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By BRET HARTE.

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AUTHOR OF

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SNOW-BOUND AT EAGLE'S.

SNOW-BOUND AT EAGLE'S.

CHAPTER I.

FOR some moments profound silence and darkness had accompanied a Sierran stage-coach towards the summit. The huge, dim bulk of the vehicle, swaying noiselessly on its straps, glided onward and upward as if obeying some mysterious impulse from behind, so faint and indefinite appeared its relation to the viewless and silent horses ahead. The shadowy trunks of tall trees that seemed to approach the coach windows, look in, and then move hurriedly away, were the only distinguishable objects. Yet even these were so vague and unreal that they might have been the mere phantoms of some dream of the half-sleeping passengers; for the thickly-strewn needles of the pine that choked the way and deadened all sound, yielded under the silently-crushing wheels a faint soporific odour that seemed to benumb their senses, already slipping back into

unconsciousness during the long ascent. Suddenly the stage stopped.

Three of the four passengers inside struggled at once into upright wakefulness. The fourth passenger, John Hale, had not been sleeping, and turned impatiently towards the window. It seemed to him that two of the moving trees had suddenly become motionless outside. One of them moved again, and the door opened quickly but quietly, as of itself.

"Git down," said a voice in the darkness.

All the passengers except Hale started. The man next to him moved his right hand suddenly behind him, but as quickly stopped. One of the motionless trees had apparently closed upon the vehicle, and what had seemed to be a bough projecting from it at right angles changed slowly into the faintly shining double-barrels of a gun at the window.

"Drop that!" said the voice.

The man who had moved uttered a short laugh, and returned his hand empty to his knees. The two others perceptibly shrugged their shoulders as over a game that was lost. The remaining passenger, John Hale, fearless by nature, inexperienced by habit, awaking suddenly to the truth, conceived a desperate resistance. But without his making a gesture this was instinctively felt by the others; the muzzle of the gun turned spontaneously on him,

and he was vaguely conscious of a certain contempt and impatience of him in his companions.

"Git down," repeated the voice imperatively.

The three passengers descended. Hale, furious, alert, but helpless of any opportunity, followed. He was surprised to find the stage-driver and express messenger standing beside him; he had not heard them dismount. He instinctively looked towards the horses. He could see nothing.

"Hold up your hands!"

One of the passengers had already lifted his, in a weary, perfunctory way. The others did the same reluctantly and awkwardly, but apparently more from the consciousness of the ludicrousness of their attitude than from any sense of danger. The rays of a bull's-eye lantern, deftly managed by invisible hands, while it left the intruders in shadow, completely illuminated the faces and figures of the passengers. In spite of the majestic obscurity and silence of surrounding nature, the group of humanity thus illuminated was more farcical than dramatic. A scrap of newspaper, part of a sandwich, and an orange peel that had fallen from the floor of the coach, brought into equal prominence by the searching light, completed the absurdity.

"There's a man here with a package of green-backs," said the voice, with an official coolness that lent a certain suggestion of Custom House inspection to the transaction; "who is it?" The passengers

looked at each other, and their glance finally settled on Hale.

"It's not *him*," continued the voice, with a slight tinge of contempt on the emphasis. "You'll save time and searching, gentlemen, if you'll tote it out. If we've got to go through every one of you we'll try to make it pay."

The significant threat was not unheeded. The passenger who had first moved when the stage stopped put his hand to his breast.

"T'other pocket first, if you please," said the voice.

The man laughed, drew a pistol from his hip-pocket, and, under the strong light of the lantern, laid it on a spot in the road indicated by the voice. A thick envelope, taken from his breast-pocket, was laid beside it. "I told the d—d fools that gave it to me, instead of sending it by express, it would be at their own risk," he said apologetically.

"As it's going with the express now it's all the same," said the inevitable humorist of the occasion, pointing to the despoiled express treasure-box already in the road.

The intention and deliberation of the outrage was plain enough to Hale's inexperience now. Yet he could not understand the cool acquiescence of his fellow-passengers, and was furious. His reflections were interrupted by a voice which seemed to come from a greater distance. He fancied it

was even softer in tone, as if a certain austerity was relaxed.

"Step in as quick as you like, gentlemen. You've five minutes to wait, Bill."

The passengers re-entered the coach; the driver and express messenger hurriedly climbed to their places. Hale would have spoken, but an impatient gesture from his companions stopped him. They were evidently listening for something; he listened too.

Yet the silence remained unbroken. It seemed incredible that there should be no indication near or far of that forceful presence which a moment ago had been so dominant. No rustle in the wayside "brush," nor echo from the rocky cañon below, betrayed a sound of their flight. A faint breeze stirred the tall tips of the pines, a cone dropped on the stage-roof, one of the invisible horses that seemed to be listening too, moved slightly in his harness. But this only appeared to emphasize the profound stillness. The moments were growing interminable, when the voice, so near as to startle Hale, broke once more from the surrounding obscurity.

"Good night."

It was the signal that they were free. The driver's whip cracked like a pistol-shot, the horses sprang furiously forward, the huge vehicle lurched ahead, and then bounded violently after them. When Hale could make his voice heard in the confusion

—a confusion which seemed greater from the colourless intensity of their last few moments' experience, he said hurriedly, "Then that fellow was there all the time?"

"I reckon," returned his companion, "he stopped five minutes to cover the driver with his double-barrel, until the two other men got off with the treasure."

"The *two* others!" gasped Hale. "Then there were only *three* men, and we *six*."

The man shrugged his shoulders. The passenger who had given up the greenbacks drawled, with a slow, irritating tolerance, "I reckon you're a stranger here?"

"I am—to this sort of thing, certainly, though I live a dozen miles from here, at Eagle's Court," returned Hale scornfully.

"Then you're the chap that's doin' that fancy ranchin' over at Eagle's," continued the man lazily.

"Whatever I'm doing at Eagle's Court I'm not ashamed of it," said Hale tartly; "and that's more than I can say of what I've done—or *haven't* done—to-night. I've been one of six men overawed and robbed by *three*."

"As to the over-awin', ez you call it—mebbe you know more about it than us. As to the robbin'—ez far as I kin remember, *you* haven't onloaded much. Ef you're talkin' about what *oughter* been done, I'll tell you what *could* have happened. P'r'aps

ye noticed that when we pulled up I made a kind of grab for my wepping behind me?"

"I did; and you weren't quick enough," said Hale shortly.

"I wasn't quick enough, and that saved *you*. For ef I got that pistol out and in sight o' that man that held the gun—"

"Well," said Hale impatiently, "he'd have hesitated."

"He'd hev blown *you* with both barrels outer the window, and that before I'd got a half-cock on my revolver."

"But that would have been only one man gone, and there would have been five of you left," said Hale haughtily.

"That might have been, ef you'd contracted to take the hull charge of two handfuls of buck-shot and slugs; but ez one-eighth o' that amount would have done your business, and yet left enough to have gone round, promiskiss, and satisfied the other passengers, it wouldn't do to kalkilate upon."

"But the express messenger and the driver were armed," continued Hale.

"They were armed, but not *fixed*; that makes all the differènce."

"I don't understand."

"I reckon you know what a duel is?"

"Yes."

"Well, the chances agin *us* was about the same

as you'd have ef you was put up agin another chap who was allowed to draw a bead on you, and the signal to fire was *your drawin' your weapon*. You may be a stranger to this sort o' thing, and p'r'aps you never fought a duel, but even then you wouldn't go foolin' your life away on any such chances."

Something in the man's manner, as in a certain sly amusement the other passengers appeared to extract from the conversation, impressed Hale, already beginning to be conscious of the ludicrous insufficiency of his own grievance beside that of his interlocutor.

"Then you mean to say this thing is inevitable," said he bitterly, but less aggressively.

"Ez long ez they hunt *you*; when you hunt *them* you've got the advantage, allus provided you know how to get at them ez well as they know how to get at you. This yer coach is bound to go regular, and on certain days. *They* ain't. By the time the Sheriff gets out his *posse* they've skedaddled, and the leader, like as not, is takin' his quiet cocktail at the Bank Exchange, or mebbe losin' his earnings to the Sheriff over draw poker, in Sacramento. You see you can't prove anything agin them unless you take them 'on the fly.' It may be a part of Joaquin Murietta's band, though I wouldn't swear to it."

"The leader might have been Gentleman George, from up-country," interposed a passenger. "He

seemed to throw in a few fancy touches, particlerly in that 'Good night.' Sorter chucked a little sentiment in it. Didn't seem to be the same thing ez, 'Git yer d—d suckers,' on the other line."

"Whoever he was, he knew the road and the men who travelled on it. Like ez not, he went over the line beside the driver on the box on the down trip, and took stock of everything. He even knew I had those greenbacks; though they were handed to me in the bank at Sacramento. He must have been hangin' round there."

For some moments Hale remained silent. He was a civic-bred man, with an intense love of law and order; the kind of man who is the first to take that law and order into his own hands when he does not find it existing to please him. He had a Bostonian's respect for respectability, tradition, and propriety, but was willing to face irregularity and impropriety to create order elsewhere. He was fond of Nature with these limitations, never quite trusting her unguided instincts, and finding her as an instructress greatly inferior to Harvard University, though possibly not to Cornell. With dauntless enterprise and energy he had built and stocked a charming cottage farm in a nook in the Sierras, whence he opposed, like the lesser Englishman that he was, his own tastes to those of the alien West. In the present instance he felt it incumbent upon him not only to assert his principles but to act upon

them with his usual energy. How far he was impelled by the half contemptuous passiveness of his companions it would be difficult to say.

"What is to prevent the pursuit of them at once?" he asked suddenly. "We are a few miles from the station, where horses can be procured."

"Who's to do it?" replied the other lazily. "The stage company will lodge the complaint with the authorities, but it will take two days to get the county officers out, and it's nobody else's funeral."

"I will go for one," said Hale quietly. "I have a horse waiting for me at the station, and can start at once."

There was an instant of silence. The stage coach had left the obscurity of the forest, and by the stronger light Hale could perceive that his companion was examining him with two colourless, lazy eyes. Presently he said, meeting Hale's clear glance, but rather as if yielding to a careless reflection,

"It *might* be done with four men. We oughter raise one man at the station." He paused. "I don't know ez I'd mind taking a hand myself," he added, stretching out his legs with a slight yawn.

"Ye can count *me* in, if you're goin', Kernel. I reckon I'm talkin' to Kernel Clinch," said the passenger beside Hale with sudden alacrity. "I'm Rawlins, of Frisco. Heerd of ye afore, Kernel, and kinder spotted you jist now from your talk."

To Hale's surprise the two men, after awkwardly

and perfunctorily grasping each other's hands, entered at once into a languid conversation on the recent election at Fresno, without the slightest further reference to the pursuit of the robbers. It was not until the remaining and undenominated passenger turned to Hale and, regretting that he had immediate business at the Summit, offered to accompany the party if they would wait a couple of hours, that Colonel Clinch briefly returned to the subject.

"*Four* men will do, and ez we'll hev to take horses from the station we'll hev to take the fourth man from there."

With these words he resumed his uninteresting conversation with the equally uninterested Rawlins, and the undenominated passenger subsided into an admiring and dreamy contemplation of them both. With all his principle and really high-minded purpose, Hale could not help feeling constrained and annoyed at the sudden subordinate and auxiliary position to which he, the projector of the enterprise, had been reduced. It was true that he had never offered himself as their leader; it was true that the principle he wished to uphold, and the effect he sought to obtain, would be equally demonstrated under another; it was true that the execution of his own conception gravitated by some occult impulse to the man who had not sought it, and whom he had always regarded as an incapable. But all this

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was so unlike precedent or tradition that, after the fashion of conservative men, he was suspicious of it, and only that his honour was now involved he would have withdrawn from the enterprise. There was still a chance of reasserting himself at the station, where he was known, and where some authority might be deputed to him.

But even this prospect failed. The station, half hotel and half stable, contained only the landlord, who was also express agent, and the new volunteer whom Clinch had suggested would be found among the stablemen. The nearest Justice of the Peace was ten miles away, and Hale had to abandon even his hope of being sworn in as a deputy constable. The introduction of a common and illiterate ostler into the party on equal terms with himself did not add to his satisfaction, and a remark from Rawlins seemed to complete his embarrassment.

"Ye had a mighty narrer escape down there just now," said that gentleman confidentially, as Hale buckled his saddle-girths.

"I thought, as we were not supposed to defend ourselves, there was no danger," said Hale scornfully.

"Oh, I don't mean them road agents. But *him*."

"Who?"

"Kernel Clinch. You jist ez good as allowed he hadn't any grit."

"Whatever I said I suppose I am responsible for it," answered Hale haughtily.

"That's what gits me," was the imperturbable reply. "He's the best shot in Southern California, and hez let daylight through a dozen chaps afore now for half what you said."

"Indeed!"

"Howsummever," continued Rawlins philosophically, "ez he's concluded to go *with* ye instead of *for* ye, you're likely to hev your ideas on this matter carried out up to the handle. He'll make short work of it, you bet. Ef, ez I suspect, the leader is an airy young feller from Frisco, who hez took to the road lately, Clinch hez got a personal grudge agin him from a quarrel over draw poker."

This was the last blow to Hale's ideal crusade. Here he was—an honest, respectable citizen—engaged as simple accessory to a lawless vendetta originating at a gambling-table! When the first shock was over, that grim philosophy which is the reaction of all imaginative and sensitive natures came to his aid. He felt better; oddly enough he began to be conscious that he was thinking and acting like his companions. With this feeling a vague sympathy, before absent, faintly showed itself in their actions. The Sharpe's rifle put into his hands by the stable-man was accompanied by a familiar word of suggestion as to an equal, which he was ashamed to find flattered him. He was

able to continue the conversation with Rawlins more coolly.

"Then you suspect who is the leader?"

"Only on giniral principles. There was a finer touch, so to speak, in this yer robbery that wasn't in the old-fashioned style. Down in my country they hed crude ideas about them things—used to strip the passengers of everything, includin' their clothes. They say that at the station hotels when the coach came in the folks used to stand round with blankets to wrap up the passengers so ez not to skeer the wimen. Thar's a story that the driver and express manager drove up one day with only a copy of the *Alty Californy* wrapped around 'em; but thin," added Rawlins grimly, "there *was* folks ez said the hull story was only an advertisement got up for the *Alty*."

"Time's up."

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" said Colonel Clinch.

Hale started. He had forgotten his wife and family at Eagle's Court, ten miles away. They would be alarmed at his absence, would perhaps hear some exaggerated version of the stage coach robbery, and fear the worst.

"Is there any way I could send a line to Eagle's Court before daybreak?" he asked eagerly.

The station was already drained of its spare men and horses. The undenominated passenger stepped forward and offered to take it himself

when his business, which he would despatch as quickly as possible, was concluded.

"That ain't a bad idea," said Clinch reflectively, "for ef yer hurry you'll head 'em off in case they scent us, and try to double back on the North Ridge. They'll fight shy of the trail if they see anybody on it, and one man's as good as a dozen."

Hale could not help thinking that he might have been that one man, and had his opportunity for independent action but for his rash proposal, but it was too late to withdraw now. He hastily scribbled a few lines to his wife on a sheet of the station paper, handed it to the man, and took his place in the little cavalcade as it filed silently down the road.

They had ridden in silence for nearly an hour, and had passed the scene of the robbery by a higher track. Morning had long ago advanced its colours on the cold white peaks to their right, and was taking possession of the spur where they rode.

"It looks like snow," said Rawlins quietly.

Hale turned towards him in astonishment. Nothing on earth or sky looked less likely. It had been cold, but that might have been only a current from the frozen peaks beyond, reaching the lower valley. The ridge on which they had halted was still thick with yellowish-green summer foliage, mingled with the darker ever-green of pine and fir. Oven-like cañons in the long flanks of the mountain seemed still to glow with the heat of yesterday's

noon; the breathless air yet trembled and quivered over stifling gorges and passes in the granite rocks, while far at their feet sixty miles of perpetual summer stretched away over the winding American River, now and then lost in a gossamer haze. It was scarcely ripe October where they stood; they could see the plenitude of August still lingering in the valleys.

"I've seen Thomson's Pass choked up with fifteen feet o' snow earlier than this," said Rawlins, answering Hale's gaze; "and last September the passengers sledged over the road we came last night, and all the time Thomson, a mile lower down over the ridge in the hollow, smoking his pipe under roses in his piazzy! Mountains is mighty uncertain; they make their own weather ez they want it. I reckon you ain't wintered here yet."

Hale was obliged to admit that he had only taken Eagle's Court in the early spring.

"Oh, you're all right at Eagle's—when you're there! But it's like Thomson's—it's the gettin' there that—— Hallo! What's that?"

A shot, distant but distinct, had rung through the keen air. It was followed by another so alike as to seem an echo.

"That's over you, on the North Ridge," said the ostler, "about two miles as the crow flies and five by the trail. Somebody's shootin' b'ar."

"Not with a shot gun," said Clinch, quickly

wheeling his horse with a gesture that electrified them. "It's *them*, and they've doubled on us! To the North Ridge, gentlemen, and ride all you know!"

It needed no second challenge to completely transform that quiet cavalcade. The wild man-hunting instinct, inseparable to most humanity, rose at their leader's look and word. With an incoherent and unintelligible cry, giving voice to the chase like the commonest hound of their fields, the order-loving Hale and the philosophical Rawlins wheeled with the others, and in another instant the little band swept out of sight in the forest.

An immense and immeasurable quiet succeeded. The sunlight glistened silently on cliff and scar, the vast distance below seemed to stretch out and broaden into repose. It might have been fancy, but over the sharp line of the North Ridge a light smoke lifted as of an escaping soul.

CHAPTER II.

EAGLE'S COURT, one of the highest cañons of the sierras, was in reality a plateau of tableland, embayed like a green lake in a semicircular sweep of granite that, lifting itself three thousand feet higher, became a foundation for the eternal snows. The mountain genii of space and atmosphere jealously guarded its seclusion and surrounded it with illusions; it never looked to be exactly what it was: the traveller who saw it from the North Ridge apparently at his feet in descending found himself separated from it by a mile-long abyss and a rushing river; those who sought it by a seeming direct trail at the end of an hour lost sight of it completely, or, abandoning the quest and retracing their steps, suddenly came upon the gap through which it was entered. That which from the Ridge appeared to be a copse of bushes beside the tiny dwelling were trees three hundred feet high; the cultivated lawn before it, which might have been covered by the traveller's handkerchief, was a field of a thousand acres.

The house itself was a long, low, irregular structure, chiefly of roof and verandah, pictu-

resquely upheld by rustic pillars of pine, with the bark still adhering, and covered with vines and trailing roses. Yet it was evident that the coolness produced by this vast extent of cover was more than the architect, who had planned it under the influence of a staring and bewildering sky, had trustfully conceived, for it had to be mitigated by blazing fires in open hearths when the thermometer marked a hundred degrees in the field beyond. The dry, restless wind that continually rocked the tall masts of the pines with a sound like the distant sea, while it stimulated outdoor physical exertion and defied fatigue, left the sedentary dwellers in these altitudes chilled in the shade they courted, or scorched them with heat when they ventured to bask supinely in the sun. White muslin curtains at the French windows, and rugs, skins, and heavy furs dispersed in the interior, with certain other charming but incongruous details of furniture, marked the inconsistencies of the climate.

There was a coquettish indication of this in the costume of Miss Kate Scott as she stepped out on the verandah that morning. A man's broad-brimmed Panama hat, partly unsexed by a twisted gaily-coloured scarf, but retaining enough character to give piquancy to the pretty curves of the face beneath, protected her from the sun; a red flannel shirt—another spoil from the enemy—and a thick

jacket shielded her from the austerities of the morning breeze. But the next inconsistency was peculiarly her own. Miss Kate always wore the freshest and lightest of white cambric skirts, without the least reference to the temperature. To the practical sanatory remonstrances of her brother-in-law, and to the conventional criticism of her sister, she opposed the same defence: "How else is one to tell when it is summer in this ridiculous climate? And then, woollen is stuffy, colour draws the sun, and one at least knows when one is clean or dirty." Artistically the result was far from unsatisfactory. It was a pretty figure under the sombre pines, against the gray granite and the steely sky, and seemed to lend the yellowing fields from which the flowers had already fled a floral relief of colour. I do not think the few masculine wayfarers of that locality objected to it; indeed, some had betrayed an indiscreet admiration, and had curiously followed the invitation of Miss Kate's warmly-coloured figure until they had encountered the invincible indifference of Miss Kate's cold gray eyes. With these manifestations her brother-in-law did not concern himself; he had perfect confidence in her unqualified disinterest in the neighbouring humanity, and permitted her to wander in her solitary picturesqueness, or accompanied her when she rode in her dark green habit, with equal freedom from anxiety.

For Miss Scott, although only twenty, had already subjected most of her maidenly illusions to mature critical analyses. She had voluntarily accompanied her sister and mother to California, in the earnest hope that nature contained something worth saying to her, and was disappointed to find she had already discounted its value in the pages of books. She hoped to find a vague freedom in this unconventional life thus opened to her, or rather to show others that she knew how intelligently to appreciate it, but as yet she was only able to express it in the one detail of dress already alluded to. Some of the men, and nearly all the women, she had met thus far, she was amazed to find, valued the conventionalities she believed she despised, and were voluntarily assuming the chains she thought she had thrown off. Instead of learning anything from them, these children of nature had bored her with eager questionings regarding the civilisation she had abandoned, or irritated her with crude imitations of it for her benefit. "Fancy," she had written to a friend in Boston, "my calling on Sue Murphy, who remembered the Donner tragedy, and who once shot a grizzly that was prowling round her cabin, and think of her begging me to lend her my saque for a pattern, and wanting to know if 'polonays' were still worn." She remembered more bitterly the romance that had tickled her earlier fancy, told of two college friends

of her brother-in-law who were living the "perfect life" in the mines, labouring in the ditches with a copy of Homer in their pockets, and writing letters of the purest philosophy under the free air of the pines. How, coming unexpectedly on them in their Arcadia, the party found them unpresentable through dirt, and thenceforth unknowable through domestic complications that had filled their Arcadian cabin with half-breed children.

Much of this disillusion she had kept within her own heart, from a feeling of pride, or only lightly touched upon it in her relations with her mother and sister. For Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Scott had no idols to shatter, no enthusiasm to subdue. Firmly and unalterably conscious of their own superiority to the life they led and the community that surrounded them, they accepted their duties cheerfully, and performed them conscientiously. Those duties were loyalty to Hale's interests and a vague missionary work among the neighbours, which, like most missionary work, consisted rather in making their own ideas understood than in understanding the ideas of their audience. Old Mrs. Scott's zeal was partly religious, an inheritance from her Puritan ancestry; Mrs. Hale's was the affability of a gentlewoman and the obligation of her position. To this was added the slight languor of the cultivated American wife, whose health had been affected by the birth of her first child, and whose views of mar-

riage and maternity were slightly tinged with gentle scepticism. She, like the rest of his 'women folk,' was sincerely attached to her husband, 'who dominated the household' with the faint consciousness of that division of service which renders the position of the sultan of a seraglio at once so prominent and so precarious. The attitude of John Hale in his family circle was dominant because it had never been subjected to criticism or comparison; and perilous for the same reason.

Mrs. Hale presently joined her sister in the verandah, and shading her eyes with a narrow white hand, glanced on the prospect with a polite interest and ladylike urbanity. The searching sun, which, as Miss Kate once intimated, was "vulgarity itself," stared at her in return, but could not call a blush to her somewhat sallow cheek. Neither could it detract, however, from the delicate prettiness of her refined face with its soft gray shadows, or the dark gentle eyes, whose blue-veined lids were just then wrinkled into coquettishly mischievous lines by the strong light. She was taller and thinner than Kate, and had at times a certain shy, coy sinuosity of movement which gave her a more virginal suggestion than her unmarried sister. For Miss Kate, from her earliest youth, had been distinguished by that matronly sedateness of voice and step, and completeness of figure which indicates some members of the gallinaceous tribe from their callow infancy.

"I suppose John must have stopped at the summit on some business," said Mrs. Hale, "or he would have been here already. It's scarcely worth while waiting for him, unless you choose to ride over and meet him. You might change your dress," she continued, looking doubtfully at Kate's costume. "Put on your riding-habit, and take Manuel with you."

"And take the only man we have, and leave you alone?" returned Kate slowly. "No!"

"There are the Chinese field hands," said Mrs. Hale; "you must correct your ideas, and really allow them some humanity, Kate. John says they have a very good compulsory school system in their own country, and can read and write."

"That would be of little use to you here alone if—if——" Kate hesitated.

"If what?" said Mrs. Hale, smiling. "Are you thinking of Manuel's dreadful story of the grizzly tracks across the fields this morning? I promise you that neither I, nor mother, nor Minnie shall stir out of the house until you return, if you wish it."

"I wasn't thinking of that," said Kate; "though I don't believe the beating of a gong and the using of strong language is the best way to frighten a grizzly from the house. Besides, the Chinese are going down the river to-day to a funeral or a wedding or a feast of stolen chickens—they're all the same—and won't be here."

"Then take Manuel," repeated Mrs. Hale. "We have the Chinese servants and Indian Molly in the house to protect us from heaven knows what! I have the greatest confidence in Chy-Lee as a warrior, and in Chinese warfare generally. One has only to hear him pipe in time of peace to imagine what a terror he might become in war-time. Indeed, anything more deadly and soul-harrowing than that love-song he sang for us last night I cannot conceive. But really, Kate, I am not afraid to stay alone. You know what John says: we ought to be always prepared for anything that might happen."

"My dear Josie," returned Kate, putting her arm around her sister's waist, "I am perfectly convinced that if three-fingered Jack or two-toed Bill or even Joaquin Murietta himself should step, red-handed, on that verandah, you would gently invite him to take a cup of tea, inquire about the state of the road, and refrain delicately from any allusions to the sheriff. But I sha'n't take Manuel from you. I really cannot undertake to look after his morals at the Station, and keep him from drinking *aguardiente* with suspicious characters at the bar. It is true he 'kisses my hand' in his speech, even when it is thickest, and offers his back to me for a horse-block, but I think I prefer the sober and honest familiarity of even that Pike county landlord who is satisfied to say: 'Jump, girl, and I'll ketch ye'!"

"I hope you didn't change your manner to either of them for that," said Mrs. Hale with a faint sigh. "John wants to be good friends with them, and they are behaving quite decently lately, considering that they can't speak a grammatical sentence nor know the use of a fork."

"And now the man puts on gloves and a tall hat to come here on Sundays, and the woman won't call until you've called first," retorted Kate; "perhaps you call that improvement. The fact is, Josephine," continued the young girl, folding her arms demurely, "we might as well admit it at once—these people don't like us."

"That's impossible!" said Mrs. Hale, with sublime simplicity. "*You* don't like them, you mean."

"I like them better than you do, Josie, and that's the reason why *I* feel it and *you* don't." She checked herself, and after a pause resumed in a lighter tone: "No; I sha'n't go to the Station; I'll commune with nature to-day, and won't 'take any humanity in mine, thank you,' as Bill the driver says. *Adios.*"

"I wish Kate would not use that dreadful slang, even in jest," said Mrs. Scott in her rocking-chair at the French window, when Josephine re-entered the parlour as her sister walked briskly away. "I am afraid she is being infected by the people at the Station. She ought to have a change."

"I was just thinking," said Josephine, looking

abstractedly at her mother, "that I would try to get John to take her to San Francisco this winter. The Careys are expected, you know; she might visit them."

"I'm afraid, if she stays here much longer, she won't care to see them at all. She seems to care for nothing now that she ever liked before," returned the old lady ominously.

Meantime the subject of these criticisms was carrying away her own reflections tightly buttoned up in her short jacket. She had driven back her dog Spot—another one of her disillusiones, who, giving way to his lower nature, had once killed a sheep—as she did not wish her Jacques-like contemplation of any wounded deer to be inconsistently interrupted by a fresh outrage from her companion. The air was really very chilly, and for the first time in her mountain experience the direct rays of the sun seemed to be shorn of their power. This compelled her to walk more briskly than she was conscious of, for in less than an hour she came suddenly and breathlessly upon the mouth of the cañon, or natural gateway to Eagle's Court.

To her always a profound spectacle of mountain magnificence, it seemed to-day almost terrible in its cold, strong grandeur. The narrowing pass was choked for a moment between two gigantic buttresses of granite, approaching each other so closely at their towering summits that trees growing in op-

posite clefts of the rock intermingled their branches and pointed the soaring Gothic arch of a stupendous gateway. She raised her eyes with a quickly beating heart. She knew that the interlacing trees above her were as large as those she had just quitted; she knew also that the point where they met was only half way up the cliff, for she had once gazed down upon them, dwindled to shrubs from the airy summit; she knew that their shaken cones fell a thousand feet perpendicularly, or bounded like shot from the scarred walls they bombarded. She remembered that one of these pines, dislodged from its high foundations, had once dropped like a portcullis in the archway, blocking the pass, and was only carried afterwards by assault of steel and fire. Bending her head mechanically she ran swiftly through the shadowy passage, and halted only at the beginning of the ascent on the other side.

It was here that the actual position of the plateau, so indefinite of approach, began to be realised. It now appeared an independent elevation, surrounded on three sides by gorges and watercourses, so narrow as to be overlooked from the principal mountain range, with which it was connected by a long cañon that led to the ridge. At the outlet of this cañon—in bygone ages a mighty river—it had the appearance of having been slowly raised by the diluvium of that river, and the *débris* washed down from above—a suggestion repeated in miniature by

the artificial plateaus of excavated soil raised before the mouths of mining tunnels in the lower flanks of the mountain. It was the realisation of a fact—often forgotten by the dwellers in Eagle's Court—that the valley below them, which was their connecting link with the surrounding world, was only reached by ascending the mountain, and the nearest road was over the higher mountain ridge. Never before had this impressed itself so strongly upon the young girl as when she turned that morning to look upon the plateau below her. It seemed to illustrate the conviction that had been slowly shaping itself out of her reflections on the conversation of that morning. It was possible that the perfect understanding of a higher life was only reached from a height still greater, while to those only half way up the mountain the summit was never as truthfully revealed as to the humbler dwellers in the valley.

I do not know that these profound truths prevented her from gathering some quaint ferns and berries, or from keeping her calm, gray eyes open to certain practical changes that were taking place around her. She had noticed a singular thickening in the atmosphere that seemed to prevent the passage of the sun's rays, yet without diminishing the transparent quality of the air. The distant snow-peaks were as plainly seen, though they appeared as if in moonlight. This seemed due to no

cloud or mist, but rather to a fading of the sun itself. The occasional flurry of wings overhead, the whirring of larger birds in the cover, and a frequent rustling in the undergrowth, as of the passage of some stealthy animal, began equally to attract her attention. It was so different from the habitual silence of these sedate solitudes. Kate had no vague fear of wild beasts; she had been long enough a mountaineer to understand the general immunity enjoyed by the unmolested wayfarer, and kept her way undismayed. She was descending an abrupt trail when she was stopped by a sudden crash in the bushes. It seemed to come from the opposite incline, directly in a line with her, and apparently on the very trail that she was pursuing. The crash was then repeated again and again lower down, as of a descending body. Expecting the apparition of some fallen tree, or detached boulder bursting through the thicket, in its way to the bottom of the gulch, she waited. The foliage was suddenly brushed aside and a large grizzly bear half rolled, half waddled, into the trail on the opposite side of the hill. A few moments more would have brought them face to face at the foot of the gulch; when she stopped there were not fifty yards between them.

She did not scream; she did not faint; she was not even frightened. There did not seem to be anything terrifying in this huge stupid beast, who, arrested by the rustle of a stone displaced by her

descending feet, rose slowly on his haunches and gazed at her with small, wondering eyes. Nor did it seem strange to her, seeing that he was in her way, to pick up a stone, throw it in his direction, and say simply, "Sho! get away!" as she would have done to an intruding cow. Nor did it seem odd that he should actually "go away" as he did, scrambling back into the bushes again, and disappearing like some grotesque figure in a transformation scene. It was not until after he had gone that she was taken with a slight nervousness and giddiness, and retraced her steps somewhat hurriedly, shying a little at every rustle in the thicket. By the time she had reached the great gateway she was doubtful whether to be pleased or frightened at the incident, but she concluded to keep it to herself.

It was still intensely cold. The light of the midday sun had decreased still more, and on reaching the plateau again she saw that a dark cloud, not unlike the precursor of a thunderstorm, was brooding over the snowy peaks beyond. In spite of the cold this singular suggestion of summer phenomena was still borne out by the distant smiling valley, and even in the soft grasses at her feet. It seemed to her the crowning inconsistency of the climate, and with a half-serious, half-playful protest on her lips she hurried forward to seek the shelter of the house.

CHAPTER III.

To Kate's surprise, the lower part of the house was deserted, but there was an unusual activity on the floor above, and the sound of heavy steps. There were alien marks of dusty feet on the scrupulously clean passage, and on the first step of the stairs a spot of blood. With a sudden genuine alarm that drove her previous adventure from her mind, she impatiently called her sister's name. There was a hasty yet subdued rustle of skirts on the staircase, and Mrs. Hale, with her finger on her lip, swept Kate unceremoniously into the sitting-room, closed the door, and leaned back against it, with a faint smile. She had a crumpled paper in her hand.

"Don't be alarmed, but read that first," she said, handing her sister the paper. "It was brought just now."

Kate instantly recognised her brother's distinct hand. She read hurriedly, "The coach was robbed last night; nobody hurt. I've lost nothing but a day's time, as this business will keep me here until to-morrow, when Manuel can join me with a fresh horse. No cause for alarm. As the bearer goes out

of his way to bring you this, see that he wants for nothing."

"Well," said Kate expectantly.

"Well, the 'bearer' was fired upon by the robbers, who were lurking on the Ridge. He was wounded in the leg. Luckily he was picked up by his friend, who was coming to meet him, and brought here as the nearest place. He's up-stairs in the spare bed in the spare room with his friend, who won't leave his side. He won't even have mother in the room. They've stopped the bleeding with John's ambulance things, and now, Kate, here's a chance for you to show the value of your education in the ambulance class. The ball has got to be extracted. Here's your opportunity."

Kate looked at her sister curiously. There was a faint pink flush on her pale cheeks, and her eyes were gently sparkling. She had never seen her look so pretty before.

"Why not have sent Manuel for a doctor at once?" asked Kate.

"The nearest doctor is fifteen miles away, and Manuel is nowhere to be found. Perhaps he's gone to look after the stock. There's some talk of snow; imagine the absurdity of it."

"But who are they?"

"They speak of themselves as 'friends' as if it were a profession. The wounded one was a passenger, I suppose."

"But what are they like?" continued Kate. "I suppose they're like them all."

Mrs. Hale shrugged her shoulders.

"The wounded one, when he's not fainting away is laughing. The other is a creature with a moustache, and gloomy beyond expression."

"What are you going to do with them?" said Kate.

"What should I do? Even without John's letter I could not refuse the shelter of my house to a wounded and helpless man. I shall keep him, of course, until John comes. Why, Kate, I really believe you are so prejudiced against these people you'd like to turn them out. But I forget! It's because you *like* them so well. Well, you need not fear to expose yourself to the fascinations of the wounded Christy Minstrel—I'm sure he's that—or to the unspeakable one who is shyness itself, and would not dare to raise his eyes to you."

There was a timid, hesitating step in the passage. It paused before the door, moved away, returned, and finally asserted its intentions in the gentlest of taps.

"It's he; I'm sure of it," said Mrs. Hale, with a suppressed smile.

Kate threw open the door smartly, to the extreme discomfiture of a tall, dark figure that already had slunk away from it. For all that, he was a good-looking enough fellow, with a moustache as

long and almost as flexible as a ringlet. Kate could not help noticing also that his hand, which was nervously pulling the moustache, was white and thin.

"Excuse me," he stammered, without raising his eyes, "I was looking for—for—the old lady, I—I beg your pardon. I didn't know that you—the young ladies—company—were here. I intended—I only wanted to say that my friend——" he stopped at the slight smile that passed quickly over Mrs. Hale's mouth, and his pale face reddened with an angry flush.

"I hope he is not worse," said Mrs. Hale, with more than her usual languid gentleness. "My mother is not here at present. Can I—can *we*—this is my sister—do as well?"

Without looking up he made a constrained recognition of Kate's presence, that, embarrassed and curt as it was, had none of the awkwardness of rusticity.

"Thank you; you're very kind. But my friend is a little stronger, and if you can lend me an extra horse I'll try to get him on the summit to-night."

"But you surely will not take him away from us so soon?" said Mrs. Hale, with a languid look of alarm, in which Kate, however, detected a certain real feeling. "Wait at least until my husband returns to-morrow."

"He won't be here to-morrow," said the stranger hastily. He stopped, and as quickly corrected himself. "That is, his business is so very uncertain, my friend says."

Only Kate noticed the slip; but she noticed also that her sister was apparently unconscious of it. "You think," she said, "that Mr. Hale may be delayed?"

He turned upon her almost brusquely. "I mean that it is already snowing up there;" he pointed through the window to the cloud Kate had noticed; "if it comes down lower in the pass the roads will be blocked up. That is why it would be better for us to try and get on at once."

"But if Mr. Hale is likely to be stopped by snow so are you," said Mrs. Hale playfully; "and you had better let us try to make your friend comfortable here rather than expose him to that uncertainty in his weak condition. We will do our best for him. My sister is dying for an opportunity to show her skill in surgery," she continued, with an unexpected mischievousness that only added to Kate's surprised embarrassment. "Aren't you, Kate?"

Equivocal as the young girl knew her silence appeared, she was unable to utter the simplest polite evasion. Some unaccountable impulse kept her constrained and speechless. The stranger did not, however, wait for her reply, but casting a swift,

hurried glance around the room, said: "It's impossible; we must go. In fact, I've already taken the liberty to order the horses round. They are at the door now. You may be certain," he added, with quick earnestness, suddenly lifting his dark eyes to Mrs. Hale, and as rapidly withdrawing them, "that your horse will be returned at once, and—and—we won't forget your kindness." He stopped and turned towards the hall. "I—I have brought my friend down-stairs. He wants to thank you before he goes."

As he remained standing in the hall the two women stepped to the door. To their surprise, half-reclining on a cane sofa was the wounded man, and what could be seen of his slight figure was wrapped in a dark *serape*. His beardless face gave him a quaint boyishness quite inconsistent with the mature lines of his temples and forehead. Pale, and in pain, as he evidently was, his blue eyes twinkled with intense amusement. Not only did his manner offer a marked contrast to the sombre uneasiness of his companion, but he seemed to be the only one perfectly at his ease in the group around him.

"It's rather rough making you come out here to see me off," he said, with a not unmusical laugh that was very infectious, "but Ned there, who carried me down-stairs, wanted to tote me round the house in his arms like a baby to say ta-ta to you all. Excuse my not rising, but I feel as uncertain

below as a mermaid, and as out of my element," he added, with a mischievous glance at his friend. "Ned concluded I must go on. But I must say good-bye to the old lady first. Ah! here she is."

To Kate's complete bewilderment not only did the utter familiarity of this speech pass unnoticed and unrebuked by her sister, but actually her own mother advanced quickly with every expression of lively sympathy, and with the authority of her years, and an almost maternal anxiety endeavoured to dissuade the invalid from going. "This is not my house," she said, looking at her daughter, "but if it were I should not hear of your leaving, not only to-night, but until you were out of danger. Josephine! Kate! What are you thinking of to permit it? Well, then, *I* forbid it—there."

Had they become suddenly insane, or were they bewitched by this morose intruder, and his insufferably familiar confidant? The man was wounded, it was true; they might have to put him up in common humanity, but here was her austere mother, who wouldn't come in the room when Whisky Dick called on business, actually pressing both of the invalid's hands, while her sister, who never extended a finger to the ordinary visiting humanity of the neighbourhood, looked on with evident complacency.

The wounded man suddenly raised Mrs. Scott's hand to his lips, kissed it gently, and with his smile quite vanished, endeavoured to rise to his

feet. "It's of no use—we must go. Give me your arm, Ned. Quick! Are the horses there?"

"Dear me," said Mrs. Scott quickly, "I forgot to say the horse cannot be found anywhere. Manuel must have taken him this morning to look up the stock. But he will be back to-night certainly, and if to-morrow——"

The wounded man sank back to a sitting position. "Is Manuel your man?" he asked grimly.

"Yes."

The two men exchanged glances.

"Marked on his left cheek and drinks a good deal?"

"Yes," said Kate, finding her voice. "Why?"

The amused look came back to the man's eyes. "That kind of man isn't safe to wait for. We must take our own horse, Ned. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

The wounded man again attempted to rise. He fell back, but this time quite heavily. He had fainted.

Involuntarily and simultaneously the three women rushed to his side. "He cannot go," said Kate suddenly.

"He will be better in a moment."

"But only for a moment. Will nothing induce you to change your mind?"

As if in reply a sudden gust of wind brought a volley of rain against the window.

"*That* will," said the stranger bitterly.

"The rain?"

"A mile from here it is *snow*; and before we could reach the summit with these horses the road would be impassable."

He made a slight gesture to himself, as if accepting an inevitable defeat, and turned to his companion, who was slowly reviving under the active ministrations of the two women. The wounded man looked around with a weak smile. "This is one way of going off," he said faintly, "but I could do this sort of thing as well on the road."

"You can do nothing now," said his friend, decidedly. "Before we get to the Gate the road will be impassable for our horses."

"For *any* horses?" asked Kate.

"For any horses. For any man or beast I might say. Where we cannot get out, no one can get in," he added, as if answering her thoughts. "I am afraid that you won't see your brother to-morrow morning. But I'll reconnoitre as soon as I can do so without torturing *him*," he said, looking anxiously at the helpless man; "he's got about his share of pain, I reckon, and the first thing is to get him easier." It was the longest speech he had made to her; it was the first time he had fairly looked her in the face. His shy restlessness had suddenly given way to dogged resignation, less abstracted, but scarcely more flattering to his entertainers,

Lifting his companion gently in his arms, as if he had been a child, he re-ascended the staircase, Mrs. Scott and the hastily-summoned Molly following with overflowing solicitude. As soon as they were alone in the parlour Mrs. Hale turned to her sister: "Only that our guests seemed to be as anxious to go just now as you were to pack them off, I should have been shocked at your inhospitality. What has come over you, Kate? These are the very people you have reproached me so often with not being civil enough to."

"But *who* are they?"

"How do I know? There is *your brother's* letter."

She usually spoke of her husband as "John." This slight shifting of relationship and responsibility to the feminine mind was significant. Kate was a little frightened and remorseful.

"I only meant you don't even know their names."

"That wasn't necessary for giving them a bed and bandages. Do you suppose the good Samaritan ever asked the wounded Jew's name, and that the Levite did not excuse himself because the thieves had taken the poor man's card-case? Do the directions 'In case of accident' in your ambulance rules read: 'First lay the sufferer on his back and inquire his name and family connections?' Besides, you can call one 'Ned' and the other 'George,' if you like."

"Oh, you know what I mean," said Kate, irrelevantly. "Which is George?"

"George is the wounded man," said Mrs. Hale, "*not* the one who talked to you more than he did to any one else. I suppose the poor man was frightened and read dismissal in your eyes."

"I wish John were here."

"I don't think we have anything to fear in his absence from men whose only wish is to get away from us. If it is a question of propriety, my dear Kate, surely there is the presence of mother to prevent any scandal—although really her own conduct with the wounded one is not above suspicion," she added, with that novel mischievousness that seemed a return of her lost girlhood. "We must try to do the best we can with them and for them," she said decidedly, "and meantime I'll see if I can't arrange John's room for them."

"John's room?"

"Oh, mother is perfectly satisfied; indeed, suggested it. It's larger and will hold two beds, for 'Ned,' the friend, must attend to him at night. And, Kate, don't you think, if you're not going out again, you might change your costume? It does very well while we are alone——"

"Well," said Kate indignantly, "as I am not going into his room——"

"I'm not so sure about that, if we can't get a regular doctor. But he is very restless, and wanders all over the house like a timid and apologetic spaniel."

"Who?"

"Why 'Ned.' But I must go and look after the patient. I suppose they've got him safe in his bed again," and with a nod to her sister she tripped up-stairs.

Uncomfortable and embarrassed, she knew not why, Kate sought her mother. But that good lady was already in attendance on the patient, and Kate hurried past that baleful centre of attraction with a feeling of loneliness and strangeness she had never experienced before. Entering her own room she went to the window—that first and last refuge of the troubled mind—and gazed out. Turning her eyes in the direction of her morning's walk, she started back with a sense of being dazzled. She rubbed first her eyes and then the rain-dimmed pane. It was no illusion! The whole landscape, so familiar to her, was one vast field of dead colourless white! Trees, rocks, even distance itself, had vanished in those few hours. An even, shadowless, motionless white sea filled the horizon. On either side a vast wall of snow seemed to shut out the world like a shroud. Only the green plateau before her, with its sloping meadows and fringe of

pinces and cotton-wood, lay alone like a summer island in this frozen sea.

A sudden desire to view this phenomenon more closely, and to learn for herself the limits of this new tethered life, completely possessed her, and accustomed to act upon her independent impulses, she seized a hooded water-proof cloak, and slipped out of the house unperceived. The rain was falling steadily along the descending trail where she walked, but beyond, scarcely a mile across the chasm, the wintry distance began to confuse her brain with the inextricable swarming of snow. Hurrying down with feverish excitement she at last came in sight of the arching granite portals of their domain. But her first glance through the gateway showed it closed as if with a white portcullis. Kate remembered that the trail began to ascend beyond the arch, and knew that what she saw was only the mountain side she had partly climbed this morning. But the snow had already crept down its flank, and the exit by trail was practically closed. Breathlessly making her way back to the highest part of the plateau—the cliff behind the house that here descended abruptly to the rain-dimmed valley—she gazed at the dizzy depths in vain for some undiscovered or forgotten trail along its face. But a single glance convinced her of its inaccessibility. The gateway was indeed their only outlet to the plain below. She looked back at the falling snow beyond until

she fancied she could see in the crossing and re-crossing lines the moving meshes of a fateful web woven around them by viewless but inexorable fingers.

Half frightened, she was turning away, when she perceived, a few paces distant, the figure of the stranger—"Ned," also apparently absorbed in the gloomy prospect. He was wrapped in the clinging folds of a black *serape* braided with silver; the broad flap of a slouched hat beaten back by the wind exposed the dark glistening curls on his white forehead. He was certainly very handsome and picturesque, and that apparently without effort or consciousness. Neither was there anything in his costume or appearance inconsistent with his surroundings, or, even with what Kate could judge, were his habits or position. Nevertheless, she instantly decided that he was *too* handsome and *too* picturesque, without suspecting that her ideas of the limits of masculine beauty were merely personal experience.

As he turned away from the cliff they were brought face to face. "It doesn't look very encouraging over there," he said quietly, as if the inevitableness of the situation had relieved him of his previous shyness and effort; "it's even worse than I expected. The snow must have begun there last night, and it looks as if it meant to stay." He

stopped for a moment, and then, lifting his eyes to her, said:

"I suppose you know what this means?"

"I don't understand you."

"I thought not. Well! it means that you are absolutely cut off here from any communication or intercourse with any one outside of that cañon. By this time the snow is five feet deep over the only trail by which one can pass in and out of that gateway. I am not alarming you, I hope, for there is no real physical danger; a place like this ought to be well garrisoned, and certainly is self-supporting so far as the mere necessities and even comforts are concerned. You have wood, water, cattle, and game at your command, but for two weeks at least you are completely isolated."

"For two weeks," said Kate, growing pale—"and my brother!"

"He knows all by this time, and is probably as assured as I am, of the safety of his family."

"For two weeks," continued Kate; "impossible! You don't know my brother! He will find some way to get to us."

"I hope so," returned the stranger gravely, "for what is possible for him is possible for us."

"Then you are anxious to get away," Kate could not help saying.

"Very."

The reply was not discourteous in manner, but

was so far from gallant that Kate felt a new and inconsistent resentment. Before she could say anything he added, "And I hope you will remember, whatever may happen, that I did my best to avoid staying here longer than was necessary to keep my friend from bleeding to death in the road."

"Certainly," said Kate, then added awkwardly, "I hope he'll be better soon." She was silent, and then, quickening her pace, said hurriedly, "I must tell my sister this dreadful news."

"I think she is prepared for it. If there is anything I can do to help you I hope you will let me know. Perhaps I may be of some service. I shall begin by exploring the trails to-morrow, for the best service we can do you possibly is to take ourselves off, but I can carry a gun, and the woods are full of game driven down from the mountains. Let me show you something you may not have noticed." He stopped, and pointed to a small knoll of sheltered shrubbery and granite on the opposite mountain, which still remained black against the surrounding snow. It seemed to be thickly covered with moving objects. "They are wild animals driven out of the snow," said the stranger. "That larger one is a grizzly; there is a panther, wolves, wild cats, a fox, and some mountain goats."

"An ill-assorted party," said the young girl.

"Ill luck makes them companions. They are too frightened to hurt one another now."

"But they will eat each other later on," said Kate, stealing a glance at her companion.

He lifted his long lashes and met her eyes. "Not on a haven of refuge."

CHAPTER IV.

KATE found her sister, as the stranger had intimated, fully prepared. A hasty inventory of provisions and means of subsistence showed that they had ample resources for a much longer isolation.

"They tell me it is by no means an uncommon case, Kate! somebody over at somebody's place was snowed in for four weeks, and now it appears that even the Summit House is not always accessible. John ought to have known it when he bought the place; in fact I was ashamed to admit that he did not. But that is like John, to prefer his own theories to the experience of others. However, I don't suppose we should even notice the privation except for the mails. It will be a lesson to John, though. As Mr. Lee says, he is on the outside, and can probably go wherever he likes from the summit except to come here."

"Mr. Lee?" echoed Kate.

"Yes, the wounded one; and the other's name is Falkner. I asked them in order that you might be properly introduced. There were very respectable Falkners in Charlestown, you remember; I thought you might warm to the name, and perhaps

trace the connection, now that you are such good friends. It's providential they are here, as we haven't got a horse or a man in the place since Manuel disappeared, though Mr. Falkner says he can't be far away, or they would have met him on the trail if he had gone towards the summit."

"Did they say anything more of Manuel?"

"Nothing; though I am inclined to agree with you that he isn't trustworthy. But that again is the result of John's idea of employing native skill at the expense of retaining native habits."

The evening closed early, and with no diminution in the falling rain and rising wind. Falkner kept his word, and unostentatiously performed the outdoor work in the barn and stables, assisted by the only Chinese servant remaining, and under the advice and supervision of Kate. Although he seemed to understand horses, she was surprised to find that he betrayed a civic ignorance of the ordinary details of the farm and rustic household. It was quite impossible that she should retain her distrustful attitude, or he his reserve in their enforced companionship. They talked freely of subjects suggested by the situation, Falkner exhibiting a general knowledge and intuition of things without parade or dogmatism. Doubtful of all versatility as Kate was, she could not help admitting to herself that his truths were none the less true for their quantity, or that he got at them without ostentatious processes.



His talk certainly was more picturesque than her brother's, and less subduing to her faculties. John had always crushed her.

When they returned to the house he did not linger in the parlour or sitting-room, but at once rejoined his friend. When dinner was ready in the dining-room, a little more deliberately arranged and ornamented than usual, the two women were somewhat surprised to receive an excuse from Falkner, begging them to allow him for the present to take his meals with the patient, and thus save the necessity of another attendant.

"It is all shyness, Kate," said Mrs. Hale confidently, "and must not be permitted for a moment."

"I'm sure I should be quite willing to stay with the poor boy myself," said Mrs. Scott simply, "and take Mr. Falkner's place while he dines."

"You are too willing, mother," said Mrs. Hale pertly, "and your 'poor boy,' as you call him, will never see thirty-five again."

"He will never see any other birthday," retorted her mother, "unless you keep him more quiet. He only talks when you're in the room."

"He wants some relief to his friend's long face and moustachios that make him look prematurely in mourning," said Mrs. Hale with a slight increase of animation. "I don't propose to leave them too much together. After dinner we'll adjourn to their

room and lighten it up a little. You must come, Kate, to look at the patient, and counteract the baleful effects of my frivolity."

Mrs. Hale's instincts were truer than her mother's experience; not only that the wounded man's eyes became brighter under the provocation of her presence; but it was evident that his naturally exuberant spirits were a part of his vital strength, and were absolutely essential to his quick recovery. Encouraged by Falkner's grave and practical assistance, which she could not ignore, Kate ventured to make an examination of Lee's wound. Even to her unpractised eye it was less serious than at first appeared. The great loss of blood had been due to the laceration of certain small vessels below the knee, but neither artery nor bone was injured. A recurrence of the hemorrhage or fever were the only things to be feared, and these could be averted by bandaging, repose, and simple nursing.

The unfailing good humour of the patient under this manipulation, the quaint originality of his speech, the freedom of his fancy, which was, however, always controlled by a certain instinctive tact, began to affect Kate nearly as it had the others. She found herself laughing over the work she had undertaken in a pure sense of duty; she joined in the hilarity produced by Lee's affected terror of her surgical mania, and offered to undo the bandages in

search of the thimble he declared she had left in the wound with a view to further experiments.

"You ought to broaden your practice," he suggested. "A good deal might be made out of Ned and a piece of soap left carelessly on the first step of the staircase, while mountains of surgical opportunities lie in a humble orange peel judiciously exposed. Only I warn you that you wouldn't find him as docile as I am. Decoyed into a snowdrift and frozen, you might get some valuable experiences in resuscitation by thawing him."

"I fancied you had done that already, Kate," whispered Mrs. Hale.

"Freezing is the new suggestion for painless surgery," said Lee, coming to Kate's relief with ready tact, "only the knowledge should be more generally spread. There was a man up at Strawberry fell under a sledge-load of wood in the snow. Stunned by the shock, he was slowly freezing to death, when, with a tremendous effort, he succeeded in freeing himself all but his right leg, pinned down by a small log. His axe happened to have fallen within reach, and a few blows on the log freed him."

"And saved the poor fellow's life," said Mrs. Scott, who was listening with sympathising intensity.

"At the expense of his *left leg*, which he had

unknowingly cut off under the pleasing supposition that it was a log," returned Lee demurely.

Nevertheless, in a few moments he managed to divert the slightly shocked susceptibilities of the old lady with some raillery of himself, and did not again interrupt the even good-humoured communion of the party. The rain beating against the windows and the fire sparkling on the hearth, seemed to lend a charm to their peculiar isolation, and it was not until Mrs. Scott rose with a warning that they were trespassing upon the rest of their patient that they discovered that the evening had slipped by unnoticed. When the door at last closed on the bright sympathetic eyes of the two young women, and the motherly benediction of the elder, Falkner walked to the window, and remained silent, looking into the darkness. Suddenly he turned bitterly to his companion.

"This is just h—ll, George."

George Lee, with a smile still on his boyish face, lazily moved his head.

"I don't know! If it wasn't for the old woman, who is the one solid chunk of absolute goodness here, expecting nothing, wanting nothing, it would be good fun enough! These two women, cooped up in this house, wanted excitement. They've got it! That man Hale wanted to show off by going for us; he's had his chance, and will have it again before I've done with him. That d——d fool of a mes-

senger wanted to go out of his way to exchange shots with me; I reckon he's the most satisfied of the lot! I don't know why *you* should growl. You did your level best to get away from here, and the result is, that little Puritan is ready to worship you."

"Yes—but this playing it on them—George—this——"

"Who's playing it? Not you; I see you've given away our names already."

"I couldn't lie, and they know nothing by that."

"Do you think they would be happier by knowing it? Do you think that soft little creature would be as happy as she was to-night if she knew that her husband had been indirectly the means of laying me by the heels here? Where is the swindle? This hole in my leg? If you had been five minutes under that girl's d——d sympathetic fingers you'd have thought it was genuine. Is it in our trying to get away? Do you call that ten-feet drift in the pass a swindle? Is it in the chance of Hale getting back while we're here? that's real enough, isn't it? I say, Ned, did you ever give your unfettered intellect to the contemplation of *that*?"

Falkner did not reply. There was an interval of silence, but he could see from the movement of George's shoulders that he was shaking with suppressed laughter.

"Fancy Mrs. Hale archly introducing her husband! My offering him a chair, but being all the time obliged to cover him with a derringer under the bedclothes. Your rushing in from your peaceful pastoral pursuits in the barn, with a pitchfork in one hand and the girl in the other, and dear old mammy sympathising all round and trying to make everything comfortable."

"I should not be alive to see it, George," said Falkner gloomily.

"You'd manage to pitchfork me and those two women on Hale's horse and ride away; that's what you'd do, or I don't know you! Look here, Ned," he added more seriously, "the only swindling was our bringing that note here. That was *your* idea. You thought it would remove suspicion, and as you believed I was bleeding to death you played that game for all it was worth to save me. You might have done what I asked you to do—propped me up in the bushes, and got away yourself. I was good for a couple of shots yet, and after that—what mattered? That night, the next day, the next time I take the road, or a year hence? It will come when it will come, all the same!"

He did not speak bitterly, nor relax his smile. Falkner, without speaking, slid his hand along the coverlet. Lee grasped it, and their hands remained clasped together for a few moments in silence.

"How is this to end? We cannot go on here in this way," said Falkner suddenly.

"If we cannot get away it must go on. Look here, Ned. I don't reckon to take anything out of this house that I didn't bring in it, or isn't freely offered to me; yet I don't otherwise, you understand, intend making myself out a d——d bit better than I am. That's the only excuse I have for not making myself out *just what* I am. I don't know the fellow who's obliged to tell every one the last company he was in, or the last thing he did! Do you suppose even these pretty little women tell *us* their whole story? Do you fancy that this St. John in the wilderness is canonised in his family? Perhaps, when I take the liberty to intrude in his affairs, as he has in mine, he'd see he isn't. I don't blame you for being sensitive, Ned. It's natural. When a man lives outside the revised statutes of his own state he is apt to be awfully fine on points of etiquette in his own household. As for me, I find it rather comfortable here. The beds of other people's making strike me as being more satisfactory than my own. Good night."

In a few moments he was sleeping the peaceful sleep of that youth which seemed to be his own dominant quality. Falkner stood for a little space and watched him, following the boyish lines of his cheek on the pillow, from the shadow of the light brown lashes under his closed lids to the lifting of

his short upper lip over his white teeth, with his regular respiration. Only a sharp accenting of the line of nostril and jaw, and a faint depression of the temple, betrayed his already tried manhood.

The house had long sunk to repose when Falkner returned to the window, and remained looking out upon the storm. Suddenly he extinguished the light, and passing quickly to the bed laid his hand upon the sleeper. Lee opened his eyes instantly.

"Are you awake?"

"Perfectly."

"Somebody is trying to get into the house!"

"Not *him*—eh?" said Lee gaily.

"No; two men. Mexicans I think. One looks like Manuel."

"Ah," said Lee, drawing himself up to a sitting posture.

"Well?"

"Don't you see? He believes the women are alone."

"The d——d hound!"

"Speak respectfully of one of my people, if you please, and hand me my derringer. Light the candle again, and open the door. Let them get in quietly. They'll come here first. It's *his* room, you understand, and if there's any money it's here. Anyway, they must pass here to get to the women's rooms. Leave Manuel to me, and you take care of the other."

"I see."

"Manuel knows the house, and will come first. When he's fairly in the room shut the door and go for the other. But no noise. This is just one of the *sw-eetest* things out—if it's done properly."

"But *you*, George?"

"If I couldn't manage that fellow without turning down the bedclothes I'd kick myself. Hush! Steady now."

He lay down and shut his eyes as if in natural repose. Only his right hand carelessly placed under his pillow closed on the handle of his pistol. Falkner quietly slipped into the passage. The light of the candle faintly illuminated the floor and opposite wall, but left it on either side in pitchy obscurity.

For some moments the silence was broken only by the sound of the rain without. The recumbent figure in bed seemed to have actually succumbed to sleep. The multitudinous small noises of a house in repose might have been misinterpreted by ears less keen than the sleeper's; but when the apparent creaking of a far-off shutter was followed by the sliding apparition of a dark head of tangled hair at the door Lee had not been deceived, and was as prepared as if he had seen it. Another step, and the figure entered the room. The door closed instantly behind it. The sound of a heavy body struggling against the partition outside followed and then suddenly ceased.

The intruder turned, and violently grasped the handle of the door, but recoiled at a quiet voice from the bed.

"Drop that, and come here."

He started back with an exclamation. The sleeper's eyes were wide open; the sleeper's extended arm and pistol covered him.

"Silence! or I'll let that candle shine through you."

"Yes, captain!" growled the astounded and frightened half-breed. "I didn't know you were here."

Lee raised himself and grasped the long whip in his left hand and whirled it round his head.

"*Will you dry up?*"

The man sank back against the wall in silent terror.

"Open that door now—softly."

Manuel obeyed with trembling fingers.

"Ned," said Lee in a low voice, "bring him in here—quick."

There was a slight rustle, and Falkner appeared, backing in another gasping figure whose eyes were starting under the strong grasp of the captor at his throat.

"Silence," said Lee; "all of you."

There was a breathless pause. The sound of a door hesitatingly opened in the passage broke the stillness, followed by the gentle voice of Mrs. Scott.

"Is anything the matter?"

Lee made a slight gesture of warning to Falkner — of menace to the others. "Everything's the matter," he called out cheerily. "Ned's managed to half pull down the house trying to get at something from my saddle-bags."

"I hope he has not hurt himself," broke in another voice mischievously.

"Answer, you clumsy villain," whispered Lee, with twinkling eyes.

"I'm all right, thank you," responded Falkner, with unaffected awkwardness.

There was a slight murmuring of voices, and then the door was heard to close. Lee turned to Falkner.

"Disarm that hound and turn him loose outside, and make no noise. And you, Manuel! tell him what his and your chances are if he shows his black face here again."

Manuel cast a single, terrified, supplicating glance, more suggestive than words, at his confederate, as Falkner shoved him before him from the room. The next moment they were silently descending the stairs.

"May I go too, captain?" entreated Manuel. "I swear to God——"

"Shut the door!" The man obeyed.

"Now, then," said Lee, with a broad gratified smile, laying down his whip and pistol within reach,

and comfortably settling the pillows behind his back, "we'll have a quiet confab. A sort of old-fashioned talk, eh? You're not looking well, Manuel. You're drinking too much again. It spoils your complexion."

"Let me go, captain," pleaded the man, emboldened by the good-humoured voice, but not near enough to notice a peculiar light in the speaker's eye.

"You've only just come, Manuel; and at considerable trouble too. Well, what have you got to say? What's all this about? What are you doing here?"

The captured man shuffled his feet nervously, and only uttered an uneasy laugh of coarse discomfiture.

"I see. You're bashful. Well, I'll help you along. Come! You knew that Hale was away and these women were here without a man to help them. You thought you'd find some money here, and have your own way generally, eh?"

The tone of Lee's voice inspired him to confidence; unfortunately it inspired him with familiarity also.

"I reckoned I had the right to a little fun on my own account, cap. I reckoned ez one gentleman in the profession wouldn't interfere with another gentleman's little game," he continued coarsely.

"Stand up."

"Wot for?"

"Up, I say!"

Manuel stood up and glanced at him.

"Utter a cry that might frighten these women, and by the living God they'll rush in here only to find you lying dead on the floor of the house you'd have polluted."

He grasped the whip and laid the lash of it heavily twice over the ruffian's shoulders. Writhing in suppressed agony the man fell imploringly on his knees.

"Now, listen!" said Lee, softly twirling the whip in the air. "I want to refresh your memory. Did you ever learn, when you were with me—before I was obliged to kick you out of gentlemen's company—to break into a private house? Answer!"

"No," stammered the wretch.

"Did you ever learn to rob a woman, a child, or any but a man, and that face to face?"

"No," repeated Manuel.

"Did you ever learn from me to lay a finger upon a woman, old or young, in anger or kindness?"

"No."

"Then, my poor Manuel, it's as I feared; civilisation has ruined you. Farming and a simple bucolic life have perverted your morals. So, you were running off with the stock and that mustang, when you got stuck in the snow; and the luminous idea of this little game struck you? Eh? That was another

mistake, Manuel; I never allowed you to think when you were with me."

"No, captain."

"Who's your friend?"

"A d——d cowardly nigger from the summit."

"I agree with you for once; but he hasn't had a very brilliant example. Where's he gone now?"

"To h—ll, for all I care!"

"Then I want you to go with him. Listen. If there's a way out of the place you know it or can find it. I give you two days to do it—you and he. At the end of that time the order will be to shoot you on sight. Now take off your boots."

The man's dark face visibly whitened, his teeth chattered in superstitious terror.

"I'm not going to shoot you now," said Lee, smiling, "so you will have a chance to die with your boots on,* if you are superstitious. I only want you to exchange them for that pair of Hale's in the corner. The fact is I have taken a fancy to yours. That fashion of wearing the stockings outside strikes me as one of the neatest things out."

Manuel sullenly drew off his boots with their muffled covering and put on the ones designated.

"Now open the door."

He did so. Falkner was already waiting at the

* "To die with one's boots on." A synonym for death by violence, popular among South-western desperadoes, and the subject of superstitious dread.

threshold. "Turn Manuel loose with the other, Ned, but disarm him first. They might quarrel. The habit of carrying arms, Manuel," added Lee, as Falkner took a pistol and bowie-knife from the half-breed, "is of itself provocative of violence, and inconsistent with a bucolic and pastoral life."

When Falkner returned he said hurriedly to his companion, "Do you think it wise, George, to let those hell-hounds loose? Good God! I could scarcely let my grip of his throat go, when I thought of what they were hunting."

"My dear Ned," said Lee, luxuriously ensconcing himself under the bedclothes again with a slight shiver of delicious warmth, "I must warn you against allowing the natural pride of a higher walk to prejudice you against the general level of our profession. Indeed, I was quite struck with the justice of Manuel's protest that I was interfering with certain rude processes of his own towards results aimed at by others."

"George!" interrupted Falkner, almost savagely.

"Well. I admit it's getting rather late in the evening for pure philosophical inquiry, and you are tired. Practically, then, it *was* wise to let them get away before they discovered two things. One, our exact relations here with these women, and the other, *how many* of us were here. At present they think we are three or four in possession and with the consent of the women."

"The dogs!"

"They are paying us the highest compliment they can conceive of by supposing us cleverer scoundrels than themselves. You are very unjust, Ned."

"If they escape and tell their story?"

"We shall have the rare pleasure of knowing we are better than people believe us. And now put those boots away somewhere where we can produce them if necessary, as evidence of Manuel's evening call. At present we'll keep the thing quiet, and in the early morning you can find out where they got in and remove any traces they have left. It is no use to frighten the women. There's no fear of their returning."

"And if they get away?"

"We can follow in their tracks."

"If Manuel gives the alarm?"

"With his burglarious boots left behind in the house? Not much! Good night, Ned. Go to bed."

With these words Lee turned on his side and quietly resumed his interrupted slumber. Falkner did not, however, follow this sensible advice. When he was satisfied that his friend was sleeping he opened the door softly and looked out. He did not appear to be listening, for his eyes were fixed upon a small pencil of light that stole across the passage from the foot of Kate's door. He watched it until it suddenly disappeared, when, leaving the

door partly open, he threw himself on his couch without removing his clothes. The slight movement awakened the sleeper, who was beginning to feel the accession of fever. He moved restlessly.

"George," said Falkner, softly.

"Yes."

"Where was it we passed that old Mission Church on the road one dark night, and saw the light burning before the figure of the Virgin through the window?"

There was a moment of crushing silence. "Does that mean you're wanting to light the candle again?"

"No."

"Then don't lie there inventing sacrilegious conundrums, but go to sleep."

Nevertheless in the morning his fever was slightly worse. Mrs. Hale, offering her condolence, said: "I know that you have not been resting well, for even after your friend met with that mishap in the hall, I heard your voices, and Kate says your door was open all night. You have a little fever too, Mr. Falkner."

George looked curiously at Falkner's pale face—it was burning.

CHAPTER V.

THE speed and fury with which Clinch's cavalcade swept on in the direction of the mysterious shot left Hale no chance for reflection. He was conscious of shouting incoherently with the others, of urging his horse irresistibly forward, of momentarily expecting to meet or overtake something, but without any further thought. The figures of Clinch and Rawlins immediately before him shut out the prospect of the narrowing trail. Once only, taking advantage of a sudden halt that threw them confusedly together, he managed to ask a question.

"Lost their track—found it again," shouted the ostler, as Clinch, with a cry like the baying of a hound, again darted forward. Their horses were panting and trembling under them, the ascent seemed to be growing steeper, a singular darkness, which even the density of the wood did not sufficiently account for, surrounded them, but still their leader madly urged them on. To Hale's returning senses they did not seem in a condition to engage a single resolute man, who might have ambushed in the woods or beaten them in detail in the narrow gorge, but in another instant the reason of their

furious haste was manifest. Spurring his horse ahead Clinch dashed out into the open with a cheering shout—a shout that as quickly changed to a yell of imprecation. They were on the ridge in a blinding snowstorm! The road had already vanished under their feet, and with it the fresh trail they had so closely followed! They stood helplessly on the shore of a trackless white sea, blank and spotless of any trace or sign of the fugitives.

"Pears to me, boys," said the ostler, suddenly ranging before them, "ef you're not kalkilatin' on gittin' another party to dig ye out, ye'd better be huntin' fodder and cover instead of road agents. 'Skuse me, gentlemen, but I'm responsible for the hosses, and this ain't no time for circus ridin'. We're a matter o' six miles from the station in a bee line."

"Back to the trail, then," said Clinch, wheeling his horse towards the road they had just quitted.

"'Skuse me, kernel," said the ostler, laying his hand on Clinch's rein, "but that way only brings us back the road we kem—the stage-road—three miles further from home. That three miles is on the divide, and by the time we get there it will be snowed up worse nor this. The shortest cut is along the ridge. If we hump ourselves we ken cross the divide afore the road is blocked. And that, 'skuse me, gentlemen, is *my* road."

There was no time for discussion. The road was already palpably thickening under their feet. Hale's arm was stiffened to his side by a wet, clinging snow-wreath. The figures of the others were almost obliterated and shapeless. It was not snowing—it was snowballing! The huge flakes, shaken like enormous feathers out of a vast blue-black cloud, commingled and fell in sprays and patches. All idea of their former pursuit was forgotten; the blind rage and enthusiasm that had possessed them was gone. They dashed after their new leader with only an instinct for shelter and succour.

They had not ridden long when fortunately, as it seemed to Hale, the character of the storm changed. The snow no longer fell in such large flakes, nor as heavily. A bitter wind succeeded; the soft snow began to stiffen and crackle under the horses' hoofs, they were no longer weighted and encumbered by the drifts upon their bodies, the smaller flakes now rustled and rasped against them like sand or bounded from them like hail. They seemed to be moving more easily and rapidly, their spirits were rising with the stimulus of cold and motion, when suddenly their leader halted.

"It's no use, boys. It can't be done! This is no blizzard—but a regular two days' snifter! It's no longer meltin', but packin' and driftin' now.

Even if we get over the divide, we're sure to be blocked up in the pass."

It was true! To their bitter disappointment they could now see that the snow had not really diminished in quantity, but that the now finely-powdered particles were rapidly filling all inequalities of the surface, packing closely against projections and swirling in long furrows across the levels. They looked with anxiety at their self-constituted leader.

"We must make a break to get down in the woods again before it's too late," he said briefly.

But they had already drifted away from the fringe of larches and dwarf pines that marked the sides of the ridge and lower down merged into the dense forest that clothed the flank of the mountain they had lately climbed, and it was with the greatest difficulty that they again reached it, only to find that at that point it was too precipitous for the descent of their horses. Benumbed and speechless they continued to toil on opposed to the full fury of the stinging snow, and at times obliged to turn their horses to the blast to keep from being blown over the ridge. At the end of half an hour the ostler dismounted, and beckoning to the others, took his horse by the bridle, and began the descent. When it came to Hale's turn to dismount he could not help at first recoiling from the prospect before him. The trail—if it could be so called—was

merely the track or furrow of some fallen tree dragged, by accident or design, diagonally across the sides of the mountain. At times it appeared scarcely a foot in width; at other times a mere crumbling gulley or a narrow shelf made by the projections of dead boughs and collected debris. It seemed perilous for a foot passenger, it appeared impossible for a horse. Nevertheless, he had taken a step forward when Clinch laid his hand on his arm.

"You'll bring up the rear," he said not unkindly, "ez you're a stranger here. Wait until we sing out to you."

"But if I prefer to take the same risks as you all?" said Hale, stiffly.

"You kin," said Clinch grimly. "But I reckoned, as you weren't familiar with this sort o' thing, you wouldn't keer, by any foolishness o' yours, to stampede the rocks ahead of us, and break down the trail, or send down an avalanche on top of us. But jest ez you like."

"I will wait, then," said Hale hastily.

The rebuke, however, did him good service. It preoccupied his mind, so that it remained unaffected by the dizzy depths, and enabled him to abandon himself mechanically to the sagacity of his horse, who was contented simply to follow the hoof-prints of the preceding animal, and in a few moments they reached the broader trail below with-

out a mishap. A discussion regarding their future movements was already taking place. The impossibility of regaining the station at the summit was admitted; the way down the mountain to the next settlement was still left to them, or the adjacent woods if they wished for an encampment. The ostler once more assumed authority.

"Skuse me, gentlemen, but them horses don't take no *pasear* down the mountain to-night. The stage road ain't a mile off, and I kalkilate to wait here till the up stage comes. She's bound to stop on account of the snow; and I've done my dooty when I hand the horses over to the driver."

"But if she hears of the block up yer, and waits at the lower station?" said Rawlins.

"Then I've done my dooty all the same. 'Skuse me, gentlemen, but them ez hez their own horses kin do ez they like."

As this clearly pointed to Hale, he briefly assured his companions that he had no intention of deserting them. "If I cannot reach Eagle's Court, I shall at least keep as near it as possible. I suppose any messenger from my house to the summit will learn where I am, and why I am delayed?"

"Messenger from your house," gasped Rawlins. "Are you crazy, stranger? Only a bird would get outer Eagle's now; and it would hev to be an eagle at that! Between your house and the summit the

snow must be ten feet by this time, to say nothing of the drift in the pass."

Hale felt it was the truth. At any other time he would have worried over this unexpected situation, and utter violation of all his traditions. He was past that now, and even felt a certain relief. He knew his family were safe; it was enough. That they were locked up securely, and incapable of interfering with *him*, seemed to enhance his new, half-conscious, half-shy enjoyment of an adventurous existence.

The ostler, who had been apparently lost in contemplation of the steep trail he had just descended, suddenly clapped his hand to his leg with an ejaculation of gratified astonishment.

"Waal, darn my skin ef that ain't Hennicker's 'slide' all the time! I heard it was somewhat about here."

Rawlins briefly explained to Hale that a slide was a rude incline for the transit of heavy goods that could not be carried down a trail.

"And Hennicker's," continued the man, "ain't more nor a mile away. Ye might try Hennicker's at a push, eh?"

By a common instinct the whole party looked dubiously at Hale. "Who's Hennicker?" he felt compelled to ask.

The ostler hesitated, and glanced at the others to reply. "There *are* folks," he said lazily, at last,

"ez beleeves that Hennicker ain't much better nor the crowd we're hunting; but they don't say it *to* Hennicker. We needn't let on what we're after."

"I for one," said Hale stoutly, "decidedly object to any concealment of our purpose."

"It don't follow," said Rawlins carelessly, "that Hennicker even knows of this yer robbery. It's his gineral gait we refer to. Ef yer think it more polite, and it makes it more sociable to discuss this matter afore him, I'm agreed."

"Hale means," said Clinch, "that it wouldn't be on the square to take and make use of any points we might pick up there agin the road agents."

"Certainly," said Hale. It was not at all what he had meant, but he felt singularly relieved at the compromise.

"And ez I reckon Hennicker ain't such a fool ez not to know who we are and what we're out for," continued Clinch, "I reckon there ain't any concealment."

"Then it's Hennicker's?" said the ostler, with swift deduction.

"Hennicker it is! Lead on."

The ostler remounted his horse, and the others followed. The trail presently turned into a broader track, that bore some signs of approaching habitation, and at the end of five minutes they came upon a clearing. It was part of one of the fragmentary mountain terraces, and formed by itself a vast niche,

or bracketed shelf, in the hollow flank of the mountain that, to Hale's first glance, bore a rude resemblance to Eagle's Court. But there was neither meadow nor open field; the few acres of ground had been wrested from the forest by axe and fire, and unsightly stumps everywhere marked the rude and difficult attempts at cultivation. Two or three rough buildings of unplanned and unpainted boards, connected by rambling sheds, stood in the centre of the amphitheatre. Far from being protected by the encircling rampart, it seemed to be the selected arena for the combating elements. A whirlwind from the outer abyss continually filled this cave of Æolus with driving snow, which, however, melted as it fell, or was quickly whirled away again.

A few dogs barked and ran out to meet the cavalcade, but there was no other sign of any life disturbed or concerned at their approach.

"I reckon Hennicker ain't home, or he'd hev been on the look out afore this," said the ostler, dismounting and rapping at the door.

After a silence, a female voice, unintelligibly to the others, apparently had some colloquy with the ostler, who returned to the party.

"Must go in through the kitchin—can't open the door for the wind."

Leaving their horses in the shed, they entered the kitchen, which communicated, and presently came upon a square room filled with smoke from a

fire of green pine logs. The doors and windows were tightly fastened; the only air came in through the large-throated chimney in voluminous gusts, which seemed to make the hollow shell of the apartment swell and expand to the point of bursting. Despite the stinging of the resinous smoke, the temperature was grateful to the benumbed travellers. Several cushionless arm-chairs, such as were used in bar-rooms, two tables, a sideboard, half bar and half cupboard, and a rocking-chair, comprised the furniture, and a few bear and buffalo skins covered the floor. Hale sank into one of the arm-chairs, and, with a lazy satisfaction, partly born of his fatigue, and partly from some newly-discovered appreciative faculty, gazed around the room, and then at the mistress of the house, with whom the others were talking.

She was tall, gaunt, and withered; in spite of her evident years her twisted hair was still dark and full, and her eyes bright and piercing; her complexion and teeth had long since succumbed to the vitiating effects of frontier cookery, and her lips were stained with the yellow juice of a briar-wood pipe she held in her mouth. The ostler had explained their intrusion, and veiled their character under the vague epithet of a "hunting party," and was now evidently describing them personally. In Hale's new-found philosophy the fact that the interest of his hostess seemed to be excited only by

the names of his companions, that he himself was carelessly, and even deprecatingly alluded to as the "stranger from Eagle's" by the ostler, and completely overlooked by the old woman, gave him no concern.

"You'll have to talk to Zenobia yourself. Dod rot ef I'm gine to interfere. She knows Hennicker's ways, and if she chooses to take in transients, it ain't no funeral o' mine. Zeenie! You, Zeenie! Look yer!"

A tall, lazy-looking, handsome girl appeared on the threshold of the next room, and with a hand on each door-post slowly swung herself backwards and forwards, without entering. "Well, Maw?"

The old woman briefly and unalluringly pictured the condition of the travellers.

"Paw ain't here," began the girl doubtfully, "and— How dy, Dick! is that you?" The interruption was caused by her recognition of the ostler, and she lounged into the room. In spite of a skimp, slatternly gown, whose straight skirt clung to her lower limbs, there was a quaint, nymph-like contour to her figure. Whether from languor, ill-health, or more probably from a morbid consciousness of her own height, she moved with a slightly affected stoop that had become a habit. It did not seem ungraceful to Hale, already attracted by her delicate profile, her large dark eyes, and a certain weird

resemblance she had to some half-domesticated Dryade.

"That'll do, Maw," she said, dismissing her parent with a nod. "I'll talk to Dick."

As the door closed on the old woman Zenobia leaned her hands on the back of a chair, and confronted the admiring eyes of Dick with a goddess-like indifference.

"Now wot's the use of your playin' this yer game on me, Dick? Wot's the good of your ladlin' out that hog-wash about huntin'? *Huntin'*? I'll tell yer the huntin' you-uns hev been at! You've been huntin' George Lee and his boys since an hour before sun up. You've been followin' a blind trail up to the ridge, until the snow got up and hunted *you* right here! You've been whoopin' and yellin' and circus ridin' on the roads like ez yer wos Comanches, and frightening all the women-folk within miles—that's your huntin'! You've been climbin' down Paw's old slide at last, and makin' tracks for here to save the skins of them condemned Government horses of the Kempany! And *that's* your huntin'!"

To Hale's surprise a burst of laughter from the party followed this speech. He tried to join in, but this ridiculous summary of the result of his enthusiastic sense of duty left him—the only earnest believer—mortified and embarrassed. Nor was he the less concerned as he found the girl's dark eyes had rested once or twice upon him curiously.

Zenobia laughed too, and lazily turning the chair around, dropped into it. "And by this time George Lee's loungin' back in his chyar and smokin' his cigyar somewhar in Sacramento," she added, stretching her feet out to the fire, and suiting the action to the word with an imaginary cigar between the long fingers of a thin and not over-clean hand.

"We cave! Zeenie," said Rawlins, when their hilarity had subsided to a more subdued and scarcely less flattering admiration of the unconcerned goddess before them. "That's about the size of it. You kin rake down the pile. I forgot you're an old friend of George's."

"He's a white man!" said the girl decidedly.

"Ye used to know him?" continued Rawlins.

"Once—Paw ain't in that line now," she said simply.

There was such a sublime unconsciousness of any moral degradation involved in this allusion that even Hale accepted it without a shock. She rose presently, and going to the little sideboard, brought out a number of glasses; these she handed to each of the party, and then producing a demijohn of whisky, slung it dexterously and gracefully over her arm, so that it rested in her elbow as in a cradle, and going to each one in succession, filled their glasses. It obliged each one to rise to accept the libation, and as Hale did so in his turn he met the dark eyes of the girl full on his own. There was a

pleased curiosity in her glance that made this married man of thirty-five colour as awkwardly as a boy.

The tender of refreshment being understood as a tacit recognition of their claims to a larger hospitality, all further restraint was removed. Zenobia resumed her seat, and placing her elbow on the arm of her chair, and her small round chin in her hand, looked thoughtfully into the fire. "When I say George Lee's a white man, it ain't because I know him. It's his general gait. Wot's he ever done that's underhanded or mean—nothin'! You kant show the poor man he's ever took a picayune from. When he's helped himself to a pile it's been outer them banks or them express companies, that think it mighty fine to bust up themselves, and swindle the poor folks o' their last cent, and nobody talks o' huntin' *them*! And does he keep their money? No; he passes it round among the boys that help him, and they put it in circulation. *He* don't keep it for himself; he ain't got fine houses in Frisco; he don't keep fast horses for show. Like ez not the critter he did that job with—ef it was him—none of you boys would have rid! And he takes all the risks himself—you ken bet your life that every man with him was safe and away afore he turned his back on you uns."

"He certainly drops a little of his money at draw poker, Zeenie," said Clinch, laughing. "He lost five thousand dollars to Sheriff Kelly last week."

"Well, I don't hear of the Sheriff huntin' him to give it back, nor do I reckon Kelly handed it over to the Express it was taken from. I heard *you* won suthin' from him a spell ago. I reckon you've been huntin' him to find out whar you should return it." The laugh was clearly against Clinch. He was about to make some rallying rejoinder when the young girl suddenly interrupted him. "Ef you're wantin' to hunt somebody—why don't you take higher game. Thar's that Jim Harkins—go for him, and I'll join you."

"Harkins!" exclaimed Clinch and Hale simultaneously.

"Yes, Jim Harkins—do you know him?" she said, glancing from the one to the other.

"One of my friends do," said Clinch, laughing; "but don't let that stop you."

"And *you*—over there," continued Zenobia, bending her head and eyes towards Hale.

"The fact is—I believe he was my banker," said Hale, with a smile. "I don't know him personally."

"Then you'd better hunt him before he does you."

"What's *he* done, Zeenie?" asked Rawlins, keenly enjoining the discomfiture of the others.

"What?" She stopped, threw her long black braids over her shoulder, clasped her knee with her hands, and rocking backwards and forwards, sublimely unconscious of the apparition of a slim

ankle and half dropped off slipper from under her shortened gown, continued, "It mightn't please *him*," she said slyly, nodding towards Hale.

"Pray don't mind me," said Hale, with unnecessary eagerness.

"Well," said Zenobia, "I reckon you all know Ned Falkner and the Excelsior Ditch?"

"Yes, Falkner's the superintendent of it," said Rawlins. "And a square man too. Thar ain't anything mean about him."

"Shake," said Zenobia, extending her hand. Rawlins shook the proffered hand with eager spontaneousness, and the girl resumed. "He's about ez good ez they make 'em—you bet. Well, you know Ned has put all his money, and all his strength, and all his *sabe*, and—"

"His good looks," added Clinch mischievously.

"Into that Ditch," continued Zenobia, ignoring the interruption. "It's his mother, it's his sweetheart, it's his everything! When other chaps of his age was cavortin' round Frisco, and havin' high jinks, Ned was in his Ditch. 'Wait till the Ditch is done,' he used to say. 'Wait till she begins to boom and then you just stand round.' Mor'n that, he got all the boys to put in their last cent—for they loved Ned, and love him now, like ez ef he wos a woman."

"That's so," said Clinch and Rawlins simultaneously, "and he's worth it."

“Well,” continued Zenobia, “the Ditch didn’t boom ez soon ez they kalkilated. And then the boys kept gettin’ poorer and poorer, and Ned he kept gettin’ poorer and poorer in everything but his hopefulness and grit. Then he looks around for more capital. And about this time, that coyote Harkins smelt suthin’ nice up there, and he gits Ned to give him control of it and he’ll lend him his name and fix up a company. Soon ez he gets control, the first thing he does is to say that it wants half a million o’ money to make it pay, and levies an assessment of two hundred dollars a share. That’s nothin’ for them rich fellows to pay, or pretend to pay—but for boys on grub wages it meant only ruin. They couldn’t pay, and had to forfeit their shares for next to nothing. And Ned made one more desperate attempt to save them and himself by borrowing money on his shares; when that hound Harkins got wind of it, and let it be buzzed around that the Ditch is a failure, and that he was goin’ out of it; that brought the shares down to nothing. As Ned couldn’t raise a dollar, the new company swooped down on his shares for the debts *they* had put up, and left him and the boys to help themselves. Ned couldn’t bear to face the boys that he’d helped to ruin, and put out and ain’t been heard from since. After Harkins had got rid of Ned and the boys he manages to pay off that wonderful debt, and sells out for a hundred thou-

sand dollars. That money—Ned's money—he sends to Sacramento, for he don't dare to travel with it himself, and is kalkilatin' to leave the kentry, for some of the boys allow to kill him on sight. So ef you're wantin' to hunt suthin', thar's yer chance, and you needn't go inter the snow to do it."

"But surely the law can recover this money?" said Hale indignantly. "It is as infamous a robbery as——" he stopped as he caught Zenobia's eye.

"Ez last night's—you were goin' to say. I'll call it *more*. Them road agents don't pretend to be your friend—but take yer money and run their risks. For ez to the law—that can't help yer."

"It's a skin game, and you might ez well expect to recover a gambling debt from a short card sharp," explained Clinch; "Falkner oughter shot him on sight."

"Or the boys lynch him," suggested Rawlins.

"I think," said Hale, more reflectively, "that in the absence of legal remedy a man of that kind should have been forced under strong physical menace to give up his ill-gotten gains. The money was the primary object, and if that could be got without bloodshed—which seems to me a useless crime—it would be quite as effective. Of course, if there was resistance or retaliation, it might be necessary to kill him."

He had unconsciously fallen into his old didactic and dogmatic habit of speech, and perhaps, under

the spur of Zenobia's eyes, he had given it some natural emphasis. A dead silence followed, in which the others regarded him with amused and gratified surprise, and it was broken only by Zenobia rising and holding out her hand. "Shake!"

Hale raised it gallantly and pressed his lips on the one spotless finger.

"That's gospel truth. And you ain't the first white man to say it."

"Indeed," laughed Hale. "Who was the other?"

"George Lee!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE laughter that followed was interrupted by a sudden barking of the dogs in the outer clearing. Zenobia rose lazily and strode to the window. It relieved Hale of certain embarrassing reflections suggested by her comment.

"Ef it ain't that God-forsaken fool Dick bringing up passengers from the snowbound upstage in the road. I reckon *I've* got suthin to say to that!" But the later appearance of the apologetic Dick, with the assurance that the party carried a permission from her father, granted at the lower station in view of such an emergency, checked her active opposition. "That's like Paw," she soliloquised aggrievedly; "shuttin' us up and settin' dogs on everybody for a week, and then lettin' the whole stage service pass through one door and out at another. Well, it's *his* house and *his* whisky—and they kin take it—but they don't get me to help 'em."

They certainly were not a prepossessing or good-natured acquisition to the party. Apart from the natural antagonism which, on such occasions, those in possession always feel towards the newcomer, they were strongly inclined to resist the dissatisfied

querulousness and aggressive attitude of these fresh applicants for hospitality. The most offensive one was a person who appeared to exercise some authority over the others. He was loud, assuming, and dressed with vulgar pretension. He quickly disposed himself in the chair vacated by Zenobia, and called for some liquor.

"I reckon you'll hev to help yourself," said Rawlins dryly, as the summons met with no response. "There are only two women in the house, and I reckon their hands are full already."

"I call it d——d uncivil treatment," said the man, raising his voice; "and Hennicker had better sing smaller if he don't want his old den pulled down some day. He ain't any better than men that hev been picked up afore now."

"You oughter told him that, and mebbe he'd hev come over with yer," returned Rawlins. "He's a mild, soft, easy-going man—is Hennicker! Ain't he, Col. Clinch?"

The casual mention of Clinch's name produced the effect which the speaker probably intended. The stranger stared at Clinch, who, apparently oblivious of the conversation, was blinking his cold grey eyes at the fire. Dropping his aggressive tone to mere querulousness, the man sought the whisky demijohn, and helped himself and his companions. Fortified by liquor he returned to the fire.

"I reckon you've heard about this yer robbery, Colonel," he said, addressing Clinch, with an attempt at easy familiarity.

Without raising his eyes from the fire, Clinch briefly assented, "I reckon."

"I'm up yer, examining into it, for the Express."

"Lost much?" asked Rawlins.

"Not so much ez they might hev. That fool Harkins had a hundred thousand dollars in greenbacks sealed up like an ordinary package of a thousand dollars, and gave it to a friend, Bill Guthrie, in the bank to pick out some unlikely chap among the passengers, to take charge of it to Reno. He wouldn't trust the Express. Ha! ha!"

The dead oppressive silence that followed his empty laughter made it seem almost artificial. Rawlins held his breath and looked at Clinch. Hale, with the instincts of a refined, sensitive man, turned hot with the embarrassment Clinch should have shown. For that gentleman, without lifting his eyes from the fire, and with no apparent change in his demeanour lazily asked,

"Ye didn't ketch the name o' that passenger?"

"Naturally, no! For when Guthrie hears what was said agin him he wouldn't give his name until he heard from him."

"And *what* was said agin him?" asked Clinch musingly.

“What would be said agin a man that give up that sum o’ money, like a chaw of tobacco, for the asking? Why there were but three men, as far ez we kin hear, that did the job. And there were four passengers inside armed, and the driver and express messenger on the box. Six were robbed by *three!*—they were a sweet-scented lot. Reckon they must hev felt mighty small, for I hear they got up and skedaddled from the station under the pretext of lookin’ for the robbers.” He laughed again, and the laugh was noisily repeated by his five companions at the other end of the room.

Hale, who had forgotten that the stranger was only echoing a part of his own criticism of eight hours before, was on the point of rising with burning cheeks and angry indignation, when the lazily uplifted eye of Clinch caught his, and absolutely held him down with its paralysing and deadly significance. Murder itself seemed to look from those cruelly quiet and remorseless grey pupils. For a moment he forgot his own rage in this glimpse of Clinch’s implacable resentment; for a moment he felt a thrill of pity for the wretch who had provoked it. He remained motionless and fascinated in his chair as the lazy lids closed like a sheath over Clinch’s eyes again. Rawlins, who had probably received the same glance of warning, remained equally still.

“They haven’t heard the last of it yet, you bet,”

continued the infatuated stranger. "I've got a little statement here for the newspaper," he added, drawing some papers from his pocket; "suthin' I just run off in the coach as I came along. I reckon it'll show things up in a new light. It's time there should be some change. All the cussin' that's been usually done hez been by the passengers agin the Express and Stage Companies. I propose that the Company should do a little cussin' themselves. See? P'r'aps you don't mind my readin' it to ye? It's just spicy enough to suit them newspaper chaps."

"Go on," said Colonel Clinch, quietly.

The man cleared his throat, with the preliminary pose of authorship, and his five friends, to whom the composition was evidently not unfamiliar, assumed anticipatory smiles.

"I call it 'Prize Pusillanimous Passengers.' Sort of runs easy off the tongue, you know.

"It now appears that the success of the late stage coach robbery near the summit was largely due to the pusillanimity—not to use a more serious word—'" he stopped and looked explanatorily towards Clinch; "ye'll see in a minit what I'm gettin' at by that pusillanimity of the passengers themselves. 'It now transpires that there were only three robbers who attacked the coach, and that although passengers, driver, and express messenger were fully armed, and were double the number of their assailants, not a shot was fired. We mean no

reflections upon the well-known courage of Yuba Bill, nor the experience and coolness of Bracy Tibbetts, the courteous express messenger, both of whom have since confessed to have been more than astonished at the Christian and lamb-like submission of the insiders. Amusing stories of some laughable yet sickening incidents of the occasion, such as grown men kneeling in the road, and offering to strip themselves completely, if their lives were only spared; of one of the passengers hiding under the seat, and only being dislodged by pulling his coat-tails; of incredible sums promised, and even offers of menial service for the preservation of their wretched carcasses, are received with the greatest gusto; but we are in possession of facts which may lead to more serious accusations. Although one of the passengers is said to have lost a large sum of money entrusted to him, while attempting with barefaced effrontery to establish a rival "carrying" business in one of the Express Company's own coaches——' I call that a good point." He interrupted himself to allow the unrestrained applause of his own party. "Don't you?"

"It's just h—ll," said Clinch musingly.

"'Yet the affair,'" resumed the stranger, from his manuscript, "'is locked up in great and suspicious mystery. The presence of Jackson N. Stanner, Esq.' (that's me), 'special detective agent to the Company, and his staff in town, is a guarantee that

the mystery will be thoroughly probed.' Hed to put that in to please the Company," he again deprecatingly explained. "'We are indebted to this gentleman for the facts.'"

"The pint you want to make in that article," said Clinch, rising, but still directing his face and his conversation to the fire, "ez far ez I ken see ez, that no three men kin back down six unless they be cowards, or are willing to be backed down."

"That's the point what I start from," rejoined Stanner, "and work up. I leave it to you ef it ain't so?"

"I can't say ez I agree with you," said the Colonel dryly. He turned, and still without lifting his eyes, walked towards the door of the room which Zenobia had entered. The key was on the inside, but Clinch gently opened the door, removed the key, and closing the door again locked it from his side. Hale and Rawlins felt their hearts beat quickly; the others followed Clinch's slow movements and downcast mien with amused curiosity. After locking the other outlet from the room, and putting the keys in his pocket, Clinch returned to the fire. For the first time he lifted his eyes; the man nearest him shrank back in terror.

"I am the man," he said slowly, taking deliberate breath between his sentences, "who gave up those greenbacks to the robbers. I am one of the three passengers you have lampooned in that paper, and

these gentlemen beside me are the other two." He stopped and looked around him. "You don't believe that three men can back down six! Well, I'll show you how it can be done. More than that, I'll show you how ONE man can do it; for by the living G——d, if you don't hand over that paper I'll kill you where you sit! I'll give you until I count ten—if one of you moves he and you are dead men—but *you* first!"

Before he had finished speaking Hale and Rawlins had both risen, as if in concert, with their weapons drawn. Hale could not tell how or why he had done so, but he was equally conscious, without knowing why, of fixing his eye on one of the other party, and that he should, in the event of an affray, try to kill him. He did not attempt to reason; he only knew that he should do his best to kill that man and perhaps others.

"One," said Clinch, lifting his derringer, "two—three——"

"Look here, Colonel—I swear I didn't know it was you. Come—d——n it! I say—see here," stammered Stanner, with white cheeks, not daring to glance for aid to his stupefied party.

"Four—five—six——"

"Wait! Here!" He produced the paper and threw it on the floor.

"Pick it up and hand it to me. Seven—eight——"

Stanner hastily scrambled to his feet, picked up the paper, and handed it to the Colonel. "I was only joking, Colonel," he said with a forced laugh.

"I'm glad to hear it. But as this joke is in black and white, you wouldn't mind saying so in the same fashion. Take that pen and ink and write as I dictate. 'I certify that I am satisfied that the above statement is a base calumny against the characters of Ringwood Clinch, Robert Rawlins, and John Hale, passengers, and that I do hereby apologise to the same.' Sign it. That'll do. Now let the rest of your party sign as witnesses."

They complied without hesitation; some, seizing the opportunity of treating the affair as a joke, suggested a drink.

"Excuse me," said Clinch quietly, "but ez this house ain't big enough for me and that man, and ez I've got business at Wild Cat Station with this paper, I think I'll go without drinkin'." He took the keys from his pocket, unlocked the doors, and taking up his overcoat and rifle turned as if to go.

Rawlins rose to follow him; Hale alone hesitated. The rapid occurrences of the last half-hour gave him no time for reflection. But he was by no means satisfied of the legality of the last act he had aided and abetted, although he admitted its rude justice and felt he would have done so again. A

fear of this, and an instinct that he might be led into further complications if he continued to identify himself with Clinch and Rawlins; the fact that they had professedly abandoned their quest, and that it was really supplanted by the presence of an authorised party whom they had already come in conflict with—all this urged him to remain behind. On the other hand, the apparent desertion of his comrades at the last moment was opposed both to his sense of honour and the liking he had taken to them. But he reflected that he had already shown his active partisanship, that he could be of little service to them at Wild Cat Station, and would be only increasing the distance from his home; and above all an impatient longing for independent action finally decided him. "I think I will stay here," he said to Clinch, "unless you want me."

Clinch cast a swift and meaning glance at the enemy, but looked approval. "Keep your eyes skinned, and you're good for a dozen of 'em," he said, *sotto voce*, and then turned to Stanner. "I'm going to take this paper to Wild Cat. If you want to communicate with me hereafter you know where I am to be found, unless"—he smiled grimly—"you'd like to see me outside for a few minutes before I go?"

"It is a matter that concerns the Stage Company, not me," said Stanner, with an attempt to appear at his ease.

Hale accompanied Clinch and Rawlins through the kitchen to the stables. The ostler, Dick, had already returned to the rescue of the snowbound coach.

"I shouldn't like to leave many men alone with that crowd," said Clinch, pressing Hale's hand; "and I wouldn't have allowed your staying behind ef I didn't know I could bet my pile on you. Your offerin' to stay just puts a clean finish on it. Look yer, Hale, I didn't cotton much to you at first; but ef you ever want a friend—call on Ringwood Clinch."

"The same here, old man," said Rawlins, extending his hand as he appeared from a hurried conference with the old woman at the woodshed, "and trust to Zeenie to give you a hint ef there's anythin' underhanded goin' on. So long."

Half inclined to resent this implied suggestion of protection, yet half pleased at the idea of a confidence with the handsome girl he had seen, Hale returned to the room. A whispered discussion among the party ceased on his entering, and an awkward silence followed, which Hale did not attempt to break as he quietly took his seat again by the fire. He was presently confronted by Stanner, who with an affectation of easy familiarity crossed over to the hearth.

"The old Kernel's d——d peppery and high

toned when he's got a little more than his reg'lar three fingers o' corn juice, eh?"

"I must beg you to understand distinctly, Mr. Stanner," said Hale, with a return of his habitual precision of statement, "that I regard any slighting allusion to the gentleman who has just left not only as in exceedingly bad taste coming from *you*, but very offensive to myself. If you mean to imply that he was under the influence of liquor it is my duty to undeceive you; he was so perfectly in possession of his faculties as to express not only his own, but *my* opinion of your conduct. You must also admit that he was discriminating enough to show his objection to your company by leaving it. I regret that circumstances do not make it convenient for me to exercise that privilege; but if I am obliged to put up with your presence in this room I strongly insist that it is not made unendurable with the addition of your conversation."

The effect of this deliberate and passionless declaration was more discomposing to the party than Clinch's fury. Utterly unaccustomed to the ideas and language suddenly confronting them, they were unable to determine whether it was the real expression of the speaker, or whether it was a vague badinage or affectation to which any reply would involve them in ridicule. In a country terrorised by practical joking they did not doubt but that this was a new form of hoaxing calculated to pro-

voke some response that would constitute them as victims. The immediate effect upon them was that complete silence in regard to himself that Hale desired. They drew together again and conversed in whispers, while Hale, with his eyes fixed on the fire, gave himself up to somewhat late and useless reflection.

He could scarcely realise his position. For however he might look at it, within a space of twelve hours he had not only changed some of his most cherished opinions, but he had acted in accordance with that change in a way that made it seem almost impossible for him ever to recant. In the interests of law and order he had engaged in an unlawful and disorderly pursuit of criminals, and had actually come in conflict not with the criminals but with the only party apparently authorised to pursue them. More than that, he was finding himself committed to a certain sympathy with those criminals. Twenty-four hours ago, if any one had told him that he would have condoned an illegal act for its abstract justice, or assisted to commit an illegal act for the same purpose, he would have felt himself insulted. That he knew he would not now feel it as an insult perplexed him still more. In these circumstances the fact that he was separated from his family, and as it were from all his past life and traditions, by a chance accident, did not disturb him greatly; indeed, he was for the first time a little doubtful

of their probable criticism on his inconsistency, and was by no means in a hurry to subject himself to it.

Lifting his eyes he was suddenly aware that the door leading to the kitchen was slowly opening. He had thought he heard it creak once or twice during his deliberate reply to Stanner. It was evidently moving now so as to attract his attention, without disturbing the others. It presently opened sufficiently wide to show the face of Zeenie, who, with a gesture of caution towards his companions, beckoned him to join her. He rose carelessly as if going out and, putting on his hat, entered the kitchen as the retreating figure of the young girl glided lightly towards the stables. She ascended a few open steps as if to a hayloft, but stopped before a low door. Pushing it open she preceded him into a small room, apparently under the roof, which scarcely allowed her to stand upright. By the light of a stable lantern hanging from a beam he saw that, though poorly furnished, it bore some evidence of feminine taste and habitation. Motioning to the only chair, she seated herself on the edge of the bed, with her hands clasping her knees in her familiar attitude. Her face bore traces of recent agitation, and her eyes were shining with tears. By the closer light of the lantern he was surprised to find it was from laughter.

"I reckoned you'd be right lonely down there with that Stanner crowd, particklerly after that little

speech o' your'n; so I sez to Maw, I'd get you up yer for a spell. Maw and I heerd you exhort 'em! Maw allowed you woz talkin' a furrin' tongue all along, but I—sakes alive!—I hed to hump myself to keep from bustin' into a yell when yer jist drawed them Websterunabridged sentences on 'em." She stopped and rocked backwards and forwards with a laugh that, subdued by the proximity of the roof, and the fear of being overheard, was by no means unmusical. "I'll tell ye whot got me though! That part commencing, 'Suckamstances over which I've no controul.'"

"Oh, come! I didn't say that," interrupted Hale, laughing.

"Don't make it convenient for me to exercise the privilege of kickin' yer out to that extent," she continued, "but if I cannot dispense with your room, the least I can say is that it's a d——d sight better than your company'—or suthin' like that! And then the way you minded your stops, and let your voice rise and fall just ez easy ez ef you wos a First Reader in large type. Why, the Kernel wasn't nowhere. *His* cussin' didn't come within a mile o' yourn. That Stanner jist turned yaller."

"I'm afraid you are laughing at me," said Hale, not knowing whether to be pleased or vexed at the girl's amusement.

"I reckon I'm the only one that dare do it,

then," said the girl, simply. "The Kernel sez the way you turned round after he'd done his cussin', and said yer believed you'd stay and take the responsibility of the whole thing—and did in that kam, soft, did-any-body-speak-to-me-style, was the neatest thing he'd seen yet! No! Maw says I ain't much on manners, but I know a man when I see him."

For an instant Hale gave himself up to the delicious flattery of unexpected, unintended, and apparently uninterested compliment. Becoming at last a little embarrassed under the frank curiosity of the girl's dark eyes, he changed the subject.

"Do you always come up here through the stables?" he asked, glancing round the room which was evidently her own.

"I reckon," she answered half abstractedly. "There's a ladder down thar to Maw's room"—pointing to a trap-door beside the broad chimney that served as a wall, "but it's handier the other way, and nearer the hosses ef you want to get away quick."

This palpable suggestion—borne out by what he remembered of the other domestic details—that the house had been planned with reference to sudden foray or escape, reawakened his former uneasy reflections. Zeenie, who had been watching his face, added, "It's no slouch, when b'ar or painters

hang round nights and stampede the stock, to be able to swing yourself on to a hoss whenever you hear a row goin' on outside."

"Do you mean that *you*——"

"Paw *used*, and I do *now*, sense I've come into the room." She pointed to a nondescript garment, half cloak, half habit, hanging on the wall. "I've been outer bed, and on Pitchpine's back as far ez the trail five minutes arter I heard the first bellow."

Hale regarded her with undisguised astonishment. There was nothing at all Amazonian or horsey in her manners, nor was there even the robust physical contour that might have been developed through such experiences. On the contrary, she seemed to be lazily effeminate in body and mind. Heedless of his critical survey of her, she beckoned him to draw his chair nearer, and, looking into his eyes, said:

"Whatever possessed *you* to take to huntin' men?"

Hale was staggered by the question, but nevertheless endeavoured to explain. But he was surprised to find that his explanation appeared stilted even to himself, and, he could not doubt, was utterly incomprehensible to the girl. She nodded her head, however, and continued:

"Then you haven't anythin' agin' George?"

"I don't know George," said Hale, smiling. "My proceeding was against the highwayman."

"Well, *he* was the highwayman."

"I mean—it was the principle I objected to. A principle that I consider highly dangerous."

"Well, *he* is the principal, for the others only *helped*, I reckon," said Zeenie with a sigh, "and I reckon he *is* dangerous."

Hale saw it was useless to explain. The girl continued:

"What made you stay here instead of going on with the Kernel? There was suthin' else besides your wantin' to make that Stanner take water. What is it?"

A light sense of the propinquity of beauty, of her confidence, of their isolation, of the eloquence of her dark eyes, at first tempted Hale to a reply of simple gallantry; a graver consideration of the same circumstances froze it upon his lips.

"I don't know," he returned awkwardly.

"Well, I'll tell you," she said. "You didn't cotton to the Kernel and Rawlins much more than you did to Stanner. They ain't your kind."

In his embarrassment Hale blundered upon the thought he had honourably avoided.

"Suppose," he said, with a constrained laugh, "I had stayed to see you."

"I reckon *I* ain't your kind neither," she replied promptly. There was a momentary pause, when she rose and walked to the chimney. "It's very quiet down there," she said, stooping and listening over the roughly-boarded floor that formed the ceiling of the room below. "I wonder what's going on."

In the belief that this was a delicate hint for his return to the party he had left, Hale rose, but the girl passed him hurriedly, and, opening the door, cast a quick glance into the stable beyond.

"Just as I reckoned—the horses are gone too. They've skedaddled," she said blankly.

Hale did not reply. In his embarrassment a moment ago the idea of taking an equally sudden departure had flashed upon him. Should he take this as a justification of that impulse or how? He stood irresolutely gazing at the girl, who turned and began to descend the stairs silently. He followed. When they reached the lower room they found it as they had expected—deserted.

"I hope I didn't drive them away," said Hale, with an uneasy look at the troubled face of the girl. "For I really had an idea of going myself a moment ago."

She remained silently gazing out of the window.

Then, turning with a slight shrug of her shoulders, said half defiantly: "What's the use now? O Maw! the Stanner crowd has vamosed the ranch, and this yer stranger kalkilates to stay!"

CHAPTER VII.

A WEEK had passed at Eagle's Court. A week of mingled clouds and sunshine by day, of rain over the green plateau and snow on the mountain by night. Each morning had brought its fresh greenness to the winter-girt domain, and a fresh coat of dazzling white to the barrier that separated its dwellers from the world beyond. There was little change in the encompassing wall of their prison; if anything, the snowy circle round them seemed to have drawn its lines nearer day by day. The immediate result of this restricted limit had been to confine the range of cattle to the meadows nearer the house, and at a safe distance from the fringe of wilderness now invaded by the prowling tread of predatory animals.

Nevertheless, the two figures lounging on the slope at sunset gave very little indication of any serious quality in the situation. Indeed, so far as appearances were concerned, Kate, who was returning from an afternoon stroll with Falkner, exhibited, with feminine inconsistency, a decided return to the world of fashion and conventionality, apparently just as she was effectually excluded from it. She had

not only discarded her white dress as a concession to the practical evidence of the surrounding winter, but she had also brought out a feather hat and sable muff which had once graced a fashionable suburb of Boston. Even Falkner had exchanged his slouch hat and picturesque *serape* for a beaver overcoat and fur cap of Hale's which had been pressed upon him by Kate, under the excuse of the exigencies of the season. Within a stone's throw of the thicket, turbulent with the savage forces of nature, they walked with the abstraction of people hearing only their own voices; in the face of the solemn peaks clothed with white austerity they talked gravely of dress.

"I don't mean to say," said Kate demurely, "that you're to give up the *serape* entirely—you can wear it on rainy nights and when you ride over here from your friend's house to spend the evening—for the sake of old times," she added, with an unconscious air of referring to an already antiquated friendship, "but you must admit it's a little too gorgeous and theatrical for the sunlight of day and the public highway."

"But why should that make it wrong, if the experience of a people has shown it to be a garment best fitted for their wants and requirements?" said Falkner, argumentatively.

"But you are not one of those people," said

Kate, "and that makes all the difference. You look differently and act differently, so that there is something irreconcilable between your clothes and you that makes you look odd."

"And to look odd, according to your civilised prejudices, is to be wrong," said Falkner bitterly.

"It is to seem different from what one really is—which *is* wrong. Now, you are a mining superintendent, you tell me. Then you don't want to look like a Spanish brigand, as you do in that *serape*. I am sure if you had ridden up to a stage coach while I was in it, I'd have handed you my watch and purse without a word. There! you are not offended?" she added, with a laugh, which did not, however, conceal a certain earnestness. "I suppose I ought to have said I would have given it gladly to such a romantic figure, and perhaps have got out and danced a saraband or bolero with you—if that is the thing to do nowadays. Well!" she said, after a dangerous pause, "consider that I've said it."

He had been walking a little before her with his face turned towards the distant mountain. Suddenly he stopped and faced her. "You would have given enough of your time to the highwayman, Miss Scott, as would have enabled you to identify him for the police—and no more. Like your brother, you would have been willing to sacrifice

yourself for the benefit of the laws of civilisation and good order."

If a denial to this assertion could have been expressed without the use of speech it was certainly transparent in the face and eyes of the young girl at that moment. If Falkner had been less self-conscious he would have seen it plainly. But Kate only buried her face in her lifted muff, slightly raised her pretty shoulders, and dropping her tremulous eyelids, walked on. "It seems a pity," she said, after a pause, "that we cannot preserve our own miserable existence without taking something from others—sometimes even a life!" He started. "And it's horrid to have to remind you that you have yet to kill something for the invalid's supper," she continued. "I saw a hare in the field yonder."

"You mean that jackass rabbit?" he said abstractedly.

"What you please. It's a pity you didn't take your gun instead of your rifle."

"I brought the rifle for protection."

"And a shot gun is only aggressive, I suppose?"

Falkner looked at her for a moment, and then, as the hare suddenly started across the open a hundred yards away, brought the rifle to his shoulder. A long interval—as it seemed to Kate—elapsed; the animal appeared to be already safely out of range, when the rifle suddenly cracked, the

hare bounded in the air like a ball, and dropped motionless. The girl looked at the marksman in undisguised admiration. "Is it quite dead?" she said timidly.

"It never knew what struck it."

"It certainly looks less brutal than shooting it with a shot gun, as John does, and then not killing it outright," said Kate. "I hate what is called sport and sportsmen, but a rifle seems——"

"What?" said Falkner.

"More—gentlemanly."

She raised her pretty head in the air, and with her hand shading her eyes, was looking around the clear ether, and said meditatively, "I wonder—no matter."

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing."

"It is something," said Falkner, with an amused smile, reloading his rifle.

"Well, you once promised me an eagle's feather for my hat. Isn't that thing an eagle?"

"I am afraid it is only a hawk."

"Well, that will do. Shoot that!"

Her eyes were sparkling. Falkner withdrew his own with a slight smile, and raised his rifle with provoking deliberation.

"Are you quite sure it's what you want?" he asked demurely.

"Yes—quick!"

Nevertheless, it was some minutes before the rifle cracked again. The wheeling bird suddenly struck the wind with its wings aslant, and then fell like a plummet at a distance which showed the difficulty of the feat. Falkner started from her side before the bird reached the ground. He returned to her after a lapse of a few moments, bearing a trailing wing in his hand. "You shall make your choice," he said gaily.

"Are you sure it was killed outright?"

"Head shot off," said Falkner briefly.

"And besides, the fall would have killed it," said Kate conclusively. "It's lovely. I suppose they call you a very good shot?"

"They—who?"

"Oh! the people you know—your friends—and their sisters."

"George shoots better than I do, and has had more experience. I've seen him do that with a pistol. Of course not such a long shot, but a more difficult one."

Kate did not reply, but her face showed a conviction that as an artistic and gentlemanly performance it was probably inferior to the one she had witnessed. Falkner, who had picked up the hare also, again took his place by her side, as they turned towards the house.

"Do you remember the day you came, when we were walking here, you pointed out that rock on

the mountain where the poor animals had taken refuge from the snow?" said Kate suddenly.

"Yes," answered Falkner, "they seem to have diminished. I am afraid you were right; they have either eaten each other or escaped. Let us hope the latter."

"I looked at them with a glass every day," said Kate, "and they've got down to only four. There's a bear and that shabby, overgrown cat you call a California lion, and a wolf and a creature like a fox or a squirrel."

"It's a pity they're not all of a kind," said Falkner.

"Why?"

"There'd be nothing to keep them from being comfortable together."

"On the contrary. *I* should think it would be simply awful to be shut up entirely with one's own kind."

"Then you believe it is possible for them, with their different natures and habits, to be happy together?" said Falkner, with sudden earnestness.

"I believe," said Kate hurriedly, "that the bear and the lion find the fox and the wolf very amusing, and that the fox and the wolf——"

"Well?" said Falkner, stopping short.

"Well, the fox and the wolf will carry away a much better opinion of the lion and bear than they had before."

They had reached the house by this time, and for some occult reason Kate did not immediately enter the parlour where she had left her sister and the invalid, who had already been promoted to a sofa and a cushion by the window, but proceeded directly to her own room. As a manœuvre to avoid meeting Mrs. Hale it was scarcely necessary, for that lady was already in advance of her on the staircase, as if she had left the parlour a moment before they entered the house. Falkner, too, would have preferred the company of his own thoughts, but Lee, apparently the only unpreoccupied, all-pervading and boyishly alert spirit in the party, hailed him from within, and obliged him to present himself on the threshold of the parlour with the hare and the hawk's wing he was still carrying. Eyeing the latter with affected concern, Lee said gravely: "Of course I *can* eat it, Ned, and I dare say it's the best part of the fowl, and the hare isn't more than enough for the women, but I had no idea we were so reduced. Three hours and a half gunning, and only one hare and a hawk's wing. It's terrible."

Perceiving that his friend was alone, Falkner dropped his burden in the hall and strode rapidly to his side. "Look here, George, we must, *I* must, leave this place at once. It's no use talking; I can stand this sort of thing no longer."

"Nor can I, with the door open. Shut it, and

say what you want quick, before Mrs. Hale comes back. Have you found a trail?"

"No, no; that's not what I mean."

"Well, it strikes me it ought to be if you expect to get away. Have you proposed to Beacon Street, and she thinks it rather premature on a week's acquaintance?"

"No; but—"

"But you *will*, you mean? *Don't*, just yet."

"But I cannot live this perpetual lie."

"That depends. I don't know *how* you're lying when I'm not with you. If you're walking round with that girl, singing hymns and talking of your class in Sunday School, or if you're insinuating that you're a millionaire, and think of buying the place for a summer hotel, I should say you'd better quit that kind of lying. But, on the other hand, I don't see the necessity of your dancing round here with a shot gun, and yelling for Harkins's blood, or counting that package of greenbacks in the lap of Miss Scott—to be truthful. It seems to me there ought to be something between the two."

"But, George, don't you think—you are on such good terms with Mrs. Hale and her mother—that you might tell them the whole story? That is, tell it in your own way; they will hear anything from you, and believe it."

"Thank you; but suppose I don't believe in lying, either?"

"You know what I mean! You have a way, d——n it, of making everything seem like a matter of course, and the most natural thing going."

"Well, suppose I did. Are you prepared for the worst?"

Falkner was silent for a moment, and then replied, "Yes, anything would be better than this suspense."

"I don't agree with you. Then you would be willing to have them forgive us?"

"I don't understand you."

"I mean that their forgiveness would be the worst thing that could happen. Look here, Ned. Stop a moment; listen at that door. Mrs. Hale has the tread of an angel, with the pervading capacity of a cat. Now listen! *I* don't pretend to be in love with anybody here, but if I were I should hardly take advantage of a woman's helplessness and solitude with a sensational story about myself. It's not giving her a fair show. You know she won't turn you out of the house."

"No," said Falkner, reddening; "but I should expect to go at once, and that would be my only excuse for telling her."

"Go! where? In your preoccupation with that girl you haven't even found the trail by which Manuel escaped. Do you intend to camp outside the house, and make eyes at her when she comes to the window?"

"Because you think nothing of flirting with Mrs. Hale," said Falkner bitterly, "you care little——"

"My dear Ned," said Lee, "the fact that Mrs. Hale has a husband, and knows that she can't marry me, puts us on equal terms. Nothing that she could learn about me hereafter would make a flirtation with me any less wrong than it would be now, or make her seem more a victim. Can you say the same of yourself and that Puritan girl?"

"But you did not advise me to keep aloof from her; on the contrary, you——"

"I thought you might make the best of the situation, and pay her some attention, *because* you could not go any further."

"You thought I was utterly heartless and selfish, like——"

"Ned!"

Falkner walked rapidly to the fireplace and returned.

"Forgive me, George—I'm a fool—and an ungrateful one."

Lee did not reply at once, although he took and retained the hand Falkner had impulsively extended. "Promise me," he said slowly, after a pause, "that you will say nothing yet to either of these women—I ask it for your own sake, and this girl's, not for mine. If, on the contrary, you are tempted to do so from any Quixotic idea of honour, remember that you will only precipitate something

that will oblige you, from that same sense of honour, to separate from the girl for ever."

"I don't understand."

"Enough!" said he, with a quick return of his old reckless gaiety. "Shoot-Off-His-Mouth—the Beardless Boy Chief of the Sierras—has spoken! Let the Pale Face with the black moustache ponder and beware how he talks hereafter to the Rippling Cochituate Water! Go!"

Nevertheless, as soon as the door had closed upon Falkner, Lee's smile vanished. With his colourless face turned to the fading light at the window, the hollows in his temples and the lines in the corners of his eyes seemed to have grown more profound. He remained motionless and absorbed in thought so deep that the light rustle of a skirt, that would at other times have thrilled his sensitive ear, passed unheeded. At last, throwing off his reverie with the full and unrestrained sigh of a man who believes himself alone, he was startled by the soft laugh of Mrs. Hale, who had entered the room unperceived.

"Dear me! How portentous! Really, I almost feel as if I were interrupting a *tête-à-tête* between yourself and some old flame. I haven't heard anything so old-fashioned and conservative as that sigh since I have been in California. I thought you never had any Past out here?"

Fortunately his face was between her and the

light, and the unmistakable expression of annoyance and impatience which passed over it was spared her. There was, however, still enough dissonance in his manner to affect her quick feminine sense, and when she drew nearer to him it was with a certain maiden-like timidity.

"You are not worse, Mr. Lee, I hope? You have not over-exerted yourself?"

"There's little chance of that with one leg—if not in the grave—at least mummified with bandages," he replied, with a bitterness new to him.

"Shall I loosen them? Perhaps they are too tight. There is nothing so irritating to one as the sensation of being tightly bound."

The light touch of her hand upon the rug that covered his knees, the thoughtful tenderness of the blue-veined lids, and the delicate atmosphere that seemed to surround her like a perfume, cleared his face of its shadow and brought back the reckless fire into his blue eyes.

"I suppose I'm intolerant of all bonds," he said, looking at her intently, "in others as well as myself!"

Whether or not she detected any double meaning in his words, she was obliged to accept the challenge of his direct gaze, and raising her eyes to his, drew back a little from him with a slight increase of colour. "I was afraid you had heard bad news just now."

"What would you call bad news?" asked Lee, clasping his hands behind his head, and leaning back on the sofa, but without withdrawing his eyes from her face.

"Oh, any news that would interrupt your convalescence, or break up our little family party," said Mrs. Hale. "You have been getting on so well, that really it would seem cruel to have anything interfere with our life of forgetting and being forgotten. But," she added with apprehensive quickness, "has anything happened? Is there really any news from—from the trails? Yesterday Mr. Falkner said the snow had recommenced in the pass. Has he seen anything?—noticed anything different?"

She looked so very pretty, with the rare, genuine, and youthful excitement that transfigured her wearied and wearying regularity of feature, that Lee contented himself with drinking in her prettiness as he would have inhaled the perfume of some flower.

"Why do you look at me so, Mr. Lee?" she asked, with a slight smile. "I believe something *has* happened. Mr. Falkner *has* brought you some intelligence."

"He has certainly found out something I did not foresee."

"And that troubles you?"

"It does."

"Is it a secret?"

"No."

"Then I suppose you will tell it to me at dinner," she said, with a little tone of relief.

"I am afraid, if I tell it at all, I must tell it now," he said, glancing at the door.

"You must do as you think best," she said coldly, "as it seems to be a secret after all." She hesitated. "Kate is dressing, and will not be down for some time."

"So much the better. For I'm afraid that Ned has made a poor return to your hospitality by falling in love with her."

"Impossible! He has known her for scarcely a week."

"I am afraid we won't agree as to the length of time necessary to appreciate and love a woman. I think it can be done in seven days and four hours, the exact time we have been here."

"Yes, but as Kate was not in when you arrived, and did not come until later, you must take off at least one hour," said Mrs. Hale gaily.

"Ned can—I shall not abate a second."

"But are you not mistaken in his feelings?" she continued hurriedly. "He certainly has not said anything to her."

"That is his last hold on honour and reason. And to preserve that little intact he wants to run away at once."

"But that would be very silly."

"Do you think so?" he said, looking at her fixedly.

"Why not?" she asked in her turn, but rather faintly.

"I'll tell you why," he said, lowering his voice with a certain intensity of passion unlike his usual boyish light-heartedness. "Think of a man whose life has been one of alternate hardness and aggression, of savage disappointment and equally savage successes, who has known no other relaxation than dissipation or extravagance, a man to whom the idea of the domestic hearth and family ties only meant weakness, effeminacy, or—worse; who had looked for loyalty and devotion only in the man who battled for him at his right hand in danger, or shared his privations and sufferings. Think of such a man and imagine that an accident has suddenly placed him in an atmosphere of purity, gentleness, and peace, surrounded him by the refinements of a higher life than he had ever known, and that he found himself as in a dream, on terms of equality with a pure woman who had never known any other life, and yet would understand and pity his. Imagine his loving her! Imagine that the first effect of that love was to show him his own inferiority and the immeasurable gulf that lay between his life and hers. Would he not fly rather than brave the disgrace of her awakening to the truth?—would he not fly rather than accept even the pity that might tempt her to a sacrifice?"

"But—is Mr. Falkner all that?"

"Nothing of the kind—I assure you!" said he, demurely. "But that's the way a man in love feels."

"Really! Mr. Falkner should get you to plead his cause with Kate," said Mrs. Hale, with a faint laugh.

"I need all my persuasive powers in that way for myself," said Lee boldly.

Mrs. Hale rose. "I think I hear Kate coming," she said. Nevertheless, she did not move away. "It is Kate coming," she added hurriedly, stopping to pick up her work-basket, which had slipped with Lee's hand from her own.

It was Kate, who at once flew to her sister's assistance, Lee deploring from the sofa his own utter inability to aid her. "It's all my fault, too," he said to Kate, but looking at Mrs. Hale. "It seems I have a faculty of upsetting existing arrangements without the power of improving them or even putting them back in their places. What shall I do? I am willing to hold any number of skeins or rewind any quantity of spools. I am even willing to forgive Ned for spending the whole day with you and only bringing me the wing of a hawk for supper."

"That was all my folly, Mr. Lee," said Kate, with swift mendacity; "he was all the time looking after something for you, when I begged him to

shoot a bird to get a feather for my hat. And that wing is so pretty."

"It is a pity that mere beauty is not edible," said Lee, gravely, "and that if the worst comes to the worst here, you would probably prefer me to Ned and his moustachios, merely because I've been tied by the leg to this sofa and slowly fattened like a Strasbourg goose."

Nevertheless, his badinage failed somehow to amuse Kate, and she presently excused herself to rejoin her sister, who had already slipped from the room. For the first time during their enforced seclusion a sense of restraint and uneasiness affected Mrs. Hale, her sister, and Falkner at dinner. The latter addressed himself to Mrs. Scott almost entirely. Mrs. Hale was fain to bestow an exceptional and marked tenderness on her little daughter Minnie, who, however, by some occult childish instinct, insisted upon sharing it with Lee her great friend—to Mrs. Hale's uneasy consciousness. Nor was Lee slow to profit by the child's suggestion, but responded with certain vicarious caresses that increased the mother's embarrassment. That evening they retired early, but in the intervals of a restless night Kate was aware, from the sound of voices in the opposite room, that the friends were equally wakeful.

A morning of bright sunshine and soft warm air did not, however, bring any change to their

new and constrained relations. It only seemed to offer a reason for Falkner to leave the house very early for his daily rounds, and gave Lee that occasion for unaided exercise with an extempore crutch on the verandah which allowed Mrs. Hale to pursue her manifold duties without the necessity of keeping him company. Kate also, as if to avoid an accidental meeting with Falkner, had remained at home with her sister. With one exception, they did not make their guests the subject of their usual playful comments, nor, after the fashion of their sex, quote their ideas and opinions. That exception was made by Mrs. Hale.

"You have had no difference with Mr. Falkner?" she said, carelessly.

"No," said Kate quickly. "Why?"

"I only thought he seemed rather put out at dinner last night, and you didn't propose to go and meet him to-day."

"He must be bored with my company at times, I dare say," said Kate, with an indifference quite inconsistent with her rising colour. "I shouldn't wonder if he was a little vexed with Mr. Lee's chaffing him about his sport yesterday, and probably intends to go further to-day, and bring home larger game. I think Mr. Lee very amusing always, but I sometimes fancy he lacks feeling."

"Feeling! you don't know him, Kate," said Mrs.

Hale, quickly. She stopped herself—but with a half smiling recollection in her dropped eyelids.

“Well, he doesn't look very amiable now, stamping up and down the verandah. Perhaps you'd better go and soothe him.”

“I'm really *so* busy just now,” said Mrs. Hale, with sudden and inconsequent energy, “things have got dreadfully behind in the last week. You had better go, Kate, and make him sit down, or he'll be overdoing it. These men never know any medium—in anything.”

Contrary to Kate's expectation, Falkner returned earlier than usual, and taking the invalid's arm, supported him in a more ambitious walk along the terrace before the house. They were apparently absorbed in conversation, but the two women who observed them from the window could not help noticing the almost feminine tenderness of Falkner's manner towards his wounded friend, and the thoughtful tenderness of his ministering care.

“I wonder,” said Mrs. Hale, following them with softly appreciative eyes, “if women are capable of as disinterested friendship as men? I never saw anything like the devotion of these two creatures. Look! if Mr. Falkner hasn't got his arm round Mr. Lee's waist, and Lee, with his own arm over Falkner's neck, is looking up in his eyes. I declare,

Kate, it almost seems an indiscretion to look at them."

Kate, however, to Mrs. Hale's indignation, threw her pretty head back and sniffed the air contemptuously. "I really don't see anything but some absurd sentimentalism of their own, or some mannish wickedness they're concocting by themselves. I am by no means certain, Josephine, that Lee's influence over that young man is the best thing for him."

"On the contrary! Lee's influence seems the only thing that checks his waywardness," said Mrs. Hale quickly. "I'm sure, if any one makes sacrifices it is Lee; I shouldn't wonder that even now he is making some concession to Falkner, and all those caressing ways of your friend are for a purpose. They're not much different from us, dear."

"Well, *I* wouldn't stand there and let them see me looking at them as if I couldn't bear them out of my sight for a moment," said Kate, whisking herself out of the room. "They're conceited enough, Heaven knows, already."

That evening, at dinner, however, the two men exhibited no trace of the restraint or uneasiness of the previous day. If they were less impulsive and exuberant, they were still frank and interested, and if the term could be used in connection with men apparently trained to neither self-control nor repose, there was a certain gentle dignity in their manner

which for the time had the effect of lifting them a little above the social level of their entertainers. For even with all their predisposition to the strangers, Kate and Mrs. Hale had always retained a conscious attitude of gentle condescension and superiority towards them—an attitude not inconsistent with a stronger feeling, nor altogether unprovocative of it; yet this evening they found themselves impressed with something more than an equality in the men who had amused and interested them, and they were perhaps a little more critical and doubtful of their own power. Mrs. Hale's little girl, who had appreciated only the seriousness of the situation, had made her own application of it. "Are you dow'in' away from Aunt Kate and mamma?" she asked, in an interval of silence.

"How else can I get you the red snow we saw at sunset the other day on the peak yonder?" said Lee gaily. "I'll have to get up some morning very early, and catch it when it comes at sunrise."

"What is this wonderful snow, Minnie, that you are tormenting Mr. Lee for?" asked Mrs. Hale.

"Oh! it's a fairy snow that he told me all about; it only comes when the sun comes up and goes down, and if you catch ever so little of it in your hand it makes all you fink you want come true! Wouldn't that be nice?" But to the child's astonishment her little circle of auditors, even while assenting, sighed.

The red snow was there plain enough the next morning before the valley was warm with light, and while Minnie, her mother, and Aunt Kate were still peacefully sleeping. And Mr. Lee had kept his word, and was evidently seeking it, for he and Falkner were already urging their horses through the pass, with their faces towards and lit up by its glow.

CHAPTER VIII.

KATE was stirring early, but not as early as her sister, who met her on the threshold of her room. Her face was quite pale, and she held a letter in her hand. "What does this mean, Kate?"

"What is the matter?" asked Kate, her own colour fading from her cheek.

"They are gone—with their horses. Left before day, and left this."

She handed Kate an open letter. The girl took it hurriedly and read:

"When you get this we shall be no more; perhaps not even as much. Ned found the trail yesterday, and we are taking the first advantage of it before day. We dared not trust ourselves to say 'Good-bye!' last evening; we were too cowardly to face you this morning; we must go as we came, without warning, but not without regret. We leave a package and a letter for your husband. It is not only our poor return for your gentleness and hospitality, but, since it was accidentally the means of giving us the pleasure of your society, we beg you to keep it in safety until his return. We kiss your

mother's hands. Ned wants to say something more, but time presses, and I only allow him to send his love to Minnie, and to tell her that he is trying to find the red snow.

“GEORGE LEE.”

“But he is not fit to travel,” said Mrs. Hale. “And the trail—it may not be passable.”

“It was passable the day before yesterday,” said Kate drearily, “for I discovered it, and went as far as the buck-eyes.”

“Then it was you who told them about it,” said Mrs. Hale reproachfully.

“No,” said Kate indignantly. “Of course I didn't.” She stopped, and, reading the significance of her speech in the glistening eyes of her sister, she blushed. Josephine kissed her, and said:

“It *was* treating us like children, Kate, but we must make them pay for it hereafter. For that package and letter to John means something, and we shall probably see them before long. I wonder what the letter is about, and what is in the package?”

“Probably one of Mr. Lee's jokes. He is quite capable of turning the whole thing into ridicule. I dare say he considers his visit here a prolonged jest.”

“With his poor leg, Kate? You are as unfair to him as you were to Falkner when they first came.”

Kate, however, kept her dark eyebrows knitted in a piquant frown.

"To think of his intimating *what* he would allow Falkner to say. And yet you believe he has no evil influence over the young man."

Mrs. Hale laughed. "Where are you going so fast, Kate?" she called mischievously, as the young lady flounced out of the room.

"Where? Why, to tidy John's room. He may be coming at any moment now. Or do you want to do it yourself?"

"No, no," returned Mrs. Hale hurriedly, "you do it. I'll look in a little later on."

She turned away with a sigh. The sun was shining brilliantly outside. Through the half-open blinds its long shafts seemed to be searching the house for the lost guests, and making the hollow shell appear doubly empty. What a contrast to the dear dark days of mysterious seclusion and delicious security, lit by Lee's laughter and the sparkling hearth, which had passed so quickly! The forgotten outer world seemed to have returned to the house through those open windows and awakened its dwellers from a dream.

The morning seemed interminable, and it was past noon, while they were deep in a sympathetic conference with Mrs. Scott, who had drawn a pathetic word-picture of the two friends perishing

in the snowdrift, without flannels, brandy, smelling-salts, or jelly, which they had forgotten, when they were startled by the loud barking of "Spot" on the lawn before the house. The women looked hurriedly at each other.

"They have returned," said Mrs. Hale.

Kate ran to the window. A horseman was approaching the house. A single glance showed her that it was neither Falkner, Lee, nor Hale, but a stranger.

"Perhaps he brings some news of them," said Mrs. Scott quickly. So complete had been their preoccupation with the loss of their guests that they could not yet conceive of anything that did not pertain to it.

The stranger, who was at once ushered into the parlour, was evidently disconcerted by the presence of the three women.

"I reckoned to see John Hale yer," he began, awkwardly.

A slight look of disappointment passed over their faces. "He has not yet returned," said Mrs. Hale briefly.

"Sho! I wanter know. He's hed time to do it, I reckon," said the stranger.

"I suppose he hasn't been able to get over from the summit," returned Mrs. Hale. "The trail is closed."

"It ain't now, for I kem over it this mornin' myself."

"You didn't—meet—any one?" asked Mrs. Hale timidly, with a glance at the others.

"No."

A long silence ensued. The unfortunate visitor plainly perceived an evident abatement of interest in himself, yet he still struggled politely to say something. "Then I reckon you know what kept Hale away?" he said dubiously.

"Oh, certainly—the stage robbery."

"I wish I'd known that," said the stranger reflectively, "for I ez good ez rode over jist to tell it to ye. Ye see John Hale he sent a note to ye 'splainin' matters by a gentleman; but the road agents tackled that man, and left him for dead in the road."

"Yes," said Mrs. Hale impatiently.

"Luckily he didn't die, but kem to, and managed to crawl inter the brush, whar I found him when I was lookin' for stock, and brought him to my house——"

"*You* found him? *Your* house?" interrupted Mrs. Hale.

"Inter *my* house," continued the man doggedly. "I'm Thompson of Thompson's Pass over yon—mebbe it ain't much of a house—but I brought him thar. Well, ez he couldn't find the note that Hale had guv him, and like ez not the road agents had

gone through him and got it, ez soon ez the weather let up I made a break over yer to tell ye."

"You say Mr. Lee came to your house?" repeated Mrs. Hale, "and is there now?"

"Not much," said the man grimly; "and I never said *Lee* was thar. I mean that Bilson waz shot by Lee and kem——"

"Certainly, Josephine!" said Kate, suddenly stepping between her sister and Thompson, and turning upon her a white face and eyes of silencing significance; "certainly—don't you remember?—that's the story we got from the Chinaman, you know, only muddled. Go on, sir," she continued, turning to Thompson calmly; "you say that the man who brought the note from my brother was shot by Lee?"

"And another fellow they call Falkner. Yes, that's about the size of it."

"Thank you; it's nearly the same story that we heard. But you have had a long ride, Mr. Thompson; let me offer you a glass of whisky in the dining-room. This way, please."

The door closed upon them none too soon. For Mrs. Hale already felt the room whirling around her, and sank back into her chair with a hysterical laugh. Old Mrs. Scott did not move from her seat, but, with her eyes fixed on the door, impatiently waited Kate's return. Neither spoke, but each felt

that the young untried girl was equal to the emergency, and would get at the truth.

The sound of Thompson's feet in the hall and the closing of the front door was followed by Kate's reappearance. Her face was still pale, but calm.

"Well?" said the two women in a breath.

"Well," returned Kate slowly; "Mr. Lee and Mr. Falkner were undoubtedly the two men who took the paper from John's messenger and brought it here."

"You are sure?" said Mrs. Scott.

"There can be no mistake, mother."

"Then," said Mrs. Scott with triumphant feminine logic, "I don't want anything more to satisfy me that they are *perfectly innocent!*"

More convincing than the most perfect masculine deduction, this single expression of their common nature sent a thrill of sympathy and understanding through each. They cried for a few moments on each other's shoulders. "To think," said Mrs. Scott, "what that poor boy must have suffered to have been obliged to do—that to—to—Bilson—isn't that the creature's name? I suppose we ought to send over there and inquire after him, with some chicken and jelly, Kate. It's only common humanity, and we must be just, my dear—for even if he shot Mr. Lee and provoked the poor boy to shoot him—he may have thought it his duty. And then—it will avert suspicion."

"To think," murmured Mrs. Hale, "what they must have gone through while they were here—momentarily expecting John to come, and yet keeping up such a light heart."

"I believe if they had stayed any longer, they would have told us everything," said Mrs. Scott.

Both the younger women were silent. Kate was thinking of Falkner's significant speech as they neared the house on their last walk; Josephine was recalling the remorseful picture drawn by Lee, which she now knew was his own portrait. Suddenly she started.

"But John will be here soon—what are we to tell him?—and then that package and that letter."

"Don't be in a hurry to tell him anything at present, my child," said Mrs. Scott gently. "It is unfortunate this Mr. Thompson called here, but we are not obliged to understand what he says now about John's message, or to connect our visitors with his story. I'm sure, Kate, I should have treated them exactly as we did if they had come without any message from John—so I do not know why we should lay any stress on that—or even speak of it. The simple fact is that we have opened our house to two strangers in distress. Your husband," continued Mr. Hale's mother-in-law, "does not require to know more. As to the letter and package, we will keep that for further consideration. It cannot

be of much importance or they would have spoken of it before; it is probably some trifling present as a return for your hospitality. I should use no *indecorous* haste in having it opened."

The two women kissed Mrs. Scott with a feeling of relief, and fell back into the monotony of their household duties. It is to be feared, however, that the absence of their outlawed guests was nearly as dangerous as their presence in the opportunity it afforded for uninterrupted and imaginative reflection. Both Kate and Josephine were at first shocked and wounded by the discovery of the real character of the two men with whom they had associated so familiarly, but it was no disparagement to their sense of propriety to say that the shock did not last long, and was accompanied with the fascination of danger. This was succeeded by a consciousness of the delicate flattery implied in their indirect influence over the men who had undoubtedly risked their lives for the sake of remaining with them. The best woman is not above being touched by the effect of her power over the worst man, and Kate at first allowed herself to think of Falkner in that light. But if in her later reflections he suffered as a heroic experience to be forgotten, he gained something as an actual man to be remembered. Now that the proposed rides from "his friend's house" were a part of the illusion, would he ever dare to visit them again? Would she dare to see

him? She held her breath with a sudden pain of parting that was new to her; she tried to think of something else, to pick up the scattered threads of her life before that eventful day. But in vain; that one week had filled the place with implacable memories, or more terrible, as it seemed to her and her sister, they had both lost their feeble, alien hold upon Eagle's Court in the sudden presence of the real genii of these solitudes, and henceforth they alone would be the strangers there. They scarcely dared to confess it to each other, but this return to the dazzling sunlight and cloudless skies of the past appeared to them to be the one unreal experience; they had never known the true wild flavour of their home, except in that week of delicious isolation. Without breathing it aloud, they longed for some vague *dénouement* to this experience that should take them from Eagle's Court for ever.

It was noon the next day when the little household beheld the last shred of their illusion vanish like the melting snow in the strong sunlight of John Hale's return. He was accompanied by Colonel Clinch and Rawlins, two strangers to the women. Was it fancy, or the avenging spirit of their absent companions? but *he* too looked a stranger, and as the little cavalcade wound its way up the slope he appeared to sit his horse and wear his hat with a

certain slouch and absence of his usual restraint that strangely shocked them. Even the old half-condescending, half-punctilious gallantry of his greeting of his wife and family was changed, as he introduced his companions with a mingling of familiarity and shyness that was new to him. Did Mrs. Hale regret it, or feel a sense of relief in the absence of his usual seignorial formality? She only knew that she was grateful for the presence of the strangers, which for the moment postponed a matrimonial confidence from which she shrunk.

"Proud to know you," said Colonel Clinch, with a sudden outbreak of the antique gallantry of some remote Huguenot ancestor. "My friend, Judge Hale, must be a regular Roman citizen to leave such a family and such a house at the call of public duty. Eh, Rawlins?"

"You bet," said Rawlins, looking from Kate to her sister in undisguised admiration.

"And I suppose the duty could not have been a very pleasant one," said Mrs. Hale timidly, without looking at her husband.

"Gad, madam, that's just it," said the gallant Colonel, seating himself with a comfortable air, and an easy, though by no means disrespectful, familiarity. "We went into this fight a little more than a week ago. The only scrimmage we've had has been with the detectives that were on the robbers' track.

Ha! ha! The best people we've met have been the friends of the man we were huntin', and we've generally come to the conclusion to vote the other ticket! Ez Judge Hale and me agreed ez we came along, the two men ez we'd most like to see just now and shake hands with are George Lee and Ned Falkner."

"The two leaders of the party who robbed the coach," explained Mr. Hale, with a slight return of his usual precision of statement.

The three women looked at each other with a blaze of thanksgiving in their grateful eyes. Without comprehending all that Colonel Clinch had said, they understood enough to know that their late guests were safe from the pursuit of that party, and that their own conduct was spared criticism. I hardly dare write it, but they instantly assumed the appearance of aggrieved martyrs, and felt as if they were!

"Yes, ladies!" continued the Colonel, inspired by the bright eyes fixed upon him. "We haven't taken the road ourselves yet, but—pohn honour—we wouldn't mind doing it in a case like this." Then with the fluent, but somewhat exaggerated, phraseology of a man trained to "stump" speaking, he gave an account of the robbery and his own connection with it. He spoke of the swindling and treachery which had undoubtedly provoked Falkner.

to obtain restitution of his property by an overt act of violence under the leadership of Lee. He added that he had learned since at Wild Cat Station that Harkins had fled the country; that a suit had been commenced by the Excelsior Ditch Company, and that all available property of Harkins had been seized by the Sheriff.

"Of course it can't be proved yet, but there's no doubt in my mind that Lee, who is an old friend of Ned Falkner's, got up that job to help him, and that Ned's off with the money by this time—and I'm right glad of it. I can't say ez we've done much towards it, except to keep tumbling in the way of that detective party of Stanner's, and so throw them off the trail—ha, ha! The Judge here, I reckon, has had his share of fun, for while he was at Hennicker's trying to get some facts from Hennicker's pretty daughter, Stanner tried to get up some sort of vigilance committee of the stage passengers to burn down Hennicker's ranch out of spite, but the Judge here stepped in and stopped that."

"It was really a high-handed proceeding, Josephine, but I managed to check it," said Hale, meeting somewhat consciously the first direct look his wife had cast upon him, and falling back for support on his old manner. "In its way, I think it was worse than the robbery by Lee and Falkner, for it was done in the name of law and order;

while, as far as I can judge from the facts, the affair that we were following up was simply a rude and irregular restitution of property that had been morally stolen."

"I have no doubt you did quite right, though I don't understand it," said Mrs. Hale languidly; "but I trust these gentlemen will stay to luncheon, and in the mean time excuse us for running away, as we are short of servants, and Manuel seems to have followed the example of the head of the house and left us, in pursuit of somebody or something."

When the three women had gained the vantage ground of the drawing-room Kate said, earnestly, "As it's all right, hadn't we better tell him now?"

"Decidedly not, child," said Mrs. Scott, imperatively. "Do you suppose they are in a hurry to tell us *their* whole story. Who are those Hennicker people? and they were there a week ago!"

"And did you notice John's hat when he came in? And the vulgar familiarity of calling him 'judge'?" said Mrs. Hale.

"Well, certainly anything like the familiarity of this man Clinch I never saw," said Kate. "Contrast his manner with Mr. Falkner's."

At luncheon the three suffering martyrs finally succeeded in reducing Hale and his two friends to an attitude of vague apology. But their triumph was short-lived. At the end of the meal they were

startled by the trampling of hoofs without, followed by loud knocking. In another moment the door was opened, and Mr. Stanner strode into the room. Hale rose with a look of indignation.

"I thought, as Mr. Stanner understood that I had no desire for his company, elsewhere, he would hardly venture to intrude upon me in my house, and certainly not after——"

"Ef you're alluding to the Vigilantes shakin' you and Zeenie up at Hennicker's, you can't make *me* responsible for that. I'm here now on business—you understand—reg'lar business. Ef you want to see the papers yer ken. I suppose you know what a warrant is?"

"I know what *you* are," said Hale hotly; "and if you don't leave my house——"

"Steady boys," interrupted Stanner, as his five henchmen filed into the hall. "There's no backin' down here, Colonel Clinch, unless you and Hale kalkilate to back down the State of Californy! The matter stands like this. There's a half-bred Mexican called Manuel arrested over at the summit, who swears he saw George Lee and Edward Falkner in this house the night after the robbery. He says that they were makin' themselves at home here, as if they were among friends, and considerin' the kind of help we've had from Mr. John Hale, it looks ez if it might be true."

"It's an infamous lie!" said Hale.

"It may be true, John," said Mrs. Scott, suddenly stepping in front of her pale-cheeked daughters. "A wounded man was brought here out of the storm by his friend, who claimed the shelter of your roof. As your mother I should have been unworthy to stay beneath it and have denied that shelter or withheld it until I knew his name, and what he was. He stayed here until he could be removed. He left a letter for you. It will probably tell you if he was the man this person is seeking."

"Thank you, mother," said Hale, lifting her hand to his lips quietly; "and perhaps you will kindly tell these gentlemen, that as your son does not care to know who or what the stranger was, there is no necessity for opening the letter, or keeping Mr. Stanner a moment longer."

"But you will oblige *me*, John, by opening it before these gentlemen," said Mrs. Hale, recovering her voice and colour. "Please to follow me," she said, preceding them to the staircase.

They entered Mr. Hale's room, now restored to its original condition. On the table lay a letter and a small package. The eyes of Mr. Stanner, a little abashed by the attitude of the two women, fastened upon it and glistened.

Josephine handed her husband the letter. He opened it in breathless silence and read:

“JOHN HALE,

“We owe you no return for voluntarily making yourself a champion of justice and pursuing us, except it was to offer you a fair field and no favour. We didn't get that much from you, but accident brought us into your house and into your family, where we *did* get it, and were fairly vanquished. To the victors belong the spoils. We leave the package of greenbacks which we took from Colonel Clinch in the Sierra coach, but which was first stolen by Harkins from forty-four shareholders of the Excelsior Ditch. We have no right to say what *you* should do with it, but if you aren't tired of following the same line of justice that induced you to run after *us*, you will try to restore it to its rightful owners.

“We leave you another trifle as an evidence that our intrusion into your affairs was not without some service to you, even if the service was as accidental as the intrusion. You will find a pair of boots in the corner of your closet. They were taken from the burglarious feet of Manuel, your *peon*, who, believing the three ladies were alone and at his mercy, entered your house with an accomplice at two o'clock on the morning of the 21st, and was kicked out by

“Your obedient servants, GEORGE LEE &

“EDWARD FALKNER.”

Hale's voice and colour changed on reading this last paragraph. He turned quickly towards his wife; Kate flew to the closet, where the muffled boots of Manuel confronted them. "We never knew it. I always suspected something that night," said Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Scott in the same breath.

"That's all very well, and like George Lee's high falutin'," said Stanner, approaching the table, "but as long ez the greenbacks are here he can make what capital he likes outer Manuel. I'll trouble you to pass that package."

"Excuse me," said Hale, "but I believe this is the package taken from Colonel Clinch. Is it not?" he added, appealing to the Colonel.

"It is," said Clinch.

"Then take it," said Hale, handing him the package. "The first restitution is to you, but I believe you will fulfil Lee's instructions as well as myself."

"But," said Stanner, furiously interposing, "I've a warrant to seize that wherever found, and I dare you to disobey the law."

"Mr. Stanner," said Clinch slowly, "there are ladies present. If you insist upon having that package I must ask them to withdraw, and I'm afraid you'll find me better prepared to resist a *second* robbery than I was the first. Your warrant, which was taken out by the Express Company, is

supplanted by civil proceedings taken the day before yesterday against the property of the fugitive swindler Harkins! You should have consulted the Sheriff before you came here."

Stanner saw his mistake. But in the faces of his grinning followers he was obliged to keep up his bluster. "You shall hear from me again, sir," he said, turning on his heel.

"I beg your pardon," said Clinch grimly, "but do I understand that at last I am to have the honour——"

"You shall hear from the Company's lawyers, sir," said Stanner, turning red, and noisily leaving the room.

"And so, my dear ladies," said Colonel Clinch, "you have spent a week with a highwayman. I say *a* highwayman, for it would be hard to call my young friend Falkner by that name for his first offence committed under great provocation, and undoubtedly instigated by Lee, who was an old friend of his, and to whom he came, no doubt, in desperation."

Kate stole a triumphant glance at her sister, who dropped her lids over her glistening eyes. "And this Mr. Lee," she continued more gently, "is he really a highwayman?"

"George Lee," said Clinch, settling himself back oratorically in his chair, "my dear young lady, *is a*

highwayman, but not of the common sort. He is a gentleman born, madam, comes from one of the oldest families of the eastern shore of Maryland. He never mixes himself up with anything but some of the biggest strikes, and he's an educated man. He is very popular with ladies and children; he was never known to do or say anything that could bring a blush to the cheek of beauty or a tear to the eye of innocence. I think I may say I'm sure you found him so."

"I shall never believe him anything but a gentleman," said Mrs. Scott firmly.

"If he has a defect, it is perhaps a too reckless indulgence in draw poker," said the Colonel musingly, "not unbecoming a gentleman, understand me, Mrs. Scott, but perhaps too reckless for his own good. George played a grand game, a glittering game—but pardon me if I say an *uncertain* game. I've told him so—it's the only point on which we ever differed."

"Then you know him?" said Mrs. Hale, lifting her soft eyes to the Colonel.

"I have that honour."

"Did his appearance, Josephine," broke in Hale, somewhat ostentatiously, "appear to—er—er correspond with these qualities? You know what I mean."

"He certainly seemed very simple and natural," said Mrs. Hale, slightly drawing her pretty lips to-

gether. "He did not wear his trousers rolled up over his boots in the company of ladies as you're doing now, nor did he make his first appearance in this house with such a hat as you wore this morning, or I should not have admitted him."

There were a few moments of embarrassing silence.

"Do you intend to give that package to Mr. Falkner yourself, Colonel?" asked Mrs. Scott.

"I shall hand it over to the Excelsior Company," said the Colonel, "but I shall inform Ned of what I have done."

"Then," said Mrs. Scott, "will you kindly take a message from us to him?"

"If you wish it."

"You will be doing *me* a great favour, Colonel," said Hale politely.

Whatever the message was, six months later it brought Edward Falkner, the re-established superintendent of the Excelsior Ditch, to Eagle's Court. As he and Kate stood again on the plateau looking towards the distant slopes once more green with verdure, Falkner said:

"Everything here looks as it did the first day I saw it, except your sister."

"The place does not agree with her," said Kate hurriedly. "That is why my brother thinks of leaving it before the winter sets in."

“It seems so sad, “said Falkner,” for the last words poor George said to me, as he left to join his cousin’s Corps at Richmond, were: ‘If I’m not killed, Ned, I hope some day to stand again beside Mrs. Hale at the window in Eagle’s Court and watch you and Kate coming home!’”

STRUCK AT DEVIL'S FORD.

STRUCK AT DEVIL'S FORD.

CHAPTER I.

It was a season of unequalled prosperity in Devil's Ford. The half-a-dozen cabins scattered along the banks of the North Fork, as if by some overflow of that capricious river, had become augmented during a week of fierce excitement by twenty or thirty others, that were huddled together on the narrow gorge of Devil's Spur, or cast up on its steep sides. So sudden and violent had been the change of fortune, that the dwellers in the older cabins had not had time to change with it, but still kept their old habits, customs, and even their old clothes. The flour pan in which their daily bread was mixed stood on the rude table side by side with the "prospecting pans," half full of gold washed up from their morning's work; the front windows of the newer tenements looked upon the one single thoroughfare, but the back-door opened upon the uncleared wilderness, still haunted by the

mis-shapen bulk of bear or the nightly gliding of catamount.

Neither had success as yet affected their boyish simplicity and the frankness of old frontier habits; they played with their newfound riches with the naïve delight of children, and rehearsed their glowing future with the importance and triviality of schoolboys.

"I've bin kalklatin'," said Dick Mattingly, leaning on his long-handled shovel with lazy gravity, "that when I go to Rome this winter, I'll get one o' them marble sharps to chisel me a statoo o' some kind to set up on the spot where we made our big strike. Suthin' to remember it by, you know."

"What kind o' statoo—Washington or Webster?" asked one of the Kearney brothers, without looking up from his work.

"No—I reckon one o' them fancy groups—one o' them Latin goddesses that Fairfax is always gassin' about, sorter leadin', directin', and bossin' us where to dig."

"You'd make a healthy-lookin' figger in a group," responded Kearney, critically regarding an enormous patch in Mattingly's trousers. "Why don't you have a fountain instead?"

"Where'll you get the water?" demanded the first speaker, in return. "You know there ain't enough in the North Fork to do a week's washing for the camp—to say nothin' of its colour."

"Leave that to me," said Kearney, with self-possession. "When I've built that there reservoir on Devil's Spur, and bring the water over the ridge from Union Ditch, there'll be enough to spare for that."

"Better mix it up, I reckon,—have suthin' half statoo, half fountain," interposed the elder Mattingly, better known as "Maryland Joe," "and set it up afore the Town Hall and Free Library I'm kalklatin' to give. Do *that*, and you can count on me."

After some further discussion, it was gravely settled that Kearney should furnish water brought from the Union Ditch, twenty miles away, at a cost of two hundred thousand dollars, to feed a memorial fountain erected by Mattingly, worth a hundred thousand dollars, as a crowning finish to public buildings contributed by Maryland Joe, to the extent of half-a-million more. The disposition of these vast sums by gentlemen wearing patched breeches, awakened no sense of the ludicrous, nor did any doubt, reservation, or contingency enter into the plans of the charming enthusiasts themselves. The foundation of their airy castles lay already before them in the strip of rich alluvium on the river bank, where the North Fork, sharply curving round the base of Devil's Spur, had for centuries swept the detritus of gulch and canon. They had barely crossed the threshold of this treasure-house, to find

themselves rich men; what possibilities of affluence might be theirs when they had fully exploited their possessions? So confident were they of that ultimate prospect, that the wealth already thus obtained was religiously expended in engines and machinery for the boring of wells and the conveyance of that precious water which the exhausted river had long since ceased to yield. It seemed as if the gold they had taken out was by some ironical compensation gradually making its way back to the soil again through ditch and flume and reservoir.

Such was the position of affairs at Devil's Ford on the 13th of August 1860. It was noon of a hot day. Whatever movement there was in the stifling air was seen rather than felt in a tremulous, quivering upward moving dust along the flank of the mountain, through which the spires of the pines were faintly visible. There was no water in the bared and burning bars of the river to reflect the vertical sun, but under its direct rays one or two tinned roofs and corrugated zinc cabins struck fire, a few canvas tents became dazzling to the eye, and the white wooded coral of the stage office and hotel insupportable. For two hours no one ventured in the glare of the open, or even to cross the narrow, unshadowed street, whose dull red dust seemed to glow between the lines of straggling houses. The heated shells of these green unseasoned tenements gave out a pungent odour of scorching wood and

resin. The usual hurried, feverish toil in the claim was suspended; the pick and shovel were left sticking in the richest "pay gravel;" the toiling millionaires themselves, ragged, dirty, and perspiring, lay panting under the nearest shade, where their pipes went out listlessly, and conversation sank to monosyllables.

"There's Fairfax," said Dick Mattingly, at last, with a lazy effort. His face was turned to the hillside, where a man had just emerged from the woods, and was halting irresolutely before the glaring expanse of upheaved gravel and glistening boulders that stretched between him and the shaded group. "He's going to make a break for it," he added, as the stranger, throwing his linen coat over his head, suddenly started into an Indian trot through the pelting sunbeams toward them. This strange act was perfectly understood by the group, who knew that in that intensely dry heat, the danger of exposure was lessened by active exercise, and the profuse perspiration that followed it. In another moment the stranger had reached their side, dripping as if rained upon, mopping his damp curls and handsome bearded face with his linen coat, as he threw himself, pantingly, on the ground.

"I struck out over here first, boys, to give you a little warning," he said, as soon as he had gained breath. "That engineer will be down here to take charge as soon as the six o'clock stage comes in.

He's an oldish chap, has got a family of two daughters, and—I—am—d—d if he is not bringing them down here with him."

"Oh, go long!" exclaimed the five men in one voice, raising themselves on their hands and elbows, and glaring at the speaker.

"Fact, boys? Soon as I found it out I just waltzed into that Jew shop at the Crossing and bought up all the clothes that would be likely to suit you fellows, before anybody else got a show. I reckon I cleared out the shop. The duds are a little mixed in style, but I reckon they're clean and whole, and a man might face a lady in 'em. I left them round at the old Buckeye Spring, where they're handy without attracting attention. You boys can go there for a general wash-up, rig yourselves up without saying anything, and then meander back careless and easy in your store clothes, just as the stage is coming in, *Sabe!*"

"Why didn't you let us know earlier?" asked Mattingly aggrievedly; "you've been back here at least an hour."

"I've been getting some place ready for *them*," returned the new comer. "We might have managed to put the man somewhere, if he'd been alone, but these women want family accommodation. There was nothing left for me to do but to buy up Thompson's saloon."

"No?" interrupted his audience, half in incredulity, half in protestation.

"Fact! You boys will have to take your drinks under canvas again, I reckon! But I made Thompson let those gold-framed mirrors that used to stand behind the bar go into the bargain, and they sort of furnish the room. You know the saloon is one of them patent houses you can take to pieces, and I've been reckoning you boys will have to pitch in and help me to take the whole shanty over to the laurel bushes, and put it up agin Kearneys' cabin."

"What's all that?" said the younger Kearney, with an odd mingling of astonishment and bashful gratification.

"Yes, I reckon yours is the cleanest house, because it's the newest, so you'll just step out and let us knock in one of the gables, and clap it on to the saloon and make *one* house of it, don't you see? There'll be two rooms, one for the girls, and the other for the old man."

The astonishment and bewilderment of the party had gradually given way to a boyish and impatient interest.

"Hadn't we better do the job at once?" suggested Dick Mattingly.

"Or throw ourselves into those new clothes, so as to be ready," added the younger Kearney, looking down at his ragged trousers. "I say, Fairfax—what are the girls like, eh?"

All the others had been dying to ask the question, yet one and all laughed at the conscious manner and blushing cheek of the questioner.

"You'll find out quick enough," returned Fairfax, whose curt carelessness did not, however, prevent a slight increase of colour on his own cheek. "We'd better get that job off our hands before doing anything else. So, if you're ready, boys, we'll just waltz down to Thompson's and pack up the shanty. He's out of it by this time, I reckon. You might as well be perspiring to some purpose over there, as gaspin' under this tree. We won't go back to work this afternoon, but knock off now, and call it half a day. Come! Hump yourselves, gentleman. Are you ready? One, two, three, and away!"

In another instant the tree was deserted; the figures of the five millionaires of Devil's Ford, crossing the fierce glare of the open space, with boyish alacrity, glistened in the sunlight and then disappeared in the nearest fringe of thickets.

CHAPTER II.

Six hours later, when the shadow of Devil's Spur had crossed the river, and spread a slight coolness over the flat beyond, the Pioneer coach, leaving the summit, began also to bathe its heated bulk in the long shadows of the descent. Conspicuous among the dusty passengers, the two pretty and youthful faces of the daughters of Philip Carr, mining superintendent and engineer, looked from the windows with no little anxiety towards their future home in the straggling settlement below, that occasionally came in view at the turns of the long zig-zagging road. A slight look of comical disappointment passed between them as they gazed upon the sterile flat, dotted with unsightly excrescences that stood equally for cabins or mounds of stone and gravel. It was so feeble and inconsistent a culmination to the beautiful scenery they had passed through, so hopeless and imbecile a conclusion to the preparation of that long, picturesque journey with its glimpses of sylvan and pastoral glades and canons, that, as the coach swept down the last incline, and the remorseless monotony of the dead level spread out before them, furrowed by ditches

and indented by pits, under cover of shielding their cheeks from the impalpable dust that rose beneath their plunging wheels, they buried their faces in their handkerchiefs, to hide a few half hysterical tears. Happily, their father, completely absorbed in a practical, scientific, and approving contemplation of the topography and material resources of the scene of his future labours, had no time to notice their defection. It was not until the stage drew up before a rambling tenement bearing the inscription, "Hotel and Stage Office," that he became fully aware of it.

"We can't stop *here*, papa," said Christie Carr decidedly, with a shake of her pretty head. "You can't expect that."

Mr. Carr looked up at the building; it was half grocery, half saloon. Whatever other accommodation it contained must have been hidden in the rear, as the flat roof above was almost level with the raftered ceiling of the shop.

"Certainly," he replied hurriedly; "we'll see to that in a moment. I dare say it's all right. I told Fairfax we were coming. Somebody ought to be here."

"But they're not," said Jessie Carr indignantly; "and the few that were here scampered off like rabbits to their burrows as soon as they saw us get down."

It was true. The little group of loungers be-

fore the building had suddenly disappeared. There was the flash of a red shirt vanishing in an adjacent doorway; the fading apparition of a pair of high boots and blue overalls in another; the abrupt withdrawal of a curly blonde head from a sashless window over the way. Even the saloon was deserted, although a back-door in the dim recess seemed to creak mysteriously. The stage-coach, with the other passengers, had already rattled away.

"I certainly think Fairfax understood that I—" began Mr. Carr.

He was interrupted by the pressure of Christie's fingers on his arm, and a subdued exclamation from Jessie, who was staring down the street.

"What are they?" she whispered, in her sister's ear. "Nigger minstrels, a circus, or what?"

The five millionaires of Devil's Ford had just turned the corner of the straggling street, and were approaching in single file. One glance was sufficient to show that they had already availed themselves of the new clothing bought by Fairfax, had washed, and one or two had shaved. But the result was startling.

Through some fortunate coincidence in size, Dick Mattingly was the only one who had achieved an entire suit. But it was of funereal black cloth, and although relieved at one extremity by a pair of high riding boots, in which his too short trousers were tucked, and at the other by a tall white hat,

and cravat of aggressive yellow, the effect was depressing. In agreeable contrast, his brother, Maryland Joe, was attired in a thin fawn-coloured summer overcoat, lightly worn open, so as to show the unstarched bosom of a white embroidered shirt, and a pair of nankeen trousers and pumps. The Kearney brothers had divided a suit between them, the elder wearing a tightly-fitting, single-breasted blue frock-coat, and a pair of pink striped cotton trousers, while the younger candidly displayed the trousers of his brother's suit, as a harmonious change to a shining black alpaca coat and crimson neckerchief. Fairfax, who brought up the rear, had, with characteristic unselfishness, contented himself with a French workman's blue blouse and a pair of white duck trousers. Had they shown the least consciousness of their finery, or of its absurdity, they would have seemed despicable. But only one expression beamed on the five sunburnt and shining faces—a look of unaffected boyish gratification and unrestricted welcome.

They halted before Mr. Carr and his daughters, simultaneously removed their various and remarkable head coverings, and waited until Fairfax advanced and severally presented them. Jessie Carr's half-frightened smile took refuge in the trembling shadows of her dark lashes; Christie Carr stiffened slightly, and looked straight before her.

“We reckoned—that is—we intended to meet

you and the young ladies at the grade," said Fairfax, reddening a little as he endeavoured to conceal his too-ready slang, "and save you from trapesing—from dragging yourselves up grade again to your house."

"Then there *is* a house?" said Jessie, with an alarmingly frank laugh of relief, that was, however, as frankly reflected in the boyishly appreciative eyes of the young men.

"Such as it is," responded Fairfax, with a shade of anxiety, as he glanced at the fresh and pretty costumes of the young women, and dubiously regarded the two Saratoga trunks resting hopelessly on the verandah. "I'm afraid it isn't much, for what you're accustomed to. But," he added more cheerfully, "it will do for a day or two, and perhaps you'll give us the pleasure of showing you the way there now."

The procession was quickly formed. Mr. Carr, alive only to the actual business that had brought him there, at once took possession of Fairfax, and began to disclose his plans for the working of the mine, occasionally halting to look at the work already done in the ditches, and to examine the field of his future operations. Fairfax, not displeased at being thus relieved of a lighter attendance on Mr. Carr's daughters, nevertheless from time to time cast a paternal glance backwards upon their escorts, who had each seized a handle of the two trunks,

and were carrying them in couples at the young ladies' side. The occupation did not offer much freedom for easy gallantry, but no sign of discomfort or uneasiness was visible in the grateful faces of the young men. The necessity of changing hands at times with their burdens brought a corresponding change of cavalier at the lady's side, although it was observed that the younger Kearney, for the sake of continuing a conversation with Miss Jessie, kept his grasp of the handle nearest the young lady until his hand was nearly cut through, and his arm worn out by exhaustion.

"The only thing on wheels in the camp is a mule waggon, and the mules are packin' gravel from the river this afternoon," explained Dick Mattingly apologetically to Christie, "or we'd have toted—I mean carried—you and your baggage up to the shant—the—your house. Give us two weeks more, Miss Carr,—only two weeks to wash' up our work and realise, and we'll give you a pair of 2-40 steppers and a skeleton buggy to meet you at the top of the hill and drive you over to the cabin. Perhaps you'd prefer a regular carriage; some ladies do. And a nigger driver. But what's the use of planning anything? Afore that time comes we'll have run you up a house on the hill, and you shall pick out the spot. It wouldn't take long—unless you preferred brick. I suppose we could get brick over from La Grange if you cared for it, but it

would take longer. If you could put up for a time with something of stained glass and a mahogany verandah—?”

In spite of her cold indignation, and the fact that she could only understand a part of Mattingly's speech, Christie comprehended enough to make her lift her clear eyes to the speaker as she replied freezingly that she feared she would not trouble them long with her company.

“Oh, you'll get over that,” responded Mattingly, with an exasperated confidence that drove her nearly frantic from the manifest kindness of intent that made it impossible for her to resent it. “I felt that way myself at first. Things will look strange and unsociable for a while, until you get the hang of them. You'll naturally stamp round and cuss a little—” he stopped in conscious consternation.

With ready tact, and before Christie could reply, Maryland Joe had put down the trunk and changed hands with his brother.

“You mustn't mind Dick, or he'll go off and kill himself with shame,” he whispered laughingly in her ear. “He means all right, but he's picked up so much slang here he's about forgotten how to talk English, and it's nigh on to four years since he's met a young lady.”

Christie did not reply. Yet the laughter of her sister in advance with the Kearney brothers seemed

to make the reserve with which she tried to crush further familiarity only ridiculous.

"Do you know many operas, Miss Carr?"

She looked at the boyish, interested, sunburnt face so near to her own, and hesitated. After all, why should she add to her other real disappointments by taking this absurd creature seriously.

"In what way?" she returned, with a half smile.

"To play. On the piano of course. There isn't one nearer here than Sacramento; but I reckon we could get a small one by Thursday. You couldn't do anything on a banjo?" he added doubtfully; "Kearney's got one."

"I imagine it would be very difficult to carry a piano over those mountains," said Christie laughingly, to avoid the collateral of the banjo.

"We got a billiard-table over from Stockton," half bashfully interrupted Dick Mattingly, struggling from his end of the trunk to recover his composure, "and it had to be brought over in sections on the back of a mule, so I don't see why"—he stopped short again in confusion, at a sign from his brother, and then added, "I mean, of course, that a piano is a heap more delicate, and valuable, and all that sort of thing, but it's worth trying for."

"Fairfax was always saying he'd get one for himself, so I reckon it's possible," said Joe.

"Does he play?" asked Christie.

"You bet," said Joe, quite forgetting himself in his enthusiasm. "He can snatch Mozart and Beethoven baldheaded."

In the embarrassing silence that followed this speech the fringe of pine wood nearest the flat was reached. Here there was a rude "clearing," and beneath an enormous pine stood the two recently joined tenements. There was no attempt to conceal the point of junction between Kearney's cabin and the newly-transported saloon from the flat,—no architectural illusion of the palpable collusion of the two buildings, which seemed to be telescoped into each other. The front room or living room occupied the whole of Kearney's cabin. It contained, in addition to the necessary articles for housekeeping, a "bunk" or berth for Mr. Carr, so as to leave the second building entirely to the occupation of his daughters as bedroom and boudoir.

There was a half humorous, half apologetic exhibition of the rude utensils of the living room, and then the young men turned away as the two girls entered the open door of the second room. Neither Christie nor Jessie could for a moment understand the delicacy which kept these young men from accompanying them into the room they had but a few moments before decorated and arranged with their own hands, and it was not until they turned to thank their strange entertainers, that they found that they were gone.

The arrangement of this second room was rude and bizarre, but not without a singular originality and even tastefulness of conception. What had been the counter or "bar" of the saloon, gorgeous in white and gold, now sawn in two and divided, was set up on opposite sides of the room as separate dressing-tables, decorated with huge bunches of azalias, that hid the rough earthenware bowls, and gave each table the appearance of a vestal altar.

The huge gilt plate-glass mirror which had hung behind the bar, still occupied one side of the room, but its length was artfully divided by an enormous rosette of red, white, and blue muslin—one of the surviving "4th of July" decorations of Thompson's saloon. On either side of the door two pathetic-looking convent-like cots, covered with spotless sheeting, and heaped up in the middle, like a snow-covered grave, had attracted their attention. They were still staring at them when Mr. Carr anticipated their curiosity.

"I ought to tell you that the young men confided to me the fact that there was neither bed nor mattress to be had on the Ford. They have filled some flour sacks with clean dry moss from the woods and put half-a-dozen blankets on the top, and they hope you can get along until the messenger who starts to-night for La Grange can bring some bedding over."

Jessie flew with mischievous delight to satisfy

herself of the truth of this marvel. "It's so, Christie," she said laughingly, "three flour sacks apiece; but I'm jealous, yours are all marked '*superfine*' and mine '*middlings*.'"

Mr. Carr had remained uneasily watching Christie's shadowed face.

"What matters," she said drily, "the accommodation is all in keeping."

"It will be better in a day or two," he continued casting a longing look towards the door—the first refuge of masculine weakness in an impending domestic emergency. "I'll go and see what can be done," he said feebly, with a sidelong impulse towards the opening and freedom. "I've got to see Fairfax again to-night any way."

"One moment," father," said Christie, wearily. "Did you know anything of this place and these—these people—before you came?"

"Certainly—of course I did," he returned with the sudden testiness of disturbed abstraction. "What are you thinking of? I knew the geological strata and the—the report of Fairfax and his partners before I consented to take charge of the works. And I can tell you that there is a fortune here. I intend to make my own terms, and share in it."

"And not take a salary or some sum of money down?" said Christie, slowly removing her bonnet in the same resigned way.

"I am not a hired man, or a workman, Christie," said her father sharply. "You ought not to oblige me to remind you of that."

"But the hired men—the superintendent and his workmen—were the only ones who ever got anything out of your last experiment with Colonel Waters at La Grange, and—and we at least lived among civilised people there."

"These young men are not common people, Christie; even if they have forgotten the restraints of speech and manners, they're gentlemen."

"Who are willing to live like—like negroes."

"You can make them what you please."

Christie raised her eyes. There was a certain cynical ring in her father's voice that was unlike his usual hesitating abstraction. It both puzzled and pained her.

"I mean," he said hastily, "that you have the same opportunity to direct the lives of these young men into more regular disciplined channels, that I have to regulate and correct their foolish waste of industry and material here. It would at least beguile the time for you."

Fortunately for Mr. Carr's escape and Christie's uneasiness, Jessie, who had been examining the details of the living-room, broke in upon this conversation.

"I'm sure it will be as good as a perpetual picnic. George Kearney says we can have a cook-

ing stove under the tree outside at the back, and as there will be no rain for three months we can do the cooking there, and that will give us more room for—for the piano when it comes, and there's an old squaw to do the cleaning and washing-up any day—and—and—it will be real fun."

She stopped breathlessly with glowing cheeks and sparkling eyes—a charming picture of youth and trustfulness. Mr. Carr had seized the opportunity to escape. "Really now, Christie," said Jessie confidentially, when they were alone, and Christie had begun to unpack her trunk, and to mechanically put her things away, "they're not so bad."

"Who?" asked Christie.

"Why the Kearneys, and Mattinglys, and Fairfax and the lot, provided you don't look at their clothes. And think of it! they told me—for they tell one *everything* in the most alarming way—that those clothes were bought to please *us*. A scramble of things bought at La Grange, without reference to size or style. And to hear these creatures talk, why you'd think they were Astors or Rothschilds. Think of that little one with the curls—I don't believe he's over 17, for all his baby moustache—says he's going to build an assembly hall for us to give a dance in next month. And apologises the next breath to tell us that there isn't any milk to be had nearer than La Grange,

and we must do without it, and use syrup in our tea to-morrow."

"And where is all this wealth?" asked Christie, forcing herself to smile at her sister's animation.

"Under our very feet, my child, and all along the river. Why, what we thought was pure and simple mud is what they call 'gold bearing cement.'"

"I suppose that is why they don't brush their boots and trousers, it's so precious," returned Christie drily. "And have they ever translated this precious dirt into actual coin?"

"Bless you, yes. Why, that dirty little gutter, you know, that ran along the side of the road and followed us down the hill all the way here, that cost them—let me see, yes, nearly sixty thousand dollars. And fancy! papa's just condemned it—says it won't do; and they've got to build another."

An impatient sigh from Christie drew Jessie's attention to her troubled eyebrows. "Don't worry about our disappointments, dear. It isn't so very great. I daresay we'll be able to get along here in some way, until papa is rich again. You know they intend to make him share with them."

"It strikes me that he is sharing with them already," said Christie, glancing bitterly round the cabin, "sharing everything—ourselves, our lives, our tastes."

"Ye-e-s!" said Jessie, with vaguely hesitating assent. "Yes, even these," she showed two dice in

the palm of her little hand. "I found 'em in the drawer of our dressing-table."

"Throw them away," said Christie impatiently.

But Jessie's small fingers closed over the dice. "I'll give them to the little Kearney. I dare say they were the poor boy's playthings."

The appearance of these relics of wild dissipation, however, had lifted Christie out of her sublime resignation. "For Heaven's sake, Jessie," she said, "look around and see if there is anything more."

To make sure they each began to scrimp; the broken-spirited Christie exhibiting both alacrity and penetration in searching obscure corners. In the dining-room, behind the dresser, three or four books were discovered; an odd volume of Thackeray, another of Dickens, a memorandum book or diary. "This seems to be Latin," said Jessie, fishing out a smaller book, "I can't read it."

"It's just as well you shouldn't," said Christie shortly, whose ideas of a general classical impropriety had been gathered from the pages of Lemprière's dictionary. "Put it back directly."

Jessie returned certain odes of Master H. Flaccus to the corner, and uttered an exclamation. "Oh, Christie! here are some letters tied up with a ribbon."

They were two or three prettily written letters, exhaling a faint odour of refinement and of the pressed flowers that peeped from between the loose

leaves. "I see, 'my darling Fairfax;' it's from some woman."

"I don't think much of her, whosoever she is," said Christie, tossing the intact packet back into the corner.

"Nor I," echoed Jessie.

Nevertheless, by some feminine inconsistency, evidently the circumstance did make them think more of *him*, for a minute later, when they had re-entered their own room, Christie remarked "the idea of petting a man by his family name. Think of mamma ever having called papa 'darling Carr.'"

"Oh, but his family name isn't Fairfax," said Jessie hastily, "that's his *first* name, his Christian name. I forget what's his other name, but nobody ever calls him by it."

"Do you mean," said Christie, with glistening eyes and awful deliberation, "do you mean to say that we're expected to fall in with this insufferable familiarity? I suppose they'll be calling *us* by our Christian names next."

"Oh, but they do!" said Jessie mischievously.

"What!"

"They call me Miss Jessie: and Kearney, the little one, asked me "if Christie played."

"And what did you say?"

"I said that you did," answered Jessie, with an affectation of cherubic simplicity. "You do, dear; don't you? . . . There, don't get angry, darling; I

couldn't flare up all of a sudden in the face of that poor little creature; he looked so absurd—and so—so honest.”

Christie turned away, relapsing into her old resigned manner, and assuming her household duties in a quiet, temporising way that was, however, without hope or expectation.

Mr. Carr, who had dined with his friends under the excuse of not adding to the awkwardness of the first day's housekeeping, returned late at night with a mass of papers and drawings, into which he afterwards withdrew, but not until he had delivered himself of a mysterious package entrusted to him by the young men for his daughters. It contained a contribution to their board in the shape of a silver spoon and battered silver mug, which Jessie chose to facetiously consider as an affecting reminiscence of the youthful Kearney's christening days—which it probably was.

The young girls retired early to their white snow-drifts, Jessie not without some hilarious struggles with hers, in which she was, however, quickly surprised by the deep and refreshing sleep of youth; Christie to lie awake and listen to the night wind that had changed from the first cool whispers of sunset to the sturdy breath of the mountain. At times the frail house shook and trembled. Wandering gusts laden with the deep resinous odours of the wood found their way through the imperfect jointure of

the two cabins, swept her cheek and even stirred her long wide open lashes. A broken spray of pine needles rustled along the roof, or a pine cone dropped with a quick reverberating tap-tap that for an instant startled her. Lying thus, wide awake, she fell into a dreamy reminiscence of the past, hearing snatches of old melody in the moving pines, fragments of sentences, old words and familiar epithets in the murmuring wind at her ear, and even the faint breath of long-forgotten kisses on her cheek. She remembered her mother—a pallid creature who had slowly faded out of one of her father's vague speculations in a vaguer speculation of her own, beyond his ken—whose place she had promised to take at her father's side. The words, "Watch over him, Christie, he needs a woman's care," again echoed in her ears, as if borne on the night wind from the lonely grave in the lonelier cemetery by the distant sea. She had devoted herself to him with some little sacrifices of self, only remembered now for their uselessness in saving her father the disappointment that sprang from his sanguine and one-ideal temperament. She thought of him lying asleep in the other room, ready on the morrow to devote those fateful qualities to the new enterprise, that with equally fateful disposition she believed would end in failure. It did not occur to her that the doubts of her own practical nature were almost as dangerous and illogical as his enthusiasm,

and that for that reason she was fast losing what little influence she possessed over him. With the example of her mother's weakness before her eyes she had become an unsparing and distrustful critic, with the sole effect of awakening his distrust and withdrawing his confidence from her. He was beginning to deceive her as he had never deceived her mother. Even Jessie knew more of this last enterprise than she did herself.

All that did not tend to decrease her utter restlessness. It was already past midnight when she noticed that the wind had again abated. The mountain breeze had by this time possessed the stifling valleys and heated bars of the river in its strong, cold embraces; the equilibrium of Nature was restored, and a shadowy mist came from the river. A stillness, more oppressive and intolerable than the previous commotion, began to pervade the house and the surrounding woods. She could hear the regular breathing of the sleepers, she even fancied she could detect the faint pulses of the more distant life in the settlement. The far off barking of a dog, a last shout, the indistinct murmur of some nearer watercourse—mere phantoms of sound—made the silence more irritating. With a sudden resolution she arose, dressed herself quietly and completely, threw a heavy cloak over her head and shoulders, and opened the door between the living-room and her own. Her father was sleeping soundly

in his bunk in the corner. She passed noiselessly through the room, opened the lightly fastened door, and stepped out into the night.

In the irritation and disgust of her walk hither, she had never noticed the situation of the cabin as it nestled on the slope at the fringe of the woods; in the preoccupation of her disappointment, and the mechanical putting away of her things, she had never looked once from the window of her room or glanced backward out of the door that she had entered. The view before her was a revelation—a reproach, a surprise that took away her breath. Over her shoulders the newly risen moon poured a flood of silvery light, stretching from her feet across the shining bars of the river to the opposite bank, and on up to the very crest of the Devil's Spur—no longer a huge bulk of crushing shadow, but the steady exaltation of plateau, spur and terrace clothed with replete and unutterable beauty. In this magical light that beauty seemed to be sustained and carried along by the river winding at its base, lifted again to the broad shoulder of the mountain and lost only in the distant vista of death-like over-crowning snow. Behind and above where she stood the towering woods seemed to be waiting with opened ranks to absorb her with the little cabin she had quitted dwarfed into insignificance in the vast prospect; but nowhere was there another sign or indication of human life and habitation. She

looked in vain for the settlement, for the rugged ditches, the scattered cabins, and the unsightly heaps of gravel. In the glamour of the moonlight they had vanished; a veil of silver grey vapour touched here and there with ebony shadows masked its site. A black strip beyond was the river bank. All else was changed. With a sudden sense of awe and loneliness she turned to the cabin and its sleeping inmates—all that seemed left to her in the vast and stupendous domination of rock and wood and sky.

But in another moment the loneliness passed. A new and delicious sense of an infinite hospitality and friendliness in their silent presence began to possess her. This same slighted, forgotten, uncomprehended, but still foolish and forgiving Nature seemed to be bending over her frightened and listening ear with vague but thrilling murmurings of freedom and independence. She felt her heart expand with its wholesome breath, her soul fill with its sustaining truth. She felt——

What was that?

An unmistakable outburst of a drunken song at the foot of the slope:

“O, my name it is Johnny from Pike,
I'm h-ll on a spree or a strike . . .”

She stopped as crimson with shame and indignation, as if the viewless singer had risen before her.

“I know when to bet,
And to get up and get——”

“Hush! D—m it all. Don't you hear?”

There was the sound of hurried whispers, a “No” and “Yes,” and then a dead silence.

Christie crept nearer to the edge of the slope in the shadow of a buckeye. In the clearer view she could distinguish a staggering figure in the trail below who had evidently been stopped by two other expostulating shadows that were approaching from the shelter of a tree.

“Sho!—didn't know!”

The staggering figure endeavoured to straighten itself and then slouched away in the direction of the settlement. The two mysterious shadows retreated again to the tree, and were lost in its deeper shadow. Christie darted back to the cabin and softly re-entered her room.

“I thought I heard a noise that woke me, and I missed you,” said Jessie, rubbing her eyes. Did you see anything?”

“No,” said Christie, beginning to undress.

“You weren't frightened, dear?”

“Not in the least,” said Christie, with a strange little laugh. “Go to sleep.”

CHAPTER III.

THE five impulsive millionaires of Devil's Ford fulfilled not a few of their most extravagant promises. In less than six weeks Mr. Carr and his daughters were installed in a new house, built near the site of the double cabin, which was again transferred to the settlement, in order to give greater seclusion to the fair guests. It was a long, roomy, one-storied villa, with a not unpicturesque combination of deep verandah and trellis work, which relieved the flat monotony of the interior, and the barrenness of the freshly-cleared ground. An upright piano, brought from Sacramento, occupied the corner of the parlour. A suite of gorgeous furniture, whose pronounced and extravagant glories the young girls instinctively hid under home-made linen covers, had also been spoils from afar. Elsewhere the house was filled with ornaments and decorations that in their incongruity forcibly recalled the gilded plate-glass mirrors of the bedroom in the old cabin. In the hasty furnishing of this Aladdin's palace, the slaves of the ring had evidently seized upon anything that would add to its glory, without reference always to fitness.

"I wish it didn't look so cussedly like a robber's cave," said George Kearney, when they were taking a quiet preliminary survey of the unclassified treasures, before the Carrs took possession.

"Or a gambling hell," said his brother reflectively.

"It's about the same thing, I reckon," said Dick Mattingly, who was supposed, in his fiery youth, to have encountered the similarity.

Nevertheless, the two girls managed to bestow the heterogeneous collection with tasteful adaptation to their needs. A crystal chandelier, which had once lent a fascinating illusion to the game of *Monte*, hung unlighted in the broad hall, where a few other *bizarre* and public articles were relegated. A long red sofa or bench, which had done duty beside a billiard-table, found a place here also. Indeed, it is to be feared that some of the more rustic and bashful youths of Devil's Ford, who had felt it incumbent upon them to pay their respects to the new-comers, were more at ease in this vestibule than in the arcana beyond, whose glories they could see through the open door. To others, it represented a recognised state of probation before their *re-entrée* into civilisation again. "I reckon, if you don't mind, miss," said the spokesman of one party, "ez this is our first call, we'll sorter hang out in the hall yer, until you're used to us." On another occasion, one Whiskey Dick, impelled by a sense of

duty, paid a visit to the new house and its fair occupants, in a fashion frankly recounted by him afterwards at the bar of the Tecumseh Saloon. "You see, boys, I dropped in there the other night, when some of you fellows was doin' the high-toned 'thankee marm' business in the parlour; I just came to anchor in the corner of the sofy in the hall, without lettin' on to say that I was there, and took up a Webster's dictionary that was on the table and laid it open—keerless like, on my knees, ez if I was sorter consultin' it—and kinder dozed off there, listenin' to you fellows gassin' with the young ladies, and that yer Miss Christie just snakin' music outer that pianner, and I reckon I fell asleep. Anyhow, I was there nigh on to two hours. It's mighty soothin' them fashionable calls; sorter knocks the old camp dust outer a fellow and sets him up again."

It would have been well if the new life of the Devil's Ford had shown no other irregularity than the harmless eccentricities of its original locators. But the news of its sudden fortune, magnified by report, began presently to flood the settlement with another class of adventurers. A tide of waifs, strays, and malcontents of old camps along the river began to set towards Devil's Ford, in very much the same fashion as the *débris*, drift, and alluvium had been carried down in bygone days and cast upon its banks. A few immigrant waggons,

diverted from the highways of travel by the fame of the new diggings, halted upon the slopes of Devil's Spur, and on the arid flats of the Ford, and disgorged their sallow freight of alkali-poisoned, prematurely-aged women and children, and maimed and fever-stricken men. Against this rude form of domesticity were opposed the chromo-tinted dresses and extravagant complexions of a few single unattended women—happily seen more often at night, and behind gilded bars, than in the garish light of day—and an equal number of pale-faced, dark-moustached, well-dressed, and suspiciously idle men. A dozen rivals of Thompson's Saloon had sprung up along the narrow main street. There were two new hotels—one a "Temperance House," whose ascetic quality was confined only to the abnegation of whisky. A rival stage office, and a small one-storied building from which the "Sierran Banner" fluttered weekly, for "ten dollars a year, in advance." Insufferable in the glare of a Sabbath sun, bleak, windy, and flaring in the gloom of a Sabbath night, and hopelessly depressing on all days of the week, the first Presbyterian Church lifted its blunt steeple from the barrenest area of the flats, and was hideous! The civic improvements so enthusiastically contemplated by the five millionaires in the earlier pages of this veracious chronicle—the fountain, reservoir, town-hall, and free library—had not yet been erected. Their sites

had been anticipated by more urgent buildings and mining works, unfortunately not considered in the sanguine dreams of the enthusiasts, and, more significant still, their cost and expense had been also anticipated by the enormous outlay of their earnings in the work upon Devil's Ditch.

Nevertheless, the liberal fulfilment of their promise in the new house in the suburbs blinded the young girls' eyes to their shortcomings in the town. Their own remoteness and elevation above its feverish life kept them from the knowledge of much that was strange, and perhaps disturbing to their equanimity. As they did not mix with the immigrant women—Miss Jessie's good-natured intrusion into one of their half-nomadic camps one day having been met with rudeness and suspicion—they gradually fell into the way of trusting the responsibility of new acquaintances to the hands of their original hosts, and of consulting them in the matter of local recreation. It thus occurred that one day the two girls on their way to the main street for an hour's shopping at the Ville de Paris and Variety Store were stopped by Dick Mattingly a few yards from their house, with the remark that as the county election was then in progress, it would be advisable for them to defer their intention for a few hours. As he did not deem it necessary to add that two citizens, in the exercise of a freeman's franchise, had been supplementing their ballots with bullets,

in front of an admiring crowd, they knew nothing of the accident that removed from Devil's Ford an entertaining stranger, who had only the night before partaken of their hospitality.

A week or two later, returning one morning from a stroll in the forest, Christie, and Jessie were waylaid by George Kearney and Fairfax, and under pretext of being shown a new and romantic trail, were diverted from the regular path. This enabled Mattingly and Maryland Joe to cut down the body of a man hung by the Vigilance Committee a few hours before on the regular trail, and to remonstrate with the committee on the incompatibility of such exhibitions with a maidenly worship of nature.

"With the whole county to hang a man in," expostulated Joe, "you might keep clear of Carr's woods."

It is needless to add that the young girls never knew of this act of violence, or the delicacy that kept them in ignorance of it. Mr. Carr was too absorbed in business to give heed to what he looked upon as a convulsion of society as natural as a geological upheaval, and too prudent to provoke the criticism of his daughters by comment in their presence.

An equally unexpected confidence, however, took its place. Mr. Carr having finished his coffee one morning, lingered a moment over his perfunc-

tory paternal embraces, with the awkwardness of a preoccupied man endeavouring by the assumption of a lighter interest to veil another abstraction.

"And what are we doing to-day, Christie?" he asked, as Jessie left the dining-room.

"Oh, pretty much the usual thing—nothing in particular. If George Kearney gets the horses from the summit, we're going to ride over to Indian Spring to picnic. Fairfax—Mr. Munroe—I always forget that man's real name in this dreadful familiar country—well, he's coming to escort us, and take me, I suppose—that is, if Kearney takes Jessie."

"A very nice arrangement," returned her father, with a slight nervous contraction of the corners of his mouth and eyelids to indicate mischievousness. "I've no doubt they'll both be here. You know they usually are—ha! ha! And what about the two Mattinglys and Philip Kearney, eh?" he continued; "won't they be jealous?"

"It isn't their turn," said Christie carelessly; "besides, they'll probably be there."

"And I suppose they're beginning to be resigned," said Carr, smiling.

"What on earth are you talking of, father?"

She turned her clear brown eyes upon him, and was regarding him with such manifest unconscious-

ness of the drift of his speech, and, withal, a little vague impatience of his archness, that Mr. Carr was feebly alarmed. It had the effect of banishing his assumed playfulness, which made his serious explanation the more irritating.

"Well, I rather thought that—that young Kearney was paying considerable attention to—to—to Jessie," replied her father, with hesitating gravity.

"What! that boy!"

"Young Kearney is one of the original locators, and an equal partner in the mine. A very enterprising young fellow. In fact, much more advanced and bolder in his conceptions than the others. I find no difficulty with him."

At another time Christie would have questioned the convincing quality of this proof, but she was too much shocked at her father's first suggestion, to think of anything else.

"You don't mean to say, father, that you are talking seriously of these men—your friends—whom we see every day—and our only company."

"No, no!" said Mr. Carr hastily; "you misunderstand. I don't suppose that Jessie or you—"

"Or *me!* am *I* included?"

"You don't let me speak, Christie. I mean, I am not talking seriously," continued Mr. Carr, with his most serious aspect, "of you and Jessie in this matter; but it may be a serious thing to these young

men to be thrown continually in the company of two attractive girls."

"I understand—you mean that we should not see so much of them," said Christie, with a frank expression of relief so genuine as to utterly discompose her father. "Perhaps you are right, though I fail to discover anything serious in the attentions of young Kearney to Jessie—or—whoever it may be—to me. But it will be very easy to remedy it, and see less of them. Indeed we might begin to-day with some excuse."

"Yes—certainly. Of course!" said Mr. Carr, fully convinced of his utter failure, but like most weak creatures, consoling himself with the reflection that he had not shown his hand or committed himself. "Yes; but it would perhaps be just as well for the present to let things go on as they were. We'll talk of it again—I'm in a hurry now," and edging himself through the door, he slipped away.

"What do you think is father's last idea?" said Christie, with, I fear, a slight lack of reverence in her tone, as her sister re-entered the room. "He thinks George Kearney is paying you too much attention."

"No!" said Jessie, replying to her sister's half interrogative, half amused glance with a frank unconscious smile.

"Yes, and he says that Fairfax—I think it's Fairfax—is equally fascinated with *me*."

Jessie's brow slightly contracted as she looked curiously at her sister.

"Of all things," she said, "I wonder if any one has put that idea into his dear old head. He couldn't have thought it himself."

"I don't know," said Christie musingly; "but perhaps it's just as well if we kept a little more to ourselves for a while."

"Did father say so?" said Jessie quickly.

"No, but that is evidently what he meant."

"Ye-es," said Jessie slowly, "unless—"

"Unless what?" said Christie sharply. "Jessie, you don't for a moment mean to say that you could possibly conceive of anything else?"

"I mean to say," said Jessie, stealing her arm around her sister's waist demurely, "that you are perfectly right. We'll keep away from these fascinating Devil's Forders, and particularly the youngest Kearney. I believe there has been some ill-natured gossip. I remember that the other day when we passed the shanty of that Pike County family on the slope, there were three women at the door, and one of them said something that made poor little Kearney turn white and pink alternately, and dance with suppressed rage. I suppose the old lady—M'Corkle, that's her name—would like to have a share of our cavaliers for her Euphemy and Mamie.

I daresay it's only right; I would lend them the cherub occasionally, and you might let them have Mr. Munroe twice a week."

She laughed, but her eyes sought her sister's with a certain watchfulness of expression.

Christie shrugged her shoulders with a suggestion of disgust.

"Don't joke. We ought to have thought of all this before."

"But when we first knew them, in the dear old cabin, there wasn't any other woman and nobody to gossip, and that's what made it so nice. I don't think so very much of civilisation, do you?" said the young lady pertly.

Christie did not reply. Perhaps she was thinking the same thing. It certainly had been very pleasant to enjoy the spontaneous and chivalrous homage of these men, with no further suggestion of recompense or responsibility than the permission to be worshipped; but beyond that she racked her brain in vain to recall any look or act that proclaimed the lover. These men, whom she had found so relapsed into barbarism, that they had forgotten the most ordinary forms of civilisation; these men, even in whose extravagant admiration there was a certain loss of self-respect, that as a woman she would never forgive; these men, who seemed to belong to another race—impossible! Yet it was so.

“What construction must they have put upon her father’s acceptance of their presents—of their company—of her freedom in their presence? No! they must have understood from the beginning that she and her sister had never looked upon them except as transient hosts and chance acquaintances. Any other idea was preposterous. And yet—”

It was the recurrence of this “yet” that alarmed her. For she remembered now that but for their slavish devotion they might claim to be her equal. According to her father’s account, they had come from homes as good as their own; they were certainly more than her equal in fortune; and her father had come to them as an employé, until they had taken him into partnership. If there had only been sentiment of any kind connected with any of them! But they were all alike, brave, unselfish, humorous—and often ridiculous. If anything, Dick Mattingly was funniest by nature, and made her laugh more. Maryland Joe, his brother, told better stories (sometimes of Dick), though not so good a mimic as the other Kearney, who had a fairly sympathetic voice in singing. They were all good-looking enough; perhaps they set store on that—men are so vain! And as for her own rejected suitor, Fairfax Munroe, except for a kind of grave and proper motherliness about his protecting manner, he absolutely was the most indistinctive of them all. He had once brought her some rare tea from the Chinese camp, and had

taught her how to make it; he had cautioned her against sitting under the trees at nightfall; he had once taken off his coat to wrap around her. Really if this were the only evidence of devotion that could be shown, she was safe!

"Well," said Jessie, "it amuses you, I see."

Christie checked the smile that had been dimpling the cheek nearest Jessie, and turned upon her the face of an elder sister.

"Tell me, have *you* noticed this extraordinary attention of Mr. Munroe to me?"

"Candidly?" asked Jessie, seating herself comfortably on the table sideways, and endeavouring to pull her skirt over her little feet. "Honest Injun?"

"Don't be idiotic, and, above all, don't be slangy! Of course, candidly."

"Well, no. I can't say that I have."

"Then," said Christie, "why, in the name of all that's preposterous, do they persist in pairing me off with the least interesting man of the lot?"

Jessie leaped from the table.

"Come now," she said, with a little nervous laugh, "he's not so bad as all that. You don't know him. But what does it matter now, as long as we're not going to see them any more?"

"They're coming here for the ride to-day," said Christie resignedly. "Father thought it better not to break it off at once."

"Father thought so!" echoed Jessie, stopping with her hand on the door.

"Yes; why do you ask?"

But Jessie had already left the room, and was singing in the hall.

CHAPTER IV.

THE afternoon did not, however, bring their expected visitors. It brought, instead, a brief note by the hands of Whiskey Dick from Fairfax, apologising for some business that kept him and George Kearney from accompanying the ladies. It added that the horses were at the disposal of themselves, and any escort they might select, if they would kindly give the message to Whiskey Dick.

The two girls looked at each other awkwardly; Jessie did not attempt to conceal a slight pout.

"It looks as if they were anticipating us," she said, with a half-forced smile. "I wonder, now, if there really has been any gossip? But, no! They wouldn't have stopped for that, unless—" she looked curiously at her sister.

"Unless what?" repeated Christie; "you are horribly mysterious this morning."

"Am I? It's nothing. But they're wanting an answer. Of course you'll decline."

"And intimate we only care for their company! No! We'll say we're sorry they can't come, and—"

accept their horses. We can do without an escort, we two."

"Capital!" said Jessie, clapping her hands. "We'll show them—"

"We'll show them nothing," interrupted Christie decidedly. "In our place there's only the one thing to do. Where is this Whiskey Dick?"

"In the parlour."

"The parlour!" echoed Christie. "Whiskey Dick? What—is he—"

"Yes; he's all right," said Jessie confidently; "he's been here before, but he stayed in the hall; he was so shy. I don't think you saw him."

"I should think not—Whiskey Dick!"

"Oh you can call him Mr. Hall, if you like," said Jessie, laughing. "His real name is Dick Hall. If you want to be funny, you can say Alky Hall, as the others do."

Christie's only reply to this levity was a look of superior resignation as she crossed the hall and entered the parlour.

Then ensued one of those surprising, mystifying, and utterly inexplicable changes that leave the masculine being so helpless in the hands of his feminine master. Before Christie opened the door her face underwent a rapid transformation; the gentle glow of a refined woman's welcome suddenly beamed in her interested eyes; the impulsive courtesy of an

expectant hostess eagerly seizing a long-looked-for opportunity broke in a smile upon her lips as she swept across the room, and stopped with her two white outstretched hands before Whiskey Dick.

It needed only the extravagant contrast presented by that gentleman to complete the tableau. Attired in a suit of shining black alpaca, the visitor had evidently prepared himself with some care for a possible interview. He was seated by the French window opening upon the verandah, as if to secure a retreat in case of an emergency. Scrupulously washed and shaven, some of the soap appeared to have lingered in his eyes and inflamed the lids, even while it lent a sleek and shining lustre, not unlike his coat, to his smooth black hair. Nevertheless, leaning back in his chair, he had allowed a large white handkerchief to depend gracefully from his fingers—a pose at once suggesting easy and elegant langour.

“How kind of you to give me an opportunity to make up for my misfortune when you last called. I was so sorry to have missed you. But was it entirely my fault? You were hurried, I think—you conversed with others in the hall—you—”

She stopped to assist him to pick up the handkerchief that had fallen, and the Panama hat that had rolled from his lap towards the window when he had started suddenly to his feet at the apparition of grace and beauty. As he still nervously re-

tained the two hands he had grasped, this would have been a difficult feat, even had he not endeavoured at the same moment by a backward furtive kick, to propel the hat out of the window, at which she laughingly broke from his grasp and flew to the rescue.

"Don't mind it, miss," he said hurriedly. "It is not worth your demeaning yourself to touch it, Leave it outside thar, miss. I wouldn't have toted it in, anyhow, if some of those high falutin' fellows hadn't allowed, the other night, ez it were the reg'lar thing to do; as if, miss, any gentleman kalkilated to ever put on his hat in the house afore a lady!"

But Christie had already possessed herself of the unlucky object, and had placed it upon the table. This compelled Whiskey Dick to rise again, and as an act of careless good breeding to drop his handkerchief in it. He then leaned one elbow upon the piano, and, crossing one foot over the other, remained standing in an attitude he remembered to have seen in the pages of an illustrated paper as portraying the hero in some drawing-room scene. It was easy and effective, but seemed to be more favourable to reverie than conversation. Indeed, he remembered that he had forgotten to consult the letterpress as to which it represented.

"I see you agree with me that politeness is quite a matter of intention," said Christie, "and not

of mere fashion and rules. Now, for instance," she continued, with a dazzling smile, "I suppose, according to the rules, I ought to give you a note to Mr. Munroe, accepting his offer. That is all that is required; but it seems so much nicer, don't you think, to tell it to *you* for *him*, and have the pleasure of your company and a little chat at the same time."

"That's it, that's just it, Miss Carr, you've hit it in the centre this time," said Whiskey Dick, now quite convinced that his attitude was not intended for eloquence, and shifting back to his own seat, hat and all, "that's tantamount to what I said to the boys just now. 'You want an excuse,' sez I, 'for not goin' out with the young ladies. So, accorden' to rules, you writes a letter allowin' buzziness and that sorter thing detains you. But wot's the facts? You're a gentleman, and as gentlemen, you and George comes to the opinion that you're rather playin' it for all it's worth in this yer house, you know—comin' here night and day, off and on, reg'lar sociable and fam'ly like, and makin' people talk about things they ain't any call to talk about, and what's a darned sight more—you *fellows* ain't got any right *yet* to allow 'em to talk about, d'ye see?'" He paused, out of breath.

It was Miss Christie's turn to move about. In changing her seat to the piano-stool, so as to be nearer her visitor, she brushed down some loose music, which Whiskey Dick hastened to pick up.

"Pray don't mind it," she said, "pray don't, really—let it be—" But Whiskey Dick, feeling himself on safe ground in this attention, persisted to the bitter end of a disintegrated and well-worn Trovatore. "So that is what Mr. Munroe said," she remarked quietly.

"Not just then, in course, but it's what's bin on his mind and in his talk for days off and on," returned Dick, with a knowing smile and a nod of mysterious confidence. "Bless your soul, Miss Carr, folks like you and me don't need to have them things explained. That's what I said to him, sez I. 'Don't send no note, but just go up there and hev it out fair and square, and say what you do mean.'" But they would hev the note, and I kalkilated to bring it. But when I set my eyes on you', and heard you express yourself as you did just now, I sez to myself, sez I, 'Dick, yer's a young lady and a fash'nable lady at that, ez don't go foolin' round on rules and etiketts'—excuse my freedom, Miss Carr—'and you and her,' sez I, 'kin just discuss this yer matter in a sociable, off-hand, fash'nable way.' They're a good lot o' boys, Miss Carr, a square lot—white men all of 'em; but they're a little soft and green, maybe, from livin' in these yer pine woods along o' the other sap. They just worship the ground you and your sister tread on—certain! of course! of course!" he added hurriedly, recognising Christie's half-conscious, deprecating

gesture with more exaggerated deprecation. "I understand. But what I want to say is that they'd be willin' to be that ground, and lie down and let you walk over them—so to speak, Miss Carr, so to speak—if it would keep the hem of your gown from gettin' soiled in the mud o' the camp. But it wouldn't do for them to make a reg'lar curderoy road o' themselves for the huol camp to trapse over, on the mere chance of your some time passin' that way, would it now?"

"Won't you let me offer you some refreshment, Mr. Hall?" said Christie, rising, with a slight colour. "I'm really ashamed of my forgetfulness again, but I'm afraid it's partly *your* fault for entertaining me to the exclusion of yourself. No, thank you, let me fetch it for you.

She turned to a handsome sideboard near the door, and presently faced him again with a decanter of whiskey and a glass in her hand, and a return of the bewitching smile she had worn on entering.

"But perhaps you don't take whiskey?" suggested the arch deceiver, with a sudden affected but pretty perplexity of eye, brow, and lips.

For the first time in his life Whiskey Dick hesitated between two forms of intoxication. But he was still nervous and uneasy; habit triumphed, and he took the whiskey. He, however, wiped his lips with a slight wave of his handkerchief, to sup-

port a certain easy elegance which he firmly believed relieved the act of any vulgar quality.

"Yes, ma'am," he continued, after an exhilarated pause. "Ez I said afore, this yer's a matter you and me kin discuss after the fashion o' society. My idea is that these yer boys should kinder let up on you and Miss Jessie for a while, and do a little more permiskus attention round the Ford. There's one or two families yer with grown-up galls ez oughter be squared; that is—the boys mighter put in a few fancy touches among them—kinder take 'em buggy riding—or to church—once in a while—just to take the pizen outer their tongues, and make a kind o' bluff to the parents, d'ye see? That would sorter divert their own minds; and even if it didn't, it would kinder get 'em accustomed agin to the old style and their own kind. I want to warn ye agin an idea that might occur to you in a giniral way. I don't say you hev the idea, but it's kind o' nat'ral you might be thinkin' of it some time, and I thought I'd warn you agin it."

"I think we understand each other too well to differ much, Mr. Hall," said Christie, still smiling; "but what is the idea?"

The delicate compliment to their confidential relations and the slight stimulus of liquor had tremulously exalted Whiskey Dick. Affecting to look cautiously out of the window and around the

room, he ventured to draw nearer the young woman with a half-paternal, half-timid familiarity.

"It might have occurred to you," he said, laying his hand lightly, holding his handkerchief as if to veil mere vulgar contact, on Christie's shoulder, "that it would be a good thing on *your* side to invite down some of your high-toned gentlemen friends from 'Frisco to visit you and escort you round. It seems quite nat'ral like, and I don't say it ain't, but—the boys wouldn't stand it."

In spite of her self-possession, Christie's eyes suddenly darkened, and she involuntarily drew herself up. But Whiskey Dick, guiltily attributing the movement to his own indiscreet gesture, said, "Excuse me, miss," recovered himself by lightly dusting her shoulder with his handkerchief, as if to remove the impression, and her smile returned.

"They wouldn't stand it," said Dick, "and there'd be some shooting! Not afore you, miss—not afore you, in course! But they'd adjourn to the woods some morning with them city folks, and hev it out with rifles at a hundred yards. Or, seein' ez they're city folks, the boys would do the square thing with pistols at twelve paces. They're good boys, as I said afore; but they're quick and tetchy—George, being the youngest, nat'rally is the tetchiest. You know how it is, Miss Carr; his pretty gal-like face and little moustaches haz cost him half-a-dozen scrimmages already. He's had a fight for every

hair that's growed in his moustache since he kem here."

"Say no more, Mr. Hall!" said Christie, rising and pressing her hands lightly on Dick's tremulous fingers. "If I ever had any such idea, I should abandon it now; you are quite right in this as in your other opinions. I shall never cease to be thankful to Mr. Munroe and Mr. Kearney that they entrusted this delicate matter to your hands."

"Well," said the gratified and reddening visitor, "it ain't perhaps the square thing to them or myself to say that they reckoned to have me discuss their delicate affairs for them, but——"

"I understand," interrupted Christie, "they simply gave you the letter as a friend. It was my good fortune to find you a sympathising and liberal man of the world." The delighted Dick, with conscious vanity beaming from every feature of his shining face, lightly waived the compliment aside with his handkerchief, as she continued, "But I am forgetting the message. We accept the horses. Of course we *could* do without an escort; but, forgive my speaking so frankly, are *you* engaged this afternoon?"

"Excuse me, miss, I don't take——" stammered Dick, scarcely believing his ears.

"Could you give us your company as an escort?" repeated Christie, with a smile.

Was he awake or dreaming, or was this some

trick of liquor in his often distorted fancy? He, Whiskey Dick! the butt of his friends, the chartered oracle of the bar-rooms, even in whose wretched vanity there was always the haunting suspicion that he was despised and scorned! he who had dared so much in speech, and achieved so little in fact! he, whose habitual weakness had even led him into the wildest indiscretion here; he—now offered a reward for that indiscretion! He, Whiskey Dick, the solicited escort of these two beautiful and peerless girls! What would they say at the Ford? What would his friends think? It would be all over the Ford the next day. His past would be vindicated, his future secured. He grew erect at the thought. It was almost in other voice, and with no trace of his previous exaggeration, that he said, "With pleasure."

"Then, if you will bring the horses at once, we shall be ready when you return."

In another instant he had vanished, as if afraid to trust the reality of his good fortune to the dangers of delay. At the end of half-an-hour he re-appeared, leading the two horses, himself mounted on a half-broken mustang. A pair of large, jingling silver spurs, and a stiff *sombrero*, borrowed with the mustang from some mysterious source, were donned to do honour to the occasion.

The young girls were not yet ready, but he was shown by the Chinese servant into the parlour

to wait for them. The decanter of whiskey and glasses were still invitingly there. He was hot, trembling, and flushed with triumph. He walked to the table and laid his hand on the decanter, when an odd thought flashed upon him. He would not drink this time. No, it should not be said that he, the selected escort of the *élite* of Devil's Ford, had to fill himself up with whiskey before they started. The boys might turn to each other in their astonishment, as he proudly passed with his fair companions, and say, "It's Whiskey Dick," but he'd be d——d if they should add, "and full as ever." No, sir! Nor when he was riding beside these real ladies, and leaning over them at some confidential moment, should they even know it from his breath! No Yet a thimbleful, taken straight—only a thimbleful, wouldn't be much, and might help to pull him together. He again reached his trembling hand for the decanter, hesitated, and then, turning his back upon it, resolutely walked to the open window. Almost at the same instant he found himself face to face with Christie on the verandah.

She looked into his bloodshot eyes, and cast a swift glance at the decanter.

"Won't you take something before you go?" she said sweetly.

"I—reckon—not, jest now," stammered Whiskey Dick, with an heroic effort.

"You're right," said Christie. "I see you are like me. It's too hot for anything fiery. Come with me."

She led him to the dining-room, and pouring out a glass of iced tea, handed it to him. Poor Dick was not prepared for this terrible culmination. Whiskey Dick and iced tea! But under pretence of seeing if it was properly flavoured, Christie raised it to her own lips.

"Try it, to please me."

He drained the goblet.

"Now then," said Christie gaily; "let's find Jessie, and be off!"

CHAPTER V.

WHATEVER might have been his other deficiencies as an escort, Whiskey Dick was a good horseman, and, in spite of his fractious brute, exhibited such skill and confidence as to at once satisfy the young girls of his value to them in the management of their own horses, to whom side-saddles were still an alarming novelty. Jessie, who had probably already learned from her sister the purport of Dick's confidences, had received him with equal cordiality and perhaps a more unqualified amusement; and now, when fairly lifted into the saddle by his tremulous but respectful hands, made a very charming picture of youthful and rosy satisfaction. And when Christie, more fascinating than ever in her riding-habit, took her place on the other side of Dick as they sallied from the gate, that gentleman felt his cup of happiness complete. His triumphal *entrée* into the world of civilisation and fashion was secure. He did not regret the untasted liquor; here was an experience in after years to lean his back against comfortably in bar-rooms, to entrance or defy mankind. He had even got so far as to formulate in fancy the sentence:—"I remember, gentlemen, that

one afternoon being on a *pasear* with two fash'nable young ladies," etc., etc.

At present, however, he was obliged to confine himself to the functions of an elegant guide and *cicerone*—when not engaged in "having it out" with his horse. Their way lay along the slope, crossing the highroad at right angles, to reach the deeper woods beyond. Dick would have lingered on the highway—ostensibly to point out to his companions the new flume that had taken the place of the condemned ditch, but really in the hope of exposing himself in his glory to the curious eyes of the way-faring world. Unhappily the road was deserted in the still powerful sunlight, and he was obliged to seek the cover of the woods, with a passing compliment to the parent of his charges. Waving his hand towards the flume, he said,—“Look at that work of your father's; there ain't no other man in Californy but Philip Carr ez would hev the grit to hold up such a bluff agin natur and agin luck ez that yer flume stands for. I don't say it 'cause you're his daughters, ladies! That ain't the style, ez *you* know, in sassiety, Miss Carr,” he added, turning to Christie as the more socially experienced; “no! but there ain't another man to be found ez could do it. It cost already two hundred thousand; it'll cost five hundred thousand afore its done; and every cent of it is got out of the yearth beneath it, or *hez* got to be out of it. Tain't ev'ry man, Miss

Carr, ez hev got the pluck to pledge not only what he's got but what he reckons to git."

"But suppose he don't get it?" said Christie, slightly contracting her brows.

"Then there's the flume to show for it," said Dick.

"But of what use is the flume, if there isn't any more gold?" continued Christie, almost angrily.

"That's good from *you*, miss," said Dick, giving way to a fit of hilarity. "That's good for a fash'nable young lady—own daughter of Philip Carr. She sez, says she," continued Dick, appealing to the sedate pines for appreciation of Christie's rare humour, "'Wot's the use of a flume, when gold ain't there?' I must tell that to the boys."

"And what's the use of the gold in the ground when the flume isn't there to work it out?" said Jessie to her sister, with a cautioning glance towards Dick.

But Dick did not notice the look that passed between the sisters. The richer humour of Jessie's retort had thrown him into convulsions of laughter.

"And now *she* says, wot's the use o' the gold without the flume? 'Xcuse me, ladies, but that's just puttin' the hull question that's agitatin' this yer camp inter two speeches as clear as crystal. There's the hull crowd outside—and some on 'em inside like Fairfax, hez their doubts—ez says with Miss

Christie; and there's all of us inside, ez holds Miss Jessie's views."

"I never heard Mr. Munroe say that the flume was wrong," said Jessie quickly.

"Not to you nat'rally," said Dick, with a confidential look at Christie; "but I reckon he'd like some of the money it cost laid out for suthin' else. But what's the odds; the gold is there, and *we're* bound to get it."

Dick was the foreman of a gang of paid workmen, who had replaced the millionaires in mere manual labour, and the *we* was a polite figure of speech.

The conversation seemed to have taken an unfortunate turn, and both the girls experienced a feeling of relief when they entered the long gulch or defile that led to Indian Spring. The track now becoming narrow, they were obliged to pass in single file along the precipitous hillside, led by this escort. This effectually precluded any further speech, and Christie at once surrendered herself to the calm obliterating influences of the forest. The settlement and its gossip were far behind and forgotten. In the absorption of nature, her companions passed out of her mind, even as they sometimes passed out of her sight in the windings of the shadowy trail. As she rode alone, the fronds of breast high ferns seemed to caress her with outstretched and gently-detaining hands; strange

wild flowers sprang up through the parting underbush; even the granite rocks that at times pressed closely upon the trail appeared as if cushioned to her contact with star-rayed mosses, or lightly flung after her long lassoes of delicate vines. She recalled the absolute freedom of their *al-fresco* life in the old double cabin, when she spent the greater part of her waking hours under the mute trees in the encompassing solitude, and, half regretting the more civilised restraints of this newer and more ambitious abode, forgot that she had ever rebelled against it. The social complication that threatened her now seemed to her rather the outcome of her half-civilised parlour than of the sylvan glade. How easy it would have been to have kept the cabin, and then to have gone away entirely, than for her father to have allowed them to be compromised with the growing fortunes of the settlement. The suspicions and distrust that she had always felt of their fortunes seemed to grow with the involuntary admission of Whiskey Dick that they were shared by others who were practical men. She was fain to have recourse to the prospect again to banish these thoughts, and this opened her eyes to the fact that her companions had been missing from the trail ahead of her for some time. She quickened her pace slightly to reach a projecting point of rock that gave her a more extended prospect. But they had evidently disappeared,

She was neither alarmed nor annoyed. She could easily overtake them soon, for they would miss her and return or wait for her at the spring. At the worst she would have no difficulty in retracing her steps home. In her present mood, she could readily spare their company; indeed she was not sorry that no other being should interrupt that sympathy with the free woods which was beginning to possess her.

She was destined, however, to be disappointed. She had not proceeded a hundred yards before she noticed the moving figure of a man beyond her in the hillside chapparal above the trail. He seemed to be going in the same direction as herself, and, as she fancied, endeavouring to avoid her. This excited her curiosity to the point of urging her horse forward until the trail broadened into the level forest again, which she now remembered was a part of the environs of Indian Spring. The stranger hesitated, pausing once or twice with his back towards her, as if engaged in carefully examining the dwarf willows to select a switch. Christie slightly checked her speed as she drew nearer; when, as if obedient to a sudden resolution, he turned and advanced towards her. She was relieved and yet surprised to recognise the boyish face and figure of George Kearney. He was quite pale and agitated, although attempting, by a jaunty swinging

of the switch he had just cut, to assume the appearance of ease and confidence.

Here was an opportunity. Christie resolved to profit by it. She did not doubt that the young fellow had already passed her sister on the trail, but, from bashfulness, had not dared to approach her. By inviting his confidence, she would doubtless draw something from him that would deny or corroborate her father's opinion of his sentiments. If he was really in love with Jessie, she would learn what reasons he had for expecting a serious culmination of his suit, and perhaps she might be able delicately to open his eyes to the truth. If, as she believed, it was only a boyish fancy, she would laugh him out of it with that *camaraderie* which had always existed between them. A half motherly sympathy, albeit born quite as much from a contemplation of his beautiful yearning eyes as from his interesting position, lightened the smile with which she greeted him.

"So you contrived to throw over your stupid business and join us after all," she said; "or was it that you changed your mind at the last moment?" she added mischievously. "I thought only we women were permitted that?" Indeed she could not help noticing that there was really a strong feminine suggestion in the shifting colour and slightly conscious eyelids of the young fellow.

"Do young girls always change their minds?" asked George, with an embarrassed smile.

"Not always; but sometimes they don't know their own mind—particularly if they're very young; and when they do at last, you clever creatures of men, who have interpreted their ignorance to please yourselves, abuse them for being fickle." She stopped to observe the effect of what she believed a rather clear and significant exposition of Jessie's and George's possible situation. But she was not prepared for the look of blank resignation that seemed to drive the colour from his face and moisten the fire of his dark eyes.

"I reckon you're right," he said, looking down.

"Oh! we're not accusing you of fickleness," said Christie gaily; "although you didn't come, and we were obliged to ask Mr. Hall to join us. I suppose you found him and Jessie just now?"

But George made no reply. The colour was slowly coming back to his face, which, as she glanced covertly at him, seemed to have grown so much older that his returning blood might have brought two or three years with it.

"Really, Mr. Kearney," she said dryly, "one would think that some silly, conceited girl—" she was quite earnest in her epithets, for a sudden, angry conviction of some coquetry and disingenuousness in Jessie had come to her in contemplating

its effects upon the young fellow at her side—"some country jilt has been trying her rustic hand upon you."

"She is not silly, conceited, nor countrified," said George, slowly raising his beautiful eyes to the young girl half-reproachfully. "It is I who am all that. No, she is right, and you know it."

Much as Christie admired and valued her sister's charms, she thought this was really going too far! What had Jessie ever done—what was Jessie, to provoke and remain insensible to such a blind devotion as this? And really—looking at him now, he was not so *very young* for Jessie; whether his unfortunate passion had brought out all his latent manliness, or whether he had hitherto kept his serious nature in the background, certainly he was not a boy. And certainly his was not a passion that he could be laughed out of. It was getting very tiresome. She wished she had not met him—at least until she had had some clearer understanding with her sister. He was still walking beside her with his hand on her bridle rein, partly to lead her horse over some boulders in the trail, and partly to conceal his first embarrassment. When they had fairly reached the woods, he stopped.

"I am going to say good-bye, Miss Carr."

"Are you not coming further? We must be near Indian Spring now; Mr. Hall and—and Jessie

—cannot be far away. You will keep me company until we meet them?”

“No,” he replied quietly. “I only stopped you to say ‘Good-bye.’ I am going away.”

“Not from Devil’s Ford?” she asked, in half incredulous astonishment. “At least, not for long?”

“I am not coming back,” he replied.

“But this is very abrupt,” she said hurriedly, feeling that in some ridiculous way she had precipitated an equally ridiculous catastrophe. “Surely you are not going away in this fashion without saying ‘Good-bye’ to Jessie and—and father?”

“I shall see your father, of course—and you will give my regards to Miss Jessie.”

He evidently was in earnest. Was there ever anything so perfectly preposterous? She became indignant.

“Of course,” she said coldly, “I won’t detain you; your business must be urgent, and I forgot—at least I had forgotten until to-day—that you have other duties more important than that of squire of dames. I am afraid this forgetfulness made me think you would not part from us in quite such a business fashion. I presume, if you had not met me just now, we should none of us have seen you again?”

He did not reply.

“Will you say ‘Good-bye,’ Miss Carr?”

He held out his hand.

"One moment, Mr. Kearney. If I have said anything which you think justifies this very abrupt leave-taking, I beg you will forgive and forget it—or, at least, let it have no more weight with you than the idle words of any woman. I only spoke generally. You know—I—I—might be mistaken."

His eyes, which had dilated when she began to speak, darkened; his colour, which had quickly come, as quickly sank when she had ended.

"Don't say that, Miss Carr. It is not like you, and—it is useless. You know what I meant a moment ago. I read it in your reply. You meant that I, like others, had deceived myself. Did you not?"

She could not meet those honest eyes with less than equal honesty. She knew that Jessie did not love him,—would not marry him—whatever coquetry she might have shown.

"I did not mean to offend you," she said hesitatingly; "I only half suspected it when I spoke."

"And you wish to spare me the avowal?" he said bitterly.

"To me, perhaps, yes, by anticipating it. I could not tell what ideas you might have gathered from some indiscreet frankness of Jessie—or my father," she added, with almost equal bitterness.

"I have never spoken to either," he replied quickly. He stopped, and added, after a moment's mortifying reflection, "I've been brought up in the

woods, Miss Carr, and I suppose I have followed my feelings, instead of the etiquette of society."

Christie was too relieved at the rehabilitation of Jessie's truthfulness to notice the full significance of his speech.

"Good-bye," he said again, holding out his hand.

"Good-bye!"

She extended her own, ungloved, with a frank smile. He held it for a moment with his eyes fixed upon hers. Then suddenly, as if obeying an uncontrollable impulse, he crushed it like a flower again and again against his burning lips, and darted away.

Christie sank back in her saddle with a little cry half of pain and half of frightened surprise. Had the poor boy suddenly gone mad, or was this vicarious farewell a part of the courtship of Devil's Ford? She looked at her little hand, which had reddened under the pressure, and suddenly felt the flush extending to her cheeks and the roots of her hair. This was intolerable.

"Christie!"

It was her sister emerging from the wood to seek her. In another moment she was at her side.

"We thought you were following," said Jessie. "Good heavens! how you look! What has happened?"

"Nothing. I met Mr. Kearney a moment ago

on the trail. He is going away, and—and—" she stopped, furious and flushing.

"And," said Jessie, with a burst of merriment, "he told you at last he loved you. Oh, Christie!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE abrupt departure of George Kearney from Devil's Ford excited but little interest in the community, and was soon forgotten. It was generally attributed to differences between himself and his partners on the question of further outlay of their earnings on mining improvements—he and Philip Carr alone representing a sanguine minority whose faith in the future of the mine accepted any risks. It was alleged by some that he had sold out to his brother; it was believed by others that he had simply gone to Sacramento to borrow money on his share, in order to continue the improvements on his own responsibility. The partners themselves were uncommunicative; even Whiskey Dick, who since his remarkable social elevation, had become less oracular, much to his own astonishment, contributed nothing to the gossip except a suggestion that as the fiery temper of George Kearney brooked no opposition, even from his brother, it was better they should separate before the estrangement became serious.

Mr. Carr did not disguise his annoyance at the loss of his young disciple and firm ally. But an unlucky allusion to his previous remarks on Kearney's attentions to Jessie, and a querulous regret that he had permitted a disruption of their social intimacy, brought such an ominous and frigid opposition, not only from Christie but even the frivolous Jessie herself, that Carr sank back in a crushed and terrified silence. "I only meant to say," he stammered after a pause, in which he, however, resumed his aggrieved manner, "that *Fairfax* seems to come here still, and *he* is not such a particular friend of mine."

"But he is—and has your interest entirely at heart—" said Jessie stoutly, "and he only comes here to tell us how things are going on at the works."

"And criticise your father, I suppose," said Mr. Carr, with an attempt at jocularly that did not, however, disguise an irritated suspiciousness. "He really seems to have supplanted *me* as he has poor Kearney in your estimation."

"Now, father," said Jessie, suddenly seizing him by the shoulders in affected indignation, but really to conceal a certain embarrassment that sprang quite as much from her sister's quietly observant eye as her father's speech, "you promised to let this ridiculous discussion drop. You will make me and Christie so nervous that we will not dare to open the door to a visitor, until he declares his innocence

of any matrimonial intentions. You don't want to give colour to the gossip that agreement with your views about the improvements is necessary to getting on with us."

"Who dares talk such rubbish?" said Carr, reddening; "is that the kind of gossip that Fairfax brings here?"

"Hardly, when it's known that he don't quite agree with you, and *does* come here. That's the best denial of the gossip."

Christie, who had of late loftily ignored these discussions, waited until her father had taken his departure.

"Then that is the reason why you still see Mr. Munroe, after what you said," she remarked quietly to Jessie.

Jessie, who would have liked to escape with her father, was obliged to pause on the threshold of the door, with a pretty assumption of blank forgetfulness in her blue eyes and lifted eyebrows.

"Said what? when?" she asked vacantly.

"When—when Mr. Kearney that day—in the woods—went away," said Christie, faintly colouring.

"Oh! *that* day," said Jessie briskly; "the day he just gloved your hand with kisses, and then fled wildly into the forest to conceal his emotion."

"The day he behaved very foolishly," said Christie, with reproachful calmness that did not,

however, prevent a suspicion of indignant moisture in her eyes, "when you explained—"

"That it wasn't meant for *me*," interrupted Jessie.

"That it was to you that *Mr. Munroe's* attentions were directed. And then we agreed that it was better to prevent any further advances of this kind by avoiding any familiar relations with either of them."

"Yes," said Jessie, "I remember; but you're not confounding my seeing Fairfax occasionally now, with that sort of thing. *He* doesn't kiss my hand like anything," she added, as if in abstract reflection.

"Nor run away, either," suggested the trodden worm, turning.

There was an ominous silence.

"Do you know we are nearly out of coffee?" said Jessie, choking, but moving towards the door with Spartan-like calmness.

"Yes. And something must be done this very day about the washing," said Christie, with suppressed emotion, going towards the opposite entrance.

Tears stood in each other's eyes with this terrible exchange of domestic confidences. Nevertheless, after a moment's pause, they deliberately turned again, and, facing each other with frightful calmness, left the room by purposeless and deliberate exits other than those they had contemplated—a

crushing abnegation of self, that, to some extent, relieved their surcharged feelings.

Meantime the material prosperity of Devil's Ford increased, if a prosperity based upon no visible foundation but the confidence and hopes of its inhabitants could be called material. Few, if any, stopped to consider that the improvements, buildings, and business were simply the outlay of capital brought from elsewhere, and as yet the settlement or town, as it was now called, had neither produced nor exported capital of itself equal to half the amount expended. It was true that some land was cultivated on the further slope, some mills erected, and lumber furnished from the inexhaustible forest; but the consumers were the inhabitants themselves, who paid for their produce in borrowed capital or unlimited credit. It was never discovered that while all roads led to Devil's Ford, Devil's Ford led to nowhere. The difficulties overcome in getting things into the settlement were never surmounted for getting things out of it. The lumber was practically valueless for export to other settlements across the mountain roads, which were equally rich in timber. The theory so enthusiastically held by the original locators that Devil's Ford was a vast sink that had, through ages, exhausted and absorbed the trickling wealth of the adjacent hills and valleys, was suffering an ironical corroboration.

One morning it was known that work was stopped at the Devil Ford's Ditch—temporarily only, it was alleged, and many of the old workmen simply had their labour for the present transferred to excavating the river banks, and the collection of vast heaps of "pay gravel." Specimens from these mounds, taken from different localities, and at different levels, were sent to San Francisco for more rigid assay and analysis. It was believed that this would establish the fact of the permanent richness of the drifts, and not only justify past expenditure, but a renewed outlay of credit and capital. The suspension of engineering work gave Mr. Carr an opportunity to visit San Francisco on general business of the mine, which would not, however, prevent him from arranging further combinations with capital. His two daughters accompanied him. It offered an admirable opportunity for a shopping expedition, a change of scene, and a peaceful solution of their perplexing and anomalous social relations with Devil's Ford. In the first flush of gratitude to their father for this opportune holiday, something of harmony had been restored to the family circle than had of late been shaken by discord.

But their sanguine hopes of enjoyment were not entirely fulfilled. Both Jessie and Christie were obliged to confess to a certain disappointment in the aspect of the civilisation they were now re-enter-

ing. They at first attributed it to the change in their own habits during the last three months, and their having become barbarous and countrified in their seclusion. Certainly in the matter of dress they were behind the fashions as revealed in Montgomery Street. But when the brief solace afforded them by the *modiste* and dressmaker was past, there seemed little else to be gained. They missed at first, I fear, the chivalrous and loyal devotion that had only amused them at Devil's Ford, and were the more inclined, I think, to distrust the conscious and more civilised gallantry of the better-dressed and more carefully-presented men they met. For it must be admitted that, for obvious reasons, their criticisms were at first confined to the sex they had been most in contact with. They could not help noticing that the men were more eager, annoyingly feverish, and self-asserting in their superior elegance and external show, than their old associates were in their frank, unrestrained habits. It seemed to them that the five millionaires of Devil's Ford, in their radical simplicity and thoroughness, were perhaps nearer the type of true gentlemanhood than these citizens who imitated a civilisation they were unable yet to reach.

The women simply frightened them, as being, even more than the men, demonstrative and excessive in their fine looks, their fine dresses, their extravagant demand for excitement. In less than a

week they found themselves regretting—not the new villa on the slope of Devil's Ford, which even in its own *bizarre* fashion was exceeded by the barbarous ostentation of the villas and private houses around them—but the double cabin under the trees, which now seemed to them almost aristocratic in its grave simplicity and abstention. In the mysterious forest of masts that thronged the city's quays they recalled the straight shafts of the pines on Devil's slopes, only to miss the sedate repose and infinite calm that used to environ them. In the feverish, pulsating life of the young metropolis they often stopped oppressed, giddy, and choking; the roar of the streets and thoroughfares was meaningless to them, except to revive strange memories of the deep unvarying monotone of the evening wind over their humbler roof on the Sierran hillside. Civic bred and nurtured as they were, the recurrence of these sensations perplexed and alarmed them.

“It seems so perfectly ridiculous,” said Jessie, “for us to feel as out of place here as that Pike County servant girl in Sacramento who had never seen a steamboat before; do you know, I quite had a turn the other day at seeing a man on the Stockton wharf in a red shirt, with a rifle on his shoulder.”

“And you wanted to go and speak to him?” said Christie, with a sad smile.

“No, that's just it; I felt awfully hurt and in-

jured that he did not come up and speak to *me!* I wonder if we got any fever or that sort of thing up there; it makes one quite superstitious."

Christie did not reply; more than once before she had felt that inexplicable misgiving. It had sometimes seemed to her that she had never been quite herself since that memorable night when she had slipped out of their sleeping-cabin and stood alone in the gracious and commanding presence of the woods and hills. In the solitude of night, with the hum of the great city rising below her—at times even in the theatres or crowded assemblies of men and women—she forgot herself, and again stood in the weird brilliancy of that moonlight night in mute worship at the foot of that slowly-rising mystic altar of piled terraces, hanging forests, and lifted plateaus that climbed for ever to the lonely skies. Again she felt before her the expanding and opening arms of the protecting woods. Had they really closed upon her in some pantheistic embrace that made her a part of them? had she been baptised in that moonlight as a child of the great forest? It was easy to believe in the myths of the poets of an idyllic life under those trees, where, free from conventional restrictions, one loved and was loved. If she, with her own worldly experience, could think of this now, why might not George Kearney have thought? . . . She stopped, and found herself blushing even in the darkness. As the thought and blush

were the usual sequel of her reflections, it is to be feared that they may have been at times the impelling cause.

Mr. Carr, however, made up for his daughters' want of sympathy with metropolitan life. To their astonishment he not only plunged into the fashionable gaieties and amusements of the town, but in dress and manner assumed the *rôle* of a leader of a society. The invariable answer to their half-humorous comment was the necessities of the mine, and the policy of frequenting the company of capitalists, to enlist their support and confidence. There was something in this so unlike their father, that what at any other time they would have hailed as a relief to his habitual abstraction, now half alarmed them. Yet he was not dissipated—he did not drink nor gamble. There certainly did not seem any harm in his frequenting the society of ladies, with a gallantry that appeared to be forced and a pleasure that to their critical eyes was certainly apocryphal. He did not drag his daughters into the mixed society of that period; he did not press upon them the company of those he most frequented, and whose accepted position in that little world of fashion was considered equal to their own. When Jessie strongly objected to the pronounced manners of a certain widow, whose actual present wealth and pecuniary influence condoned for a more uncertain prehistoric past, Mr. Carr did

not urge a further acquaintance. "As long as you're not thinking of marrying again, papa," Jessie had said finally, "I don't see the necessity of our knowing her." "But suppose I were," had replied Mr. Carr with affected humour. "Then you certainly wouldn't care for any one like her," his daughter had responded triumphantly. Mr. Carr smiled, and dropped the subject, but it is probable that his daughters' want of sympathy with his acquaintances did not in the least interfere with his social prestige. A gentleman in all his relations, and under all circumstances—even his cold scientific abstraction was provocative; rich men envied his lofty ignorance of the smaller details of money-making, even while they mistrusted his judgment. A man still well preserved, and free from weakening vices, he was a dangerous rival to younger and faster San Francisco, in the eyes of the sex, who knew how to value a repose they did not themselves possess.

Suddenly Mr. Carr announced his intention of proceeding to Sacramento, on further business of the mine, leaving his two daughters in the family of a wealthy friend until he should return for them. He opposed their ready suggestion to return to Devil's Ford with a new and unnecessary inflexibility; he even met their compromise to accompany him to Sacramento with equal decision.

"You will only be in my way," he said curtly. "Enjoy yourselves here while you can."

Thus left to themselves, they tried to accept his advice. Possibly some slight reaction to their previous disappointment may have already set in; perhaps they felt any distraction to be a relief to their anxiety about their father. They went out more; they frequented concerts and parties; they accepted with their host and his family an invitation to one of those opulent and barbaric entertainments with which a noted San Francisco millionaire distracted his rare moments of reflection in his gorgeous palace on the hills. Here they would at least be once more in the country they loved, albeit of a milder and less heroic type, and a little degraded by the overlapping tinsel and scattered spangles of the palace.

It was a three days *fête*; the style and choice of amusements left to the guests, and an equal and active participation by no means necessary or indispensable. Consequently when Christie and Jessie Carr proposed a ride through the adjacent canon on the second morning, they had no difficulty in finding horses in the well-furnished stables of their opulent entertainers, nor cavaliers among the other guests, who were too happy to find favour in the eyes of two pretty girls who were supposed to be abnormally fastidious and refined. Christie's escort was a good-natured young banker, shrewd enough to avoid demonstrative attentions, and lucky enough to interest her during the ride with his clear and

half-humorous reflections on some of the business speculations of the day. If his ideas were occasionally too clever, and not always consistent with a high sense of honour, she was none the less interested to know the ethics of that world of speculation into which her father had plunged, and the more convinced, with a mingled sense of pride and anxiety, that his still dominant gentlemanhood would prevent his coping with it on equal terms. Nor could she help contrasting the conversation of the sharp-witted man at her side, with what she still remembered of the vague, touching, boyish enthusiasm of the millionaires of Devil's Ford. Had her escort guessed the result of this contrast, he would hardly have been as gratified as he was with the grave attention of her beautiful eyes.

The fascination of a gracious day, and the leafy solitude of the canon, led them to prolong their ride beyond the proposed limit, and it became necessary towards sunset for them to seek some shorter cut home.

"There's a *vaquero* in yonder field," said Christie's escort, who was riding with her a little in advance of the others, "and those fellows know every trail that a horse can follow. I'll ride on, intercept him, and try my Spanish on him. If I miss him, as he's galloping on, you might try your hand on him yourself. He'll understand your eyes, Miss Carr, in any language."

As he dashed away, to cover his first audacity of compliment, Christie lifted the eyes thus apostrophised to the opposite field. The *vaquero*, who was chasing some cattle, was evidently too pre-occupied to heed the shouts of his companion, and wheeling round suddenly to intercept one of the deviating fugitives, permitted Christie's escort to dash past him before that gentleman could rein in his excited steed. This brought the *vaquero* directly in her path. Perceiving her, he threw his horse back on its haunches, to prevent a collision. Christie rode up to him, suddenly uttered a cry, and halted. For before her, sunburnt in cheek and throat, darker in the free growth of moustache and curling hair, clad in the coarse, picturesque finery of his class, undisguised only in his boyish beauty, sat George Kearney.

The blood that had forsaken her astonished face, rushed as quickly back. His eyes, which had suddenly sparkled with an electrical glow, sank before hers. His hand dropped, and his cheek flushed with a dark embarrassment.

"You here, Mr. Kearney? How strange?—but how glad I am to meet you again."

She tried to smile; her voice trembled, and her little hand shook as she extended it to him.

He raised his dark eyes quickly, and impulsively urged his horse to her side. But, as if suddenly awakening to the reality of the situation, he

glanced at her hurriedly, down at his barbaric finery, and threw a searching look towards her escort.

In an instant Christie saw the infelicity of her position, and its dangers. The words of Whiskey Dick, "He wouldn't stand that," flashed across her mind. There was no time to lose. The banker had already gained control over his horse, and was approaching them, all unconscious of the fixed stare with which George was regarding him. Christie hastily seized the hand which he had allowed to fall at his side, and said quickly,—

"Will you ride with me a little way, Mr. Kearney?"

He turned the same searching look upon her. She met it clearly and steadily: he even thought reproachfully.

"Do!" she said hurriedly. "I ask it as a favour. I want to speak to you. Jessie and I are here alone. Father is away. *You* are one of our oldest friends."

He hesitated. She turned to the astonished young banker who rode up.

"I have just met an old friend. Will you please ride back as quickly as you can, and tell Jessie that Mr. Kearney is here, and ask her to join us?"

She watched her dazed escort, still speechless from the spectacle of the fastidious Miss Carr *tête-à-tête* with a common Mexican *vaquero*, gallop off in the direction of the canon, and then turned to George.

"Now take me home, the shortest way, as quick as you can."

"Home?" echoed George.

"I mean to Mr. Prince's house. Quick! before they can come up to us."

He mechanically put spurs to his horse; she followed. They presently struck into a trail that soon diverged again into a disused logging track through the woods.

"This is the short cut to Prince's, by two miles," he said, as they entered the woods.

As they were still galloping, without exchanging a word, Christie began to slacken her speed; George did the same. They were safe from intrusion at the present, even if the others had found the short cut. Christie, bold and self-reliant a moment ago, suddenly found herself growing weak and embarrassed. What had she done?

She checked her horse suddenly.

"Perhaps we had better wait for them," she said timidly.

George had not raised his eyes to hers.

"You said you wanted to hurry home," he replied gently, passing his hand along his mustang's velvety neck, "and—and you had something to say to me."

"Certainly," she answered, with a faint laugh, "I'm so astonished at meeting you here. I'm quite bewildered. You are living here; you have forsaken

us to buy a ranche?" she continued, looking at him attentively.

His brow coloured slightly.

"No, I'm living here, but I have brought no ranche. I'm only a hired man on somebody else's ranche, to look after the cattle."

He saw her beautiful eyes fill with astonishment and—something else. His brow cleared; he went on, with his old boyish laugh.

"No, Miss Carr. The fact is, I'm dead broke. I've lost everything since I saw you last. But as I know how to ride, and I'm not afraid of work, I manage to keep along."

"You have lost money in—in the mines?" said Christie suddenly.

"No—" he replied quickly, evading her eyes. "My brother has my interest, you know. I've been foolish on my own account solely. You know I'm rather inclined to that sort of thing. But as long as my folly don't affect others, I can stand it."

"But it may affect others—and *they* may not think of it as folly." She stopped short, confused by his brightening colour and eyes—"I mean—Oh, Mr. Kearney, I want you to be frank with me. I know nothing of business, but I know there has been trouble about the mine at Devil's Ford. Tell me honestly, has my father anything to do with it? If I thought that, through any imprudence of his, you had suffered,—if I believed that you could

trace any misfortune of yours to him—to *us*—I should never forgive myself,”—she stopped and flashed a single look at him—“I should never forgive *you* for abandoning us.”

The look of pain which had at first shewn itself in his face, which never concealed anything, passed, and a quick smile followed her feminine anticlimax.

“Miss Carr,” he said, with boyish eagerness, “if any man suggested to me that your father wasn’t the brightest and best of his kind,—too wise and clever for the fools about him to understand—I’d—I’d shoot him.”

Confused by his ready and gracious disclaimer of what she had *not* intended to say, there was nothing left for her but to rush upon what she really intended to say, with what she felt was shameful precipitation.

“One word more, Mr. Kearney,” she began, looking down, but feeling the colour come to her face as she spoke. “When you spoke to me the day you left, you must have thought me hard and cruel. When I tell you that I thought you were alluding to Jessie and some feeling you had for her—”

“For Jessie!” echoed George.

“You will understand that—that—”

“That what?” said George, drawing nearer to her.

"That I was only speaking as she might have spoken had you talked to her of me," added Christie hurriedly, slightly backing her horse away from him.

But this was not so easy, as George was the better rider, and by an imperceptible movement of his wrist and foot had glued his horse to her side. "He will go now," she had thought, but he didn't.

"We must ride on," she suggested faintly.

"No," he said, with a sudden dropping of his boyish manner and a slight lifting of his head. "We must ride together no further, Miss Carr. I must go back to the work I am hired to do, and you must go on with your party, whom I hear coming. But when we part here you must bid me 'good bye,'—not as Jessie's sister—but as Christie—the one—the only woman that I love, or that I have ever loved."

He held out his hand. With the recollection of their previous parting, she tremblingly advanced her own. He took it—but did not raise it to his lips. And it was she who found herself half confusedly retaining his hand in hers until she dropped it with a blush.

"Then is this the reason you give for deserting us as you have deserted Devil's Ford?" she said coldly.

He lifted his eyes to her with a strange smile and said "Yes," wheeled his horse, and disappeared in the forest.

He had left her thus abruptly once before, kissed, blushing, and indignant. He was leaving her now, un-kissed, but white and indignant. Yet she was so self-possessed when the party joined her, that the singular rencontre, and her explanation of the stranger's sudden departure, excited no further comment. Only Jessie managed to whisper in her ear,—

"I hope you are satisfied now that it wasn't me he meant?"

"Not at all," said Christie coldly.

CHAPTER VII.

A FEW days after the girls had returned from San Francisco, they received a letter from their father. His business, he wrote, would detain him in Sacramento some days longer. There was no reason why they should return to Devil's Ford in the heat of the summer, their host had written to beg him to allow them a more extended visit, and if they were enjoying themselves, he thought it would be well not to disoblige an old friend. He had heard they had a pleasant visit to Mr. Prince's place, and that a certain young banker had been very attentive to Christie.

"Do you know what all this means, dear?"

asked Jessie, who had been watching her sister with an unusually grave face.

Christie, whose thoughts had wandered from the letter, replied carelessly,—

“I suppose it means that we are to wait here until father sends for us.”

“It means a good deal more. It means that papa has had another reverse; it means that the assay has turned out badly for the mine;—that the further they go from the flat the worse it gets;—that all the gold they will probably ever see at Devil's Ford is what they have already found or will find on the flat; it means that all Devil's Ford is only a ‘pocket,’ and not a ‘lead.’” She stopped, with unexpected tears in her eyes.

“Who told you this?” asked Christie breathlessly.

“Fairfax—Mr. Munroe,” stammered her sister, “writes to me as if we already knew it,—tells me not to be alarmed, that it isn't so bad—and all that.”

“How long has this happened, Jessie?” said Christie, taking her hand with a white but calm face.

“Nearly ever since we've been here, I suppose. It must be so, for he says poor papa is still hopeful of doing something yet.”

“And Mr. Munroe writes to you?” said Christie abstractedly.

"Of course," said Jessie quickly. "He feels interested in—us."

"Nobody tells *me* anything," said Christie.

"Didn't—"

"No, said Christie bitterly."

"What on earth *did* you talk about? But people don't confide in you because they're afraid of you. You're so—"

"So what?"

"So gently patronising, and so 'I-don't-suppose-you-can-help-it,-poor-thing,' in your general style," said Jessie, kissing her. "There! I only wish I was like you. What do you say if we wrote to father that we'll go back to Devil's Ford. Mr. Munroe thinks we will be of service there just now. If the men are dissatisfied, and think we're spending money—"

"I'm afraid Mr. Munroe is hardly a disinterested adviser. At least, I don't think it would look quite decent for you to fly back without your father, at his suggestion," said Christie coldly. "He is not the only partner. We are spending no money. Besides, we have engaged to go to Mr. Prince's again next week."

"As you like, dear," said Jessie, turning away to hide a faint smile.

Nevertheless, when they returned from their visit to Mr. Prince's, and one or two uneventful rides,

Christie looked grave. It was only a few days later that Jessie burst upon her one morning.

"You were saying that nobody ever tells you anything. Well, here's your chance. Whiskey Dick is below."

"Whiskey Dick?" repeated Christie. "What does he want?"

"*You*, love. Who else? You know he always scorns me as not being high-toned and elegant enough for his social confidences. He asked for you only."

With an uneasy sense of some impending revelation, Christie descended to the drawing-room. As she opened the door, a strong flavour of that toilet soap and eau de Cologne with which Whiskey Dick was in the habit of gracefully effacing the traces of dissipation, made known his presence. In spite of a new suit of clothes, whose pristine folds refused to adapt themselves entirely to the contour of his figure, he was somewhat subdued by the unexpected elegance of the drawing-room of Christie's host. But a glance at Christie's sad but gracious face quickly re-assured him. Taking from his hat a three-cornered parcel, he unfolded a handsome *saffrona* rose, which he gravely presented to her. Having thus re-established his position, he sank elegantly into a *tête-à-tête* ottoman. Finding the position inconvenient to face Christie, who had seated herself on a chair, he transferred himself to the

other side of the ottoman, and addressed her over its back as from a pulpit.

"Is this really a fortunate accident, Mr. Hall, or did you try to find us?" said Christie pleasantly.

"Partly promiskuss, and partly coincident, Miss Christie, one up and t'other down," said Dick lightly. "Work being slack at present at Devil's Ford, I reck'ned I'd take a *pasear* down to 'Frisco, and dip into the vortex o' fash'nable society and out again.' He lightly waved a new handkerchief to illustrate his swallow-like intrusion. "This yer minglin' with the *ho-tong* is apt to be wearisome, ez you and me knows, unless combined with experience and judgment. So when them boys up there allows that there's a little too much fash'nable society and San Francisco capital and high-falutin' about the future goin' on fer square surface mining, I sez, 'Look yere, gentlemen,' sez I, 'you don't see the pint. The pint is, to get the pop'lar eye fixed, so to speak, on Devil's Ford. When a fash'nable star rises above the 'Frisco horizon—like Miss Carr—and, so to speak, dazzles the giniral eye, people want to know who she is. And when people say that's the accomplished daughter o' the accomplished superintendent of the Devil's Ford claim—otherwise known as the Star-eyed Goddess o' Devil's Ford—every eye is fixed on the mine, and Capital, so to speak, tumbles to her.' And when they sez that the old man—excuse my freedom, but that's the

way the boys talk of your father, meaning no harm—the old man, instead o' trying to corral rich wid-ders—grass or otherwise—to spend their money on the big works for the gold that ain't there yet—should stay in Devil's Ford and put all his sabe and genius into grindin' out the little gold that is there, I sez to them that it ain't your father's style. 'His style,' sez I, 'ez to go in and build them works.' When they're done he turns round to Capital, and sez he,—'Look yer,' sez he, 'thar's all the works you want, first quality—cost a million; thar's all the water you want, onlimited—cost another million; thar's all the pay gravel you want in and outer the ground—call it two millions more. Now my time's too vally'ble; my professhun's too high-toned, to *work* mines. I *make* 'em. Hand me over a cheque for ten millions and call it square, and work it for yourself.' So Capital hands over the money and waltzes down to run the mine, and you original locators walks round with yer hands in yer pockets a-top of your six million profit, and you let's Capital take the work and the responsibility."

Preposterous as this seemed from the lips of Whiskey Dick, Christie had a haunting suspicion that it was not greatly unlike the theories expounded by the clever young banker who had been her escort. She did not interrupt his flow of reminiscent criticism; when he paused for breath, she said quietly,—

"I met Mr. George Kearney the other day in the country."

Whiskey Dick stopped awkwardly, glanced hurriedly at Christie, and coughed behind his handkerchief.

"Mr. Kearney—eh—er—certengly—yes—er—met him you say. Was he—er—er—well?"

"In health, yes; but otherwise he has lost everything," said Christie, fixing her eyes on the embarrassed Dick.

"Yes—er—in course—in course—" continued Dick, nervously glancing round the apartment as if endeavouring to find an opening to some less abrupt statement of the fact.

"And actually reduced to take some menial employment," added Christie, still regarding Dick with her clear glance.

"That's it—that's just it," said Dick, beaming as he suddenly found his delicate and confidential opportunity. "That's it, Miss Christie; that's just what I was sayin' to the boys. 'Ez it the square thing,' sez I, 'just because George hez happened to hypothecate every dollar he has, or expects to hev, to put into them works, only to please Mr. Carr, and just because he don't want to distress that intelligent gentleman by letting him see he's dead broke—for him to go and demean himself and Devil's Ford by rushing away and hiring out as a Mexican *vaquero* on Mexican wages? Look,'

sez I, 'at the disgrace he brings upon a high-toned, fash'nable girl, at whose side he's walked and danced and passed rings, and sentiments, and bokays in the changes o' the cotillion and the mizzourka. And wot,' sez I, 'if some day, prancing along in a fash'nable cavalcade, she all of a suddents comes across him drivin' a Mexican steer?' That's what I said to the boys. And so you met him, Miss Christie, as usual," continued Dick, endeavouring, under the appearance of a large social experience, to conceal an eager anxiety to know the details, "so you met him; and, in course, you didn't let on yer knew him, so to speak, nat'rally, or p'raps you kinder like asked him to fix your saddle-girth, and give him a five dollar piece—eh?"

Christie, who had risen and gone to the window, suddenly turned a very pale face and shining eyes on Dick.

"Mr. Hall," she said, with a faint attempt at a smile, "we are old friends, and I feel I can ask you a favour. You once before acted as our escort—it was for a short but a happy time—will you accept a larger trust? My father is busy in Sacramento for the mine; will you, without saying anything to anybody, take Jessie and me back at once to Devil's Ford?"

"Will I? Miss Christie," said Dick, choking between an intense gratification and a desire to keep back its vulgar exhibition, "I shall be proud!"

"When I say keep it a secret"—she hesitated—"I don't mean that I object to your letting Mr. Kearney, if you happen to know where he is, understand that we are going back to Devil's Ford."

"Cert'nly—nat'rally," said Dick, waving his hand gracefully; "sorter drop him a line, saying that bizness of a social and delicate nature—being the escort of Miss Christie and Jessie Carr to Devil's Ford—prevents my having the pleasure of calling."

"That will do very well, Mr. Hall," said Christie, faintly smiling through her moist eyelashes. "Then will you go at once and secure tickets for to-night's boat and bring them here. Jessie and I will arrange everything else."

"Cert'nly," said Dick impulsively, and preparing to take a graceful leave.

"We'll be impatient until you return with the tickets," said Christie graciously.

Dick shook hands gravely, got as far as the door, and paused.

"You think it better to take the tickets now?" he said dubiously.

"By all means," said Christie impetuously. "I've set my heart on going to-night—and unless you secure berths early—"

"In course—in course," interrupted Dick nervously. "But—"

"But what?" said Christie impatiently.

Dick hesitated, shut the door carefully, and,

looking round the room, lightly shook out his handkerchief, apparently flicked away an embarrassing suggestion, and said, with a little laugh,—

“It’s ridiklous, perfectly ridiklous, Miss Christie; but not bein’ in the habit of carryin’ ready money, and havin’ omitted to cash a draft on Walls, Fargo & Co.—”

“Of course,” said Christie rapidly. “How forgetful I am. Pray forgive me, Mr. Hall. I didn’t think. I’ll run up and get it from our host; he will be glad to be our banker.”

“One moment, Miss Christie,” said Dick lightly, as his thumb and finger relaxed in his waistcoat pocket over the only piece of money in the world that had remained to him after his extravagant purchase of Christie’s *saffrona* rose, “one moment; in this yer monetary transaction, if you like, you are at liberty to use *my* name.”

CHAPTER VIII.

As Christie and Jessie Carr looked from the windows of the coach whose dust-clogged wheels were slowly dragging them, as if reluctant, nearer the last stage of their journey to Devil’s Ford, they were conscious of a change in the landscape, which they could not entirely charge upon their changed feelings. The few bared open spaces on the upland,

the long stretch of rocky ridge near the summit, so vivid and so velvety during their first journey, were now burnt and yellow; even the brief openings in the forest were seared as if by a hot iron in the scorching rays of a half year's sun. The pastoral slopes of the valley below were cloaked in lustreless leather; the rare water-courses along the road had faded from the waiting eye and ear; it seemed as if the long and dry summer had even invaded the close set ranks of pines, and had blown a simoon breath through the densest woods, leaving its charred red ashes on every leaf and spray along the tunnelled shade. As they leaned out of the window and inhaled the half-dead spices of the evergreens, they seemed to have entered the atmosphere of some exhausted passion—of some fierce excitement that was even now slowly burning itself out.

It was a relief at last to see the straggling houses of Devil's Ford far below come once more into view as they rounded the shoulder of Devil's Spur and began the long descent. But as they entered the town a change more ominous and startling than the desiccation of the landscape forced itself upon them. The town was still there, but where were the inhabitants? Four months ago they had left the straggling street thronged with busy citizens,—groups at every corner, and a chaos of merchandise and traders in the open *plaza* or square beside the Presbyterian church. Now all was changed.

Only a few wayfarers lifted their heads lazily as the coach rattled by, crossing the deserted square littered with empty boxes and gliding past empty cabins or vacant shop windows, from which not only familiar faces but even the window sashes themselves were gone. The great unfinished serpent-like flume crossing the river on gigantic trestles had advanced as far as the town, stooping over it like some enormous reptile that had sucked its life blood and was gorged with its prey.

Whiskey Dick, who had left the stage on the summit to avail himself of a shorter foot trail to the house that would give him half-an-hour's grace to make preparations, met them at the stage office with a buggy. A glance at the young girls, perhaps, convinced him that the graces of elegant worldly conversation were out of place with the revelation he read on their faces. Perhaps he, too, was a trifle indisposed. The short journey to the house was made in profound silence.

The villa had been repainted and decorated, and it looked fresher, and even, to their preoccupied minds, appeared more attractive than ever. Thoughtful hands had taken care of the vines and rose bushes on the trellises; water—that precious element in Devil's Ford—had not been spared in keeping green through the long drought the plants which the girls had so tenderly nurtured. It was the one oasis in which the summer still lingered; and yet a

singular sense of loss came over the girls as they once more crossed its threshold. It seemed no longer their own.

"Ef I was you, Miss Christie, I'd keep close to the house for a day or two, until—until—things is settled," said Dick; "there's a heap o' tramps and sich cattle trapsin' round. P'raps you wouldn't feel so lonesome if you was nearer town,—for instance, 'bout wher' you uster live."

"In the dear old cabin," said Christie quickly; "I remember it: I wish we were there now."

"Do you really? Do you?" said Whiskey Dick, with suddenly twinkling eyes. "That's like you to say it. That's what I allus said," continued Dick, addressing space generally; "if there's any one ez knows how to come square down to the bottom rock without flinchin', it's your high-toned, fash'nable gals. But I must meander back to town and let the boys know you're in possession safe and sound. It's right mean that Fairfax and Mattingly had to go down to Lagrange on some low business yesterday, but they'll be back to-morrow. So long."

Left alone, the girls began to realise their strange position. They had conceived no settled plan. The night they left San Francisco they had written an earnest letter to their father, telling him that on learning the truth about the reverses of Devil's Ford, they thought it their duty to return and share them with others, without obliging him

to prefer the request, and with as little worry to him as possible. He would find them ready to share his trials, and in what must be the scene of their work hereafter.

"It will bring father back," said Christie; "he won't leave us here alone; and then together we must come to some understanding with him—with *them*—for somehow I feel as if this house belonged to us no longer."

Her surmise was not far wrong. When Mr. Carr arrived hurriedly from Sacramento the next evening, he found the house deserted. His daughters were gone; there were indications that they had arrived, and, for some reason, suddenly departed. The vague fear that had haunted his guilty soul after receiving their letter, and during his breathless journey, now seemed to be realised. He was turning from the empty house, whose reproachful solitude frightened him, when he was confronted on the threshold by the figure of Fairfax Munroe.

"I came to the stage office to meet you," he said; "you must have left the stage at the summit."

"I did," said Carr angrily. "I was anxious to meet my daughters quickly, to know the reason of their foolish alarm, and to know also who had been frightening them. Where are they?"

"They are safe in the old cabin beyond, that has been put up ready to receive them again," said Fairfax quietly.

"But what is the meaning of this? Why are they not here?" demanded Carr, hiding his agitation in a burst of querulous rage.

"Do *you* ask, Mr. Carr?" said Fairfax sadly. "Did you expect them to remain here until the sheriff took possession? No one knows better than yourself that the money advanced you on the deeds of this homestead has never been repaid."

Carr staggered, but recovered himself with feeble violence.

"Since you know so much of my affairs, how do you know that this claim will ever be pressed for payment? How do you know it is not the advance of a—a—friend?"

"Because I have seen the woman who advanced it," said Fairfax hopelessly. "She was here to look at the property before your daughters came."

"Well?" said Carr nervously.

"Well! You force me to tell you something I should like to forget. You force me to anticipate a disclosure I expected to make to you only when I came to ask permission to woo your daughter Jessie; and when I tell you what it is, you will understand that I have no right to criticise your conduct. I am only explaining my own."

"Go on," said Carr impatiently.

"When I first came to this country, there was a woman I loved passionately. She treated me as women of her kind only treat men like me, she

ruined me, and left me. That was four years ago. I love your daughter, Mr. Carr, but she has never heard it from my lips. I would not woo her until I had told you all. I have tried to do it ere this, and failed. Perhaps I should not now, but—”

“But what?” said Carr furiously; “speak out!”

“But this. Look!” said Fairfax, producing from his pocket the packet of letters Jessie had found; “perhaps you know the handwriting?”

“What do you mean?” gasped Carr.

“That woman—my mistress—is the woman who advanced you money, and who claims this house.”

The interview, and whatever came of it, remained a secret with the two men. When Mr. Carr accepted the hospitality of the old cabin again, it was understood that he had sacrificed the new house and its furniture to some of the more pressing debts of the mine, and the act went far to restore his waning popularity. But a more genuine feeling of relief was experienced by Devil's Ford when it was rumoured that Fairfax Munroe had asked for the hand of Jessie Carr, and that some promise, contingent upon the equitable adjustment of the affairs of the mine, had been given by Mr. Carr. To the superstitious mind of Devil's Ford and its few remaining locators, this new partnership seemed to promise that unity of interest and stability of fortune that Devil's Ford had lacked. But nothing

could be done until the rainy season had set fairly in; until the long-looked-for element that was to magically separate the gold from the dross in those dull mounds of dust and gravel, had come of its own free will, and in its own appointed channels, independent of the feeble auxiliaries that had hopelessly riven the rocks on the hillside, or hung incomplete and unfinished in lofty scaffoldings above the settlement.

The rainy season came early. At first in gathered mists on the higher peaks that were lifted in the morning sun only to shew a fresher field of dazzling white below; in white clouds that at first seemed to be mere drifts blown across from those fresh snowfields, and obscuring the clear blue above; in far-off murmurs in the hollow hills and gulches; in nearer tinkling melody and baby prattling in the leaves. It came with bright flashes of sunlight by day, with deep, monotonous shadow at night; with the onset of heavy winds, the roar of turbulent woods, the tumultuous tossing of leafy arms, and with what seemed the silent dissolution of the whole landscape in days of steady and uninterrupted downfall. It came extravagantly, for every cañon had grown into a torrent, every gulch a waterspout, every water-course a river, and all pouring into the North Fork, that rushing past the settlement seemed to threaten it with lifted crest and flying mane. It came dangerously, for one

night the river, leaping the feeble barrier of Devil's Ford, swept away houses and banks, scattered with unconscious irony the laboriously collected heaps of gravel left for hydraulic machinery, and spread out a vast and silent lake across the submerged flat.

In the hurry and confusion of that night, the girls had thrown open their cabin to the escaping miners, who hurried along the slope that was now the bank of the river. Suddenly Christie felt her arm grasped, and she was half led, half dragged into the inner room. Her father stood before her.

"Where is George Kearney?" he asked tremulously.

"George Kearney!" echoed Christie, for a moment believing the excitement had turned her father's brain; "you know he is not here, he is in San Francisco."

"He is here—I tell you," said Carr impatiently; "he has been here ever since the high water, trying to save the flume and reservoir."

"George—here!" Christie could only gasp.

"Yes! He passed here a few moments ago, to see if you were all safe, and he has gone on towards the flume. But what he is trying to do is madness. If you see him, implore him to do no more. Let him abandon the accursed flume to its fate. It has worked already too much woe upon us all; why should it carry his brave and youthful soul down with it?"

The words were still ringing in her ears, when he suddenly passed away with the hurrying crowd. Scarcely knowing what she did, she ran out, vaguely intent only on one thought, seeking only the one face lately so dear in recollection that she felt she would die if she never saw it again. Perplexed by confused voices in the woods, she lost track of the crowd, until the voices suddenly were raised in one loud outcry, followed by the crashing of timber, the splashing of water, a silence, and then a dull, continuous roar. She ran vaguely on in the direction of the reservoir, with her father's injunction still in her mind, until a terrible idea displaced it, and she turned at right angles suddenly, and ran towards the slope leading down to the submerged flat. She had barely left the shelter of the trees behind her, before the roar of water seemed to rise at her very feet. She stopped, dazed, bewildered, and horror-stricken, on the edge of the slope. It was the slope no longer, but the bank of the river itself!

Even in the grey light of early morning, and with inexperienced eyes, she saw all too clearly now. The trestle work had given way; the curving mile of flume fallen into the stream, and, crushed and dammed against the opposite shore, had absolutely turned the whole river through the half-finished ditch and partly excavated mine in its way, a few rods further on to join the old familiar channel. The bank of the river was changed; the flat had

become an island, between which and the slope where she stood the North Fork was rolling its resistless yellow torrent. As she gazed spell-bound, a portion of the slope beneath her suddenly seemed to sink and crumble, and was swallowed up in the rushing stream. She heard a cry of warning behind her, but, rooted to the spot by a fearful fascination, she heeded it not. Again there was a sudden disruption, and another part of the slope sank to rise no more; but this time she felt herself seized by the waist and dragged back. It was her father standing by her side.

He was flushed and excited, gazing at the water with a strange exultation.

"Do you see it? Do you know what has happened?" he asked quickly.

"The flume has fallen and turned the river," said Christie hurriedly. "But—you have seen him—is he safe?"

"He—who?" he answered vacantly.

"George Kearney!"

"He is safe," he said impatiently. "But, do you see, Christie, do you know what this means?"

He pointed with his tremulous hand to the stream before him.

"It means we are ruined," said Christie coldly.

"Nothing of the kind! It means that the river is doing the work of the flume. It is sluicing off the gravel, deepening the ditch, and altering the

slope which was the old bend of the river. It will do in ten minutes the work that would take us a year. If we can stop it in time, or control it, we are safe; but if we cannot, it will carry away the bed deposit with the rest, and we are ruined again."

With a gesture of impotent fury, he dashed away in the direction of an equally excited crowd, that on a point of the slope nearer the island were gesticulating and shouting to a second group of men, who on the opposite shore were clambering on over the choked *débris* of the flume that had dammed and diverted the current. It was evident that the same idea had occurred to them, and they were risking their lives in the attempt to set free impediments. Shocked and indignant as Christie had been at the degrading absorption of material interests at such a moment, the element of danger lifted the labours of these men into heroism, and she began to feel a strange exultation as she watched them. Under the skilful blows of their axes, in a few moments the vast body of drift began to disintegrate, and then to swing round and move towards the old channel. A cheer went up, but as suddenly died away again. An overlapping fringe of wreckage had caught on the point of the island, and arrested the whole mass.

The men who had gained the shore with difficulty looked back with a cry of despair. But the

next moment from among them leaped a figure, alert, buoyant, invincible, and, axe in hand, once more essayed the passage. Springing from timber to timber he at last reached the point of obstruction. A few strokes of the axe were sufficient to clear it; but at the first stroke it was apparent that the striker was also loosing his hold upon the shore, and that he must inevitably be carried away with the tossing *débris*. But this consideration did not seem to affect him; the last blow was struck, and as the freed timbers rolled on over and over, he boldly plunged into the flood. Christie gave a little cry—her heart had bounded with him; it seemed as if his plunge had splashed the water in her eyes. He did not come to the surface until he had passed the point below where her father stood, and then struggling feebly, as if stunned or disabled by a blow. It seemed to her that he was trying to approach the side of the river where she was. Would he do it? Could she help him? She was alone; he was hidden from the view of the men on the point, and no succour could come from them. There was a fringe of alder nearly opposite their cabin that almost overhung the stream. She ran to it, clutched it with a frantic hand, and leaning over the boiling water, uttered for the first time his name.

“George!”

As if called to the surface by the magic of her

voice, he rose a few yards from her in mid current, and turned his fading eyes towards the bank. In another moment he would have been swept beyond her reach, but with a supreme effort he turned on one side, the current striking him sideways, threw him towards the bank, and she caught him by his sleeve. For an instant it seemed as if she would be dragged down with him. For one dangerous moment she did not care, and almost yielded to the spell; but as the rush of water pressed him against the bank, she recovered herself, and managed to lift him beyond its reach. And then she sat down half fainting, with his white face and damp curls upon her breast.

“George, darling, speak to me! Only one word! Tell me have I saved you?”

His eyes opened. A faint twinkle of the old days came to them—a boyish smile played upon his lips.

“For yourself—or Jessie?”

She looked around her with a little frightened air. They were alone. There was but one way of sealing those mischievous lips, and she found it!

“That’s what I allus said, gentlemen,” lazily remarked Whiskey Dick, a few weeks later, leaning back against the bar, with his glass in his hand; “George,” sez I, “it ain’t what you *say* to a fash’nable, high-toned young lady—it’s

what you *does* ez makes or breaks you. And that's what I sez gin'rally o' things in the Ford. It ain't what Carr and you boys allows to do—it's the gin'ral average o' things ez *iz* done that gives tone to the hull, and hez brought this yer new luck to you all!"

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THE END.

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