrs. Abram Pantin had received at church functions in Keokuk now came to her rescue. Gathering herself, she was able to chirp:

"This *is* a surprise!"

"You know my daughter, of course?" to Mrs. Sudds, whose jaw had dropped, so that she stood slightly open-mouthed, arrayed in a frock made in the fashion of the Moyen age and recently handed down from a great-uncle's relict who had passed on. Since this confection bulged where it should have clung and clung where it should have bulged, it was the general impression that Mrs. Sudds was out in a maternity gown. Mrs. Neifkins in fourteen gores stood beside Mrs. Toomey in a hobble skirt reminiscent of her Chicago trip, while a faint odor of moth balls, cedar chips and gasolene permeated the atmosphere in the immediate vicinity of all this ancient elegance.

"We all have met," Kate replied, and her glance included the group. While there was no emphasis to suggest that the sentence contained any special significance, yet each of the ladies was conscious of an uncomfortable warmth, and the wish that dinner would be announced was so unanimous that their heads turned simultaneously towards the dining room; and, quite as if the concentrated thought had produced the result, the proprietor of the Prouty House conveyed the information to Sudds in a whisper from the corner of his mouth that all was in readiness.

After some embarrassed uncertainty as to who was to conduct whom, and which arm should be

used, the guests filed into the dining room at an hour when, commonly, they were preparing to retire.

In the confusion Mrs. Toomey found the opportunity to say:

"Jap, our goose is cooked!"

Adversity had sharpened her intuitions, developed her sensibilities; what others might fear, she knew, and this commonplace held all her disappointment, all the chagrin and hopelessness that in an instant had dissipated the roseate dreams she had again dared to entertain.

Toomey was too dazed to reply. What did it mean, he was asking himself in bewilderment as he found the seat at the table which had been assigned him. When he had disparaged and insulted Kate, why had Prentiss not resented it verbally, knocked him down? Why had he made a secret of their relationship?

Notwithstanding Gov'nor Sudds's best efforts, ably supported by Mr. Scales and Hiram Butefish, the banquet did not promise to be an unqualified success. There was a tension which did not make for a proper appreciation of the excellently prepared food. In truth, nobody was entirely at his ease save Prentiss and Kate—and Abram Pantin. The complacency of the cat who has eaten the canary was discontent beside the satisfaction upon Mr. Pantin's face as he sent triumphant glances at his wife. It was well towards the end of the banquet that the belated train whistled and Mr. Teeters excused himself—first reaching for a stalk of celery which he ate as he went, and looking, as Mr. Butefish observed to fill a pause, "like a pig with a corn husk hanging out of its mouth."

When the several courses had passed in review, the tension increased with the realization that the

moment which meant so much to everyone present had arrived at last.

So many times they had allowed themselves to hope only to know disappointment. But Prentiss inspired a confidence they never had had in the prospective investors who had gone before. He was of quite a different sort.

But the most adroit questioning had failed to extract the slightest hint as to his intentions. In any event, they would soon be out of their suspense, and they waited with an impatience not too well concealed for Gov'nor Sudds to finish his labored speech.

Toomey was called upon next but he begged to be excused, intimating that he was a man of deeds, not words.

Mr. Butefish then recounted the natural resources of the country with a glibness that carried the suggestion that he could do the same in his sleep, and Mr. Scales arose to affirm his confidence in the day when Prouty would be heralded as “the Denver of the State.”

Noting the growing signs of restlessness, the Gov'nor ignored the expectant looks of other prominent citizens and called upon Mr. Prentiss, admitting, as though he were conceding a disputed fact, that the decision they were anticipating was a matter of interest—even of considerable concern—to the town.

So general was the appreciation of what Prentiss’s speech meant that the cook came out of the kitchen and the waitresses hovered within hearing as Prentiss crumpled his napkin and slowly got up.

He looked thoroughly the man of affairs and of the world in his faultless dinner clothes, while the air of power which emanated from him seemed to be

something concrete—definite. In the pleasant voice and well-chosen words of one accustomed to thinking on his feet, he thanked the Boosters Club graciously for their hospitality and courtesies extended during his short stay in the town. Then, without further preliminaries, he went direct to the subject which was uppermost in every mind.

The project had merit, he was convinced of that. It would take considerable capital to enlarge the ditch and to put it in perfect condition, but the returns would warrant the outlay in time. The numerous failures had complicated the affairs of the company somewhat, but patience and the desire to be just would straighten these entanglements out.

The loosening of the tension as he talked evidenced itself in audible breaths and growing smiles upon every face. The encouraging words acted as the stimulant of a hypodermic in sluggish veins, eyes brightening and cheeks flushing at the mental pictures conjured up by the prospect of getting their money back.

"It is a proposition," Prentiss went on in his agreeable voice, "which I should feel justified either in taking up or letting alone. While it is legitimate and safe, in so far as I can see, I have on the other hand interests which claim a large share of my time, and this undertaking would be an additional demand.

"Therefore," his gaze traveled the length of the table and back to where Toomey sat, "I have concluded to determine the matter by a somewhat unique means. I shall leave the decision to my daughter here. Prouty, one may say, is her home. She has grown up among you. Many of you, no doubt, she numbers among her friends. At any rate, she has the final say. I have informed her of my intention,

but I have no more notion than yourselves what her answer will be, and," he added, "I have quite as much curiosity."

Blank surprise was followed by the exchange of startled, inquiring looks. Abram Pantin was perhaps the only one who did not find some grounds for uneasiness.

The swift transition from relief to their former state of suspense was marked, and their feelings found an outlet in a sudden nervous movement of hands and feet. The town had given her rather a hard deal in some ways, all were ready to admit that, but had she felt it? Did she entertain resentment because of it? She looked so young, so feminine, so exquisitely soft that, somehow, they thought not.

Toomey's sallow skin had taken on a saffron shade, and Mrs. Toomey sat with her thin hands clenched in her lap, a strained smile fixed on her face, waiting for—she knew not what.

Turning in his chair, Prentiss laid his hand upon the back of Kate's, and his keen worldly eyes shone with the peculiar satisfaction which human nature finds in its own flesh and blood when it reflects credit upon themselves. Immeasurable pride was in his face as he looked at her.

The miracle of clothes and an altered frame of mind had done wonders for Kate. The austere expression, the tense lines which came from responsibility and unhappiness had been smoothed out, while much of the tan of her years in the open air had vanished in a few weeks in the moist climate of the east. She looked not more than twenty-two or three in the soft glow of the shaded lights, and of the awkward self-conscious girl whom they remembered on that night in this same dining room, there was not a trace.

She had the quiet assurance of authority, the poise of self-reliance and reserve force, but there was not a shade of triumph in her face, at the power with which her father had vested her.

There seemed not to be even heart beats in the tense silence while Kate sat with her eyes downcast, clinking, with her jewelled fingers, a bit of ice against the sides of her drinking glass. Even when she spoke finally she did not look up, but began in a low, even voice:

"A fable that I read long ago keeps coming to me to-night—the story of a king, powerful and cruel, who, when his time came to appear before the Great Judge, the single entry in his favor that the Recording Angel could find was the whim which had induced him when walking one day to have a pig that he saw suffering in the gutter put out of its misery.

"The story is applicable in that as I sit here I realize that in all the years I have been among you there is only one," she raised her eyes and indicated Teeters's empty chair, "who ever has done me the smallest disinterested kindness.

"Until I got beyond the need of it, I cannot remember one unselfish, friendly act, or, at a time when every man's hand was against me, one sympathetic word or look. It sounds incredible, but it is the truth. It seems the irony of Fate indeed that this decision, which means so much to you, should rest with me."

She stopped and lowered her eyes again to the glass which she twirled slowly as she deliberated, as if choosing the words which should most exactly express her thoughts.

She began again:

"You will excuse me if I speak much of myself,

but there is no other way to make clear what I have to say." She paused for a breathless moment, and went on: "We all have our peculiarities of temperament and mind, our individual idiosyncracies, to distinguish us, and they are as marked as physical characteristics, and it happens to be mine that either a kindness or an injury is something to be paid in full as surely as a promissory note, if it is possible to do so.

"The debts I owe to you are for acts of wanton cruelty that one would have to look to Indians to find their counterpart, for deliberate insults that had not even the excuse of personal animus to justify them, but were due solely to the cowardice which likes to strike where it is safe—the eagerness to hurt, which seems to be the first instinct of small minds and natures. I have no taste to rehearse my grievances, but it is necessary, that you may quite understand why it is that I feel as I do towards you."

Somewhat in the tone of a person reciting a lesson she continued:

"I was a young girl when I first came among you —to the dance here, into this very room. I was ignorant, unsophisticated. I met you with my hand outstretched, yearning for your friendship; and you would as well have struck me in my upturned face as do what you did.

"I had no mother, no woman friend to tell me that I was absurd in my paper flowers and the dress that I had made with my inexperienced fingers, and you could find no excuse for my ridiculous appearance, but enjoyed it openly.

"When you laughed in my face you had not yet inflicted pain enough to satisfy you—you had to turn the knife to see me quiver. And you did—mercilessly —relishing my humiliation when I had to leave.

“There was not one among you generous enough to make allowance for my youth and inexperience, and spare me. You saw only that I was absurd in my fantastic clothes, and overly anxious to be friendly. I was the daughter of 'Jezebel of the Sand Coulee' and the protegée of a ‘sheepherder.’

“I did not know you then as I do now and your pose of superiority impressed me; I took you at your own valuation and overestimated you; so I was all but crushed by your condemnation. I was like a child that is whipped without knowing for what it is being punished.”

She paused a moment before going on.

“Worse things came to me afterwards, but none from which I suffered more keenly—in a different way, perhaps, but not more acutely. The wounds you inflicted that night left scars that never have healed entirely.

“The turning-point in my life came when 'Mormon Joe' was murdered. He was more than a guardian and a benefactor—he had been father, mother, teacher, to me, but with no other grounds than that I benefited by his death, the stigma of murder was placed upon me. There was not evidence to hold me, so I remained a suspect, proven neither guilty nor innocent.

“The murder was little more than an agreeable break in the monotony to most of you, but it revolutionized the world for me—changed the whole scheme of my life—and,” with a smile that was tinged with bitterness, “demonstrated to my entire satisfaction the extent to which character is affected by environment.”

She went on thoughtfully:

“I have come to believe that to know human nature—at least to know it as its worst—one must be

the victim of some discreditable misfortune in a small community. Moral cowardice, ingratitude, the greed which is ready to take advantage of some one unable to make an effective protest, the gratuitous insults offered the 'under dog' because he is helpless to fight back—he discovers it all, and when all is done he has little faith in human nature left.

“This experience I had at your hands, to the last ounce. I know the ‘friendship’ that couldn’t 'stand the gaff' of public opinion, the ingratitude that makes no count of personal sacrifice, the rapacity that takes it to the border of dishonesty to attain its end. Yet, curiously enough, after the lapse of years these things shrink into comparative insignificance beside the uncalled for insolence, unwarranted affronts, which were offered me by many of you with whom I had not even a speaking acquaintance.

“My friendlessness aroused no pity in your hearts; I was only an unresisting target at which to throw a convenient stone. For years I stood out in the open, as it were, with the storms to whip the life out of me, and not one of you offered me a cloak.

“Upon any nature this experience would have had its effect—most women, I think, it would have crushed. In me it developed traits that in other circumstances might always have lain dormant. Along with a pride that was tremendous, it aroused a desire for revenge that was savage in its ferocity. I’ve lived for some such hour as this—worked, and sacrificed my happiness for it.

“If it could have been of my own planning I could not have conceived of a more gratifying situation than this.

“I know how much my decision means to you; I know that there isn’t one here who would not be affected directly or indirectly by the collapse of this

project; that it will take years for you to get back even to the position you were in when you came, quite as well as I realize that its completion would put you on your feet."

She stopped again while they waited for her to go on in a silence that was painful.

"When I've visualized 'The Day' in my waking dreams, I've wondered if I should weaken and forgive my enemies as they always do in books—if any argument could move me to relent—if any impulse would soften me toward you—if I might not even pity you.

"One never knows, but I thought not. And I was right. The desperation of your situation isn't the sort of pathos that appeals to me. I find that in my nature there is nothing 'noble' that pleads for you. I neither pity nor forgive you.

"Yet this moment is a disappointment. Instead of the sweetness of revenge, I feel only indifference, for I realize as never before how I magnified your importance, that I looked at you through the wrong end of the telescope; and along with my apathy is a feeling of dismay that I have spent all these years working to retaliate upon foes that are not worth what it has cost. The worst thing one could wish you is to be yourselves, for there isn't one among you who has the qualities to lift him above his present level of mediocrity."

A resentful movement to go was initiated by Gov'nor Sudds.

"Wait a moment!" Kate raised her hand imperiously. "I presume you think you have your answer?" She shook her head slowly. Then, with increased deliberation: "I told you that I always pay my debts. I owe my success to you. It is my enemies who have given me the patience to sit hour after

hour and herd sheep—not for weeks nor months, but for years. It is my enemies who have given me the courage to stagger on through cold and snow when the blood in my veins was ice. It is my enemies who have given me the endurance to work in emergencies until I have dropped; to endure poverty, loneliness, derision—and worse. When failures have knocked me down, it is you, my enemies, who have given me the strength to pick myself up and go on.

"Because of you, I am the better able to appreciate true friendship, integrity, the many qualities which go to make up greatness of mind and heart, and that in happier circumstances I have learned do exist. So you see, if you have taken much, perhaps you have given more, and I have an obligation to discharge. Therefore," she turned to her father with a slightly inquiring look, "if the decision still remains with me, I should like to know that the project will go through."

The tense and pent-up feelings of the guests found an outlet in long-drawn breaths and indignant but unconvincing murmurs that "they'd rather starve," which did not prevent all attention focusing upon Prentiss, whose face wore a forbidding grimness from which all semblance of friendliness had long since fled.

"If I had known—if I had dreamed of half of this—I am frank to confess that you could not have interested me in this proposition for the hundredth part of a second. But it will be completed because it is my daughter's wish. However," with cold emphasis, "upon my own terms.

"You may, or may not know, that the involved affairs of the project leave it practically optional with a new company whether they recognize the claims against former companies or repudiate these debts.

"The local claims amount to something like sixty-five thousand dollars, which is a sum of considerable importance, distributed in a town of this size. I had intended to pay these claims in full, largely as a matter of sentiment, presuming that among those affected there were at least a few of my daughter's friends. What she has said to-night gives the matter a new face. It is now a business proposition with me. I am no philanthropist where my interests or affections are not concerned.

"The offer I am about to make you can take or you can leave, but I've a notion self-interest will prevail over your temporary pique, since you no doubt realize that unless something is done almost immediately this segregated land will revert to the state.

"I will not pay any debts of former companies, and I will take over the controlling stock—not at the figure at which you are holding it, but at what I consider a fair price. I will enlarge the ditch and complete the project so that it will meet every requirement of the state engineers and turn it over to the settlers under it when it has been demonstrated to be a complete success."

They thought he had done, and again looked at each other with deep-drawn breaths, when he resumed:

"There is one more condition upon which I insist: It is that in the purchase of the stock I deal with the stockholders direct. There shall be no commission paid to a go-between." He looked at Toomey as he spoke. "My reason for this is purely personal, but nevertheless my offer rests upon this stipulation." There was no mistaking the finality of his tone or the cold enmity of his voice.

In a night of surprises this seemed the climax.

What did it mean, since there had not been the slightest hint that Toomey and Prentiss were not the warmest of friends? In the dramatic silence each could hear his neighbor breathe.

Toomey looked stunned, then, as he recovered himself, the vein in his temple swelled and his sallow face darkened to ugly belligerence.

“I don’t understand this!” he cried, raising his voice as he endeavored to return Prentiss’s steely gaze with one of defiance. “But I’ll serve notice now that I’ll have the commission to which I’m entitled, or I’ll sue for it and tie the whole thing up!”

Gov'nor Sudds started to his feet to voice a hot protest, as did other leading citizens who saw the chance to rehabilitate their fortunes vanish at the threat, but they were overshadowed, overborne by the more vigorous personality of Mr. Teeters, who suddenly dominated the scene from the door of the dining room where he had been listening intently. As if no longer able to contain himself, Teeters strode forward, shaking at Toomey the finger of emphasis:

“Then,” he cried, “you’ll do your suin’ from a cell! If I hold in any longer I’m goin’ to choke! I’m goin’ to speak, if she won’t.” He motioned towards Kate. “I want these folks to know what that yella-back has been keepin’ to himself all these years for some reason that only himself and the Almighty knows. *He* owned the gun that killed Mormon Joe! *He* sold it to the ‘breed,’ Mullendore! *He* could have proved Kate Prentiss’s innocence any time he wanted to—and *he kept his mouth shut*! I’m no legal sharp, but I won’t believe there ain’t some law that’ll put the likes o’ him where he belongs.”

Toomey shrank under the attack as though beneath actual blows; he seemed to contract beneath the focused gaze of eyes that contained anger, scorn,

in some instances, incredulity. He looked for a moment as though he were going to faint, then he clutched the edge of the table cloth in a convulsive grip, and shouted with an attempt at his old braggadocio:

"It's a lie!"

"It's the truth!" Teeters thundered, opposite. "Mullendore confessed. Anyhow, I've got other proof —the original owner of the gun who left it at your house when he was a kid. Feller—come out."

"Disston!" Toomey gasped as Hugh stepped from the semidusk of the corridor into the light. The thing he had feared most since some ugly perversity of his nature had kept him silent because of his dislike of Mormon Joe and Kate had come to pass.

In the swift movement of events, matters of more interest were transpiring than Toomey's nervous collapse. With a cry that has no counterpart save as it comes straight from a woman's heart, Kate had sprung to her feet and gone to Disston with her hands outstretched.

"Hughie! Hughie! You've come back. Speak—say something so I'll know that I'm awake." The Boosters' Club and its guests did not exist for Kate.

"Katie—Katie Prentice, is this wonderful girl you?" His face was radiant with admiration and amazement as he held her at arms' length.

"For months and months, Hughie," she said softly, "I've wanted to tell you that I was wrong and you were right. There is nothing of any great importance except love. *Without it success is empty—empty as a gourd!* Tell me, Hughie—tell me quick that it isn't too late to make amends for my mistake!"

Her answer was already in Disston's eyes so his whisper was superfluous—"I told you it was *for always*, Kate."

THE END

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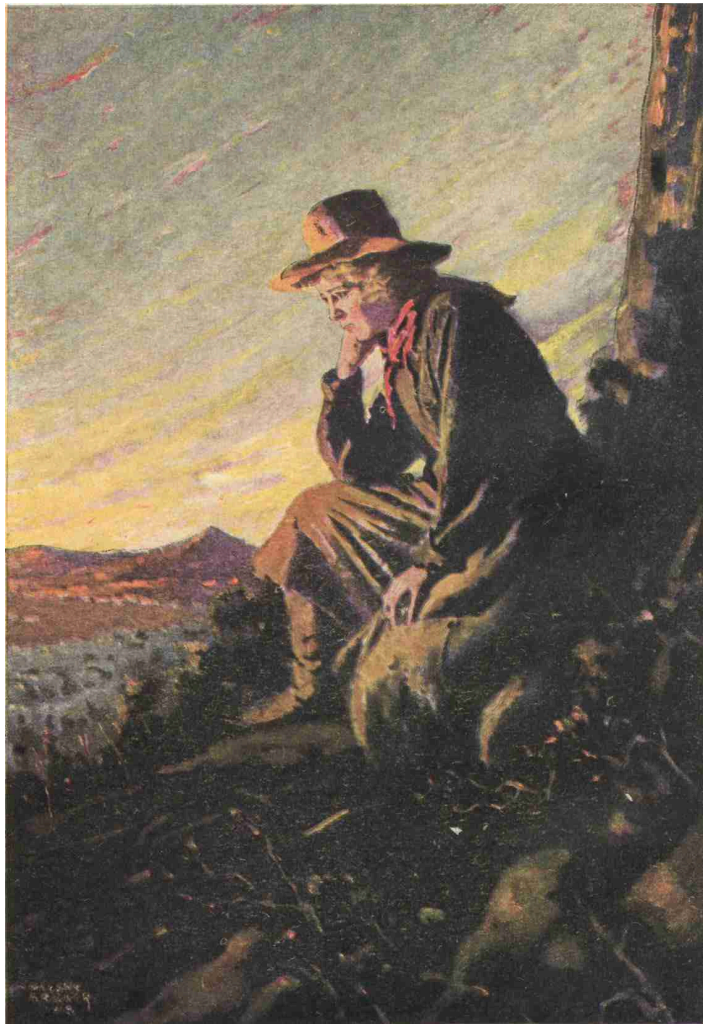
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