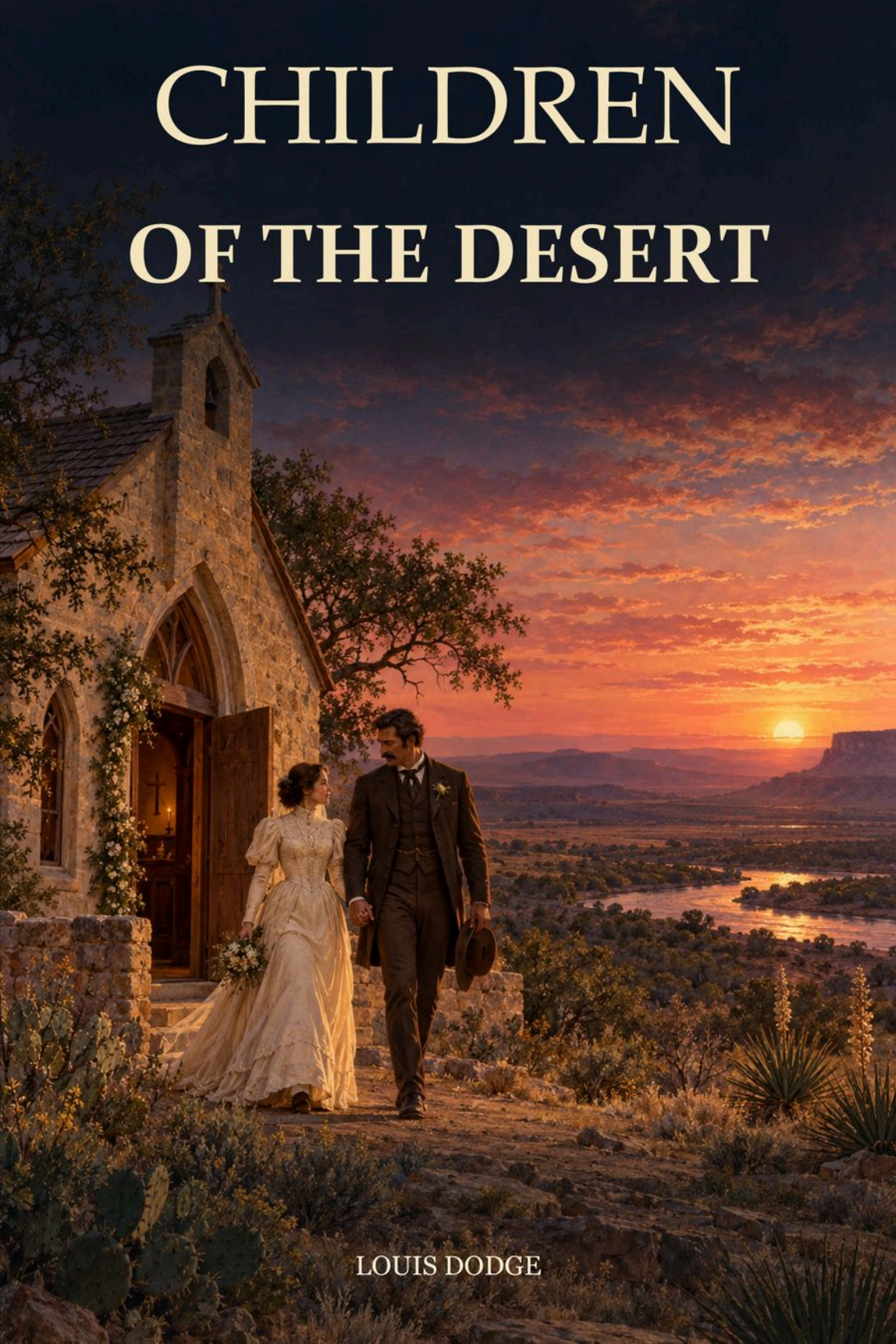
CHILDREN OF THE DESERT



LOUIS DODGE

Children of the desert

Louis Dodge

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louis Dodge

Louis Dodge was an American novelist and journalist, born in Burlington, Iowa, in 1870. His family later moved to Arkansas, where he attended Quitman College. Books and newspaper work shaped his early interests; his father was a printer, and Dodge eventually made reporting his own profession.

He worked in Texas and served in the United States Army before joining the *Saint Louis Globe-Democrat* in 1901. His newspaper career included literary, musical and dramatic criticism. These assignments brought him into contact with the performing arts and the business of reviewing stories for a public audience.

His first novel, *Bonnie May*, appeared in 1916, both as a magazine serial and as a book. Its young heroine, raised in the theatre, sees familiar social conventions from an unexpected perspective. The novel established his reputation, and further books followed. Dodge died in 1952.

Readers can pay attention to the distance between a character's public manner and private understanding. Someone unfamiliar with an accepted custom may notice contradictions that others overlook. Asking who is performing a role, and for whose benefit, can reveal how a scene works beneath its surface conversation. No portrait is included because a reliable likeness could not be verified in the sources reviewed.

Biographical references: University of Iowa Libraries, Philip D. Jordan, Louis Dodge—A Forgotten Iowa Author. Full source records retained in the edition archive.

TO

THE FRIENDS OF EAGLE PASS AND
PIEDRAS NEGRAS—IN THE
GOOD OLD DAYS

PART I

HARBORO AND SYLVIA

Children of the Desert

CHAPTER I

They were married in the little Episcopal church in Eagle Pass on a September day in the late eighties. The fact may be verified, I have no doubt, by any who will take the trouble to examine the records, for the toy-like place of worship still stands.

The church structure is not, perhaps, so small as my imagination presents it to me; but I cannot see it save with the desert as a background—the desert austere and illimitable. You reach the prim little front door by climbing a street which runs parallel with the Rio Grande, and the church is almost the last structure you will pass before you set forth into a No-Man's land of sage and cactus and yucca and mesquite lying under the blazing sun.

Harboro his name was. Of course, there was a Christian name, but he was known simply as Harboro from Piedras Negras to the City. She was Sylvia Little. Sylvia, people called her, both before and after her marriage. The Little might as well never have belonged to her.

Although neither Harboro nor Sylvia really belonged to Eagle Pass, the wedding was an event. Both had become familiar figures in the life of the town and were pretty well known. Their wedding drew a large and interested audience. (I think the theatrical phrase is justified, as perhaps will be seen.) Weddings were not common in the little border town, unless you counted the mating of young Mexicans, who were always made one by the priest in the *adobe* church closer to the river. Entertainment of any kind was scarce. But there were other and more significant reasons why people wanted to see the bride and the bridegroom, when Harboro gave his name to the woman of his choice.

The young people belonging to some sort of church guild had decorated the church, and special music had been prepared. And indeed when Harboro and Sylvia marched up the aisle to the strains of the *Lohengrin* march (the bridegroom characteristically trying to keep step, and Sylvia ignoring the music entirely), it was not much to be wondered at that people craned their necks to get the best possible view. For both Harboro and the woman were in a way extraordinary individuals.

Harboro was forty, and seemed in certain aspects older than that. He was a big man, well built, and handsome after a fashion. He was swarthy, with dark eyes which seemed to meditate, if not to dream. His hair was raven-black, and he wore a heavy mustache which stopped just short of being unduly conspicuous. It was said of him that he talked little, but that he listened keenly. By trade he was a railroad man.

He had been heard to remark on one occasion that he had begun as a brakeman, but there were rumors of adventurous days before he became a member of a train crew. It was said that he had gone prospecting into Mexico as a youth, and that he had spent years working at ends and odds of jobs about mines and smelters. Probably he had hoped to get into something in a big way.

However, he had finally turned to railroading, and in the course of uncertain events had become an engineer. It was a year or two after he had attained this position that he had been required to haul a special train from Torreon to Piedras Negras. The General Manager of the Mexican International Railroad was on that train, and he took occasion to talk to the engineer. The result pleased him mightily. In his engine clothes Harboro looked every inch a man. There was something clean and level about his personality which couldn't have been hid under a *sarape*. He stood shoulder to shoulder with the General Manager, making the latter look like a manikin, and talked about his work and the condition of the road and the rolling stock. He talked easily and listened intelligently. He was grave in an easy fashion. He took no liberties, cracked no jokes.

The General Manager got the idea that the big fellow would be a good man to stand shoulder to shoulder with in larger events than a special trip.

When he got back to headquarters he made a casual inquiry or two, and discovered that Harboro wrote an exceptionally good hand, and that he spelled correctly. He assumed that he was an educated man—though this impression may have been largely due to the fact that Harboro was keenly interested in a great variety of things, and had a good memory.

The General Manager waited for certain wheels to turn, and then he sent for Harboro and offered him a position as chief clerk in one of the headquarter departments.

Harboro accepted the position, and said “Thank you,” and proved to be uncommonly competent.

The people of Piedras Negras took a liking to him; the women wanted to get acquainted with him. He was invited to places, and he accepted the invitations without either belittling or magnifying their importance. He got on rather well from the beginning.

The social affairs of Piedras Negras were sometimes on a fairly large scale. The General Manager had his winter residence there—a meticulously cultivated demain which lay like a blue spot in a cloudy sky. There were grass and palms and, immediately beyond, the vast desert. At night (on occasion) there were Chinese lanterns to add their cheerful note to pretty revelries, while the stars lay low and big over all the desert expanse. The General Manager’s wife had prominent social affiliations, and she used to bring winter guests from the north and east—from Chicago and New York and Boston. There were balls and musicales, and a fine place for conversation out on the lawn, with Mexican servants to bring cigars and punch, and with Mexican fiddlers to play the national airs under a fig-covered band-stand.

The young people from Eagle Pass used to go over when the General Manager’s wife was giving one of her less formal affairs. They were rather refreshing types: the Texas type, with a good deal of freedom of action and speech, once they were drawn out, and with plenty of vigor. On these occasions Eagle Pass merged itself into the Mexican town, and went home late at night over the Rio Grande bridge, and regarded life as a romance.

These affairs and this variety of people interested Harboro. He was not to be drawn out, people soon discovered; but he liked to sit on the lawn and listen and take observations. He was not backward, but his tastes were simple. He was seemingly quite as much at ease in the presence of a Chicago poetess with a practised—a somewhat too practised—laugh or a fellow employee risen, like himself, to a point where society could see him.

In due course Eagle Pass gave an entertainment (at the Mesquite Club) and invited certain railroad officials and employees from the other side of the river. Harboro was included among those invited, and he put on correct evening dress, and rode over in a coach, and became a favorite in Eagle Pass. He seemed rather big and serious

for complete assimilation, but he looked well with the club settings as a background, and his name appeared later in the week in the Eagle Pass *Guide*, in the list headed "among those present."

All of which he accepted without agitation, or without ceasing to be Harboro himself all over.

He did not meet Sylvia Little at the Mesquite Club. If you had known Sylvia and the Mesquite Club, you would laugh at so superfluous a statement. Eagle Pass was pleasantly democratic, socially, but it could not have been expected to stand for Sylvia.

People didn't know much about her (to her credit, at least) except that she was pretty. She was wonderfully pretty, and in a way which was all the more arresting when you came to consider her desert surroundings.

She had come, with her father, from San Antonio. They had taken a low, homely little house, standing under its mesquite-tree, close to the government reservation, where the flagstaff stood, and the cannon boomed at sundown, and the soldiers walked their posts. Back of the house there was a thicket of mesquites, and through this a path ran down to the river.

The first thing people mistrusted about Sylvia was her father. He had no visible means of support; and if his manner was amiable, his ways were furtive. He had a bias in favor of Mexican associates, and much of his time was spent down under the river bank, where a few small wine-shops and gambling establishments still existed in those days. There were also rumors of drinking and gambling orgies in the house under the mesquite-tree, and people said that many strange customers traversed that path through the mesquite, and entered Little's back door. They were soldiers and railroad men, and others of a type whose account in the bank of society nobody ever undertakes to balance. Sylvia was thought to be the torch which attracted them, and it was agreed that Sylvia's father knew how to persuade them to drink copiously of beverages which they paid for themselves, and to manipulate the cards to his own advantage in the games which were introduced after a sufficient number of drinks had been served.

Possibly a good deal of this was rumor rather than fact: an uncharitable interpretation of pleasures which were inelegant,

certainly, but possibly not quite vicious. Still, it seemed to be pretty well established that up to the time of Sylvia's marriage her father never worked, and that he always had money—and this condition, on any frontier, is always regarded with mistrust.

Sylvia's prettiness was of a kind to make your heart bleed, everything considered. She was of a wistful type, with eager blue eyes, and lips which were habitually parted slightly—lips of a delicate fulness and color. Her hair was soft and brown, and her cheeks were of a faint, pearly rosiness. You would never have thought of her as what people of strictly categorical minds would call a bad woman. I think a wholly normal man must have looked upon her as a child looks at a heather-bell—gladly and gratefully, and with a pleased amazement. She was small and slight. Women of the majordomo type must have regarded her as still a child. Her breasts were little, her neck and shoulders delicate, and she had a trick of lifting her left hand to her heart when she was startled or regarded too shrewdly, as if she had some prescient consciousness of coming evil.

She was standing by her front gate when Harboro first saw her—and when she first saw Harboro. The front gate commanded an unobstructed view of the desert. It was near sundown, and far across the earth's floor, which looked somewhat like a wonderful mosaic of opals and jade at this hour, a Mexican goatherd was driving his flock. That was the only sign of life to be seen or felt, if you except the noise of locusts in the mesquite near by and the spasmodic progress of a horned toad in the sand outside Sylvia's gate.

Yet she was looking away to the vibrating horizon, still as hot as an oven, as yearningly as if at any moment a knight might ride over the rim of the desert to rescue her, or as if a brother were coming to put an end to the existence of a Bluebeard who, obviously, did not exist.

And then Harboro appeared—not in the distance, but close at hand. He was passing Sylvia's gate. He had a natural taste for geology, it seemed, and he had chosen this hour to walk out beyond Eagle Pass to examine the rock formations which had been cast up to the surface of the desert by prehistoric cataclysms.

He was close enough to Sylvia to touch her when her presence broke down his abstraction and drew his eyes away from whatever object they had been observing away on the horizon.

He stopped as if he had been startled. That was a natural result of Sylvia's appearance here in this withered place. She was so delicately, fragilely abloom. Her setting should have been some region south of the Caucasus. Her period should have been during the foundations of mythology. She would have made you think of Eve.

And because her hand went to her heart, and her lips parted tremulously, Harboro stopped. It was as if he felt he must make amends. Yet his words were the inevitable banalities.

"You have a fine view here," he said.

"A fine view!" she echoed, a little incredulously. It was plain that she did not agree with him. "There is plenty of sun and air," she conceded after a pause.

He rested a heavy hand on the fence. When Harboro stopped you never had the feeling that some of his interests had gone on ahead and were beckoning to him. He was always all there, as if permanently.

He regarded her intently. Her voice had something of the quality of the *Träumerei* in it, and it had affected him like a violin's *vibrato*, accompanying a death scene—or as a litany might have done, had he been a religious man.

"I suppose you find it too much the same, one day after another," he suggested, in response to that mournful quality in her voice. "You live here, then?"

She was looking across the desert. Where had the goatherd hidden himself? She nodded without bringing her glance to meet Harboro's.

"I know a good many of the Eagle Pass people. I've never seen you before."

"I thought you must be a stranger," she replied. She brought her glance to his face now and seemed to explore it affectionately, as one does a new book by a favorite author. "I've never seen you before, either."

"I've been to several entertainments at the Mesquite Club."

"Oh! ... the Mesquite Club. I've never been there."

He looked at her in his steadfast fashion for a moment, and then changed the subject. "You have rather more than your share of shade here. I had no idea there was such a pretty place in Eagle Pass." He

glanced at the old mesquite-tree in the yard. It was really quite a tree.

"Yes," she assented. She added, somewhat falteringly: "But it seems dreadfully lonesome sometimes."

(I do not forget that path which led from Sylvia's back door down to the Rio Grande, nor the men who traversed it; yet I believe that she spoke from her heart, and that her words were essentially true.)

"Perhaps you're not altogether at home in Eagle Pass: I mean, this isn't really your home?"

"No. We came from San Antonio a year ago, my father and I."

His glance wandered up the brick walk to the cottage door, but if Sylvia perceived this and knew it for a hint, she did not respond.

Harboro thought of other possibilities. He turned toward the desert. "There, the sun's dipping down beyond that red ridge," he said. "It will be cooler now. Won't you walk with me?—I'm not going far."

She smiled happily. "I'd like to," she admitted.

And so Sylvia and Harboro walked together out toward the desert. It was, in fact, the beginning of a series of walks, all taken quite as informally and at about the same hour each day.

CHAPTER II

Some of the cruder minds of Eagle Pass made a sorry jest over the fact that nobody "gave the bride away" when she went to the altar—either then or during the brief period of courtship. Her father went to the wedding, of course; but he was not the kind of person you would expect to participate conspicuously in a ceremony of that sort. He was so decidedly of the black-sheep type that the people who assumed management of the affair considered it only fair to Sylvia (and to Harboro) to keep him in the background. Sylvia had never permitted Harboro to come to the house to see her. She had drawn a somewhat imaginary figure in lieu of a father to present to Harboro's mind's eye. Her father (she said) was not very well and was inclined to be disagreeable. He did not like the idea of his daughter getting married. She was all he had, and he was fearfully lonesome at times.

Harboro had accepted all this readily. He had asked no questions.

And so Little went to the wedding. He went early so that he could get a seat over against the wall, where he wouldn't be too conspicuous. He looked decidedly like an outsider, and, as a matter of fact, a good many people did not recognize him as Sylvia's father. He was probably regarded as a stranger who had drifted into the church to enjoy the familiar yet interesting spectacle of a man and a maid bound together by a rite which was the more interesting because it seemed so ephemeral, yet meant so much.

Several of the young women of Eagle Pass had aided Sylvia in getting ready to meet her husband-to-be at the altar. They were well-known girls, acting with the aid (and in the company) of their mothers. They did not admit even to one another what it was that separated Sylvia from their world. Perhaps they did not fully understand. They did know that Sylvia was not one of them; but they felt sorry for her, and they enjoyed the experience of arraying her as a bride and of constituting, for the moment, a pretty and irreproachable setting for her wistful person. They were somewhat excited, too. They had the feeling that they were helping to set a mouse-trap to catch a lion—or something like that.

And after the wedding Mr. and Mrs. Harboro emerged from the church into the clear night, under the stars, and went afoot in the direction of their new home—an attractive structure which Harboro had had erected on what was called the Quemado Road.

A good many of the guests looked after them, and then at each other, but of definite comment there was mighty little.

Sylvia's father went back to his house alone. He was not seen in the Maverick Bar that night, nor for quite a number of succeeding nights. He had never had any experiences in Eagle Pass which proved him to be a courageous man—or to lack courage; but in all probability a sensation akin to fear bothered him more or less during those first days and nights after his daughter had got married.

Perhaps it would have been better for Sylvia if he had brazened it out just at that time, for on the very night of the wedding there was talk in the Maverick Bar. Not open or general comment, certainly. The border folk were not loose of speech. But two young fellows whose social versatility included membership in the Mesquite Club, on the one side, and a free and easy acquaintance with habitués of the Maverick Bar on the other, sat over against the wall behind a card-table and spoke in lowered tones. They pretended to be interested in the usual movements of the place. Two or three cowboys from Thompson's ranch were "spending" and pressing their hospitality upon all and sundry. A group of soldiers from the post were present, and Jesus Mendoza, a Mexican who had accumulated a competency by corralling his inebriated fellow countrymen at election times, and knowing far more about the ticket they voted than they could ever have learned, was resting a spurred boot on the bar railing, and looking through dreamy eyes and his own cloud of cigarette smoke at the front door. Mendoza always created the impression of being interested in something that was about to happen, or somebody who was about to appear—but never in his immediate surroundings.

"It's too bad somebody couldn't have told him," Blanchard, of the Eagle Pass bank, was saying to the other man behind the card-table. The conversation had begun by each asking the other why he wasn't up at the wedding.

"Yes," assented Dunwoodie, the other man. He was a young lawyer whose father had recently died in Belfast, leaving him money

enough to quench a thirst which always flourished, but which never resulted in even partial disqualification, either for business or pleasure. “Yes, but Harboro is.... Say, Blanchard, did you ever know another chap like Harboro?”

“I can’t say I know him very well.”

“Of course—that’s it. Nobody does. He won’t let you.”

“I don’t see that, quite. I have an idea there just isn’t much to know. His size and good looks mislead you. He doesn’t say much, probably because he hasn’t much to say. I’ve never thought of there being any mystery. His behavior in this affair proves that there isn’t much of the right kind of stuff in him. He’s had every chance. The railroad people pushed him right along into a good thing, and the women across the river—the best of them—were nice to him. I have an idea the—er—new Mrs. Harboro will recall some of us to a realization of a truth which we’re rather proud of ignoring, down here on the river: I mean, that we’ve no business asking people about their antecedents.”

Dunwoodie shook his head. “I figure it out differently. I think he’s really a big chap. He won all the fellows over in the railroad offices—and he was pushed over the heads of some of them when he was given that chief clerkship. And then the way he’s got of standing up to the General Manager and the other magnates. And you’ll notice that if you ever ask him a question he’ll give you an answer that sets you to thinking. He seems to work things out for himself. His mind doesn’t just run along the channel of traditions. I like him all the better because he’s not given to small talk. If there was anything worth while to talk about, I’ll bet you’d always find him saying something worth while.”

“You’re right about his not being strong about traditions. There’s the matter of his marriage. Maybe he knows all about Sylvia—and doesn’t care. He *must* know about her.”

“Don’t make a mistake on that score. I’ve seen them together. He reveres her. You can imagine his wanting to spread a cloak for her at every step—as if she were too pure to come into contact with the earth.”

“But good God, man! There’s a path to her back door, worn there by fellows who would tremble like a colt in the presence of a lady.”

Dunwoodie frowned whimsically. “Don’t say a path. It must be just a trail—a more or less indistinct trail.”

Blanchard looked almost excited. “It’s a *path*, I tell you!”

And then both men laughed suddenly—though in Dunwoodie’s laughter there was a note of deprecation and regret.

CHAPTER III

And so Harboro and Sylvia went home to the house on the Quemado Road without knowing that the town had washed its hands of them.

Harboro had made certain arrangements which were characteristic of him, perhaps, and which nobody knew anything about. For example, he had employed the most presentable Mexican woman he could find, to make the house homelike. He had taken a little sheaf of corn-husks away from her so that she could not make any cigarettes for a day or two, and he had read her a patient lecture upon ways and means of making a lot of furniture look as if it had some direct relationship with human needs and pleasures. And he had advised and aided her in the preparation of a wedding supper for two. He had ordered grapes from Parras, and figs—black figs, a little withered, and candied *tunas*. And there was a roast of beef with herbs and chili sauce, and *enchalades*.

The electric lights were turned on up-stairs and down when they entered the house, and Sylvia had an alarmed moment when she pictured a lot of guests waiting for them. But there proved to be nobody in the house but just they two and the old Mexican woman. Antonia, her name was.

Harboro took her by the hand and led her up-stairs to the door of her room. It didn't occur to him that Antonia might better have attended to this part of the welcoming. Antonia was busy, and she was not the sort of person to mother a bride, Harboro thought. She wouldn't have been asked to perform this task in any case. You would have thought that Harboro was dealing with a child rather than a woman—his wife. It seemed the most natural thing in the world for him to take complete charge of her from the beginning.

She uttered a little cry when she entered the bedroom. There by the bed was her trunk, which she had left at home. She hadn't known anything about its having been transferred from one house to the other.

"Who brought it?" she asked, startled.

"I sent for it," explained Harboro. "I knew you'd want it the first thing."

"You didn't go to the house?"

"Oh, no. I sent the expressman to the house and instructed him to ask for your things. I suppose he met your father. It's all right."

She looked at him curiously. There was a little furrow in her forehead. "Do you always do things—that way?" she asked.

He didn't appear to understand what she meant. He had other things on his mind. He stood away from her, by the door. "If I were you I'd take off that—harness," he said. "It makes you look like a picture—or a sacrifice. Do you know the old Aztec legends? It would be nicer for you to look just like a little woman now. Put on one of the dresses you wore when we walked together. How does that strike you?"

"Well, I will." She looked after him as if she were a little bewildered as he turned away, and closed the door. She heard him call back: "I'll see if there's anything I can do for Antonia. Supper will be ready when you come down."

It seemed to her that his conduct was very strange for a lover. He was so entirely matter-of-fact. Yet everything about him seemed to be made up of kindness—to radiate comfort. She had never known any other man like this, she reflected. And then an unfamiliar light dawned upon her. She had had lovers before, certainly; but she realized now, with a deep and strange sensation, that she had never really been loved until Harboro came.

She had some difficulty in getting out of her wedding-finery. There was a momentary temptation to call for help. But she thought better of this, and in the end she came down-stairs like a girl, in a light, clinging dress of Chinese silk, with a girdle and tassel at the waist, and a red ribbon woven into the throat. You might have thought she was seventeen or eighteen. As a matter of fact, she was only twenty-two.

Harboro met her and kissed her, and led her to the table. He had a forceful manner. He was hungry, and it seemed that his efficiency extended to a knowledge of how a dinner should be served.

He took his seat at the end of the table where the roast was, and the carving implements. At Sylvia's place there was a percolator, and the coffee-cups, and the sugar and cream.

Antonia, wizened and dark, came and went silently. To the people of her race a wedding means a *fiesta*, a village hubbub, a dance, and varying degrees of drunkenness. She was not herself in this house of a wedding supper for two, and a prosaic attitude toward the one event in life when money ought to be spent freely, even in the face of impending bankruptcy.

But Harboro speedily set her at ease. They were there to eat their supper—that was all there was to it. He wasn't drinking toasts, or making love. He seemed thoroughly contented; and it didn't occur to him, clearly, that there was any occasion for making a noise or simulating an excitement which he did not feel.

Antonia regarded him furtively, from over his shoulder, as she waited for Sylvia's plate with its portion of the roast. He was a strange *hombre*. Well, she had known big, quiet men before. They were like rocks. It was all very well for a woman if she stood behind such a man for protection as long as she remained quiet; but Heaven help her if she ever undertook to beat him with her fists. She would only break her hands and accomplish nothing else whatever.

Sylvia was not in a mood, seemingly, to eat very heartily; but Harboro thought he understood that, and he made allowances. He did not urge her, unless reassuring tones and comfortable topics may be said to consist of urging.

He regarded her with bright eyes when she poured the coffee; and when her hands trembled he busied himself with trifles so that he would not seem to notice. He produced a cigar and cut the end off with his penknife, and lit it deliberately.

Only once—just before they got up from the table—did he assume the rôle of lover. He turned to Antonia, and with an air of pride and contentment, asked the old woman, in her own language:

"Isn't she a beautiful child?"

Sylvia was startled by his manner of speaking Spanish. Everybody along the border spoke the language a little; but Harboro's wasn't the canteen Spanish of most border Americans. Accent and enunciation were singularly nice and distinct. His mustache bristled rather fiercely over one or two of the words.

Antonia thought very highly of the "child," she admitted. She was *bonisima*, and other superlatives.

And then Harboro's manner became rather brisk again. "Come, I want to show you the house," he said, addressing his wife.

He had taken a great deal of pride in the planning and construction of the house. There was a young Englishman in one of the shops—a draftsman—who had studied architecture in a London office, and who might have been a successful architect but for a downfall which had converted him, overnight, into a remittance-man and a fairly competent employee of the Mexican International. And this man and Harboro had put their heads together and considered the local needs and difficulties, and had finally planned a house which would withstand northers and lesser sand-storms, and the long afternoons' blazing sun, to the best advantage. A little garden had been planned, too. There was hydrant water in the yard. And there was a balcony, looking to the west, over the garden.

She preceded him up-stairs.

"First I want to show you your own room," said Harboro. "What do you call it? I mean the room in which the lady of the house sits and is contented."

I can't imagine what there was in this description which gave Sylvia a hint as to his meaning, but she said:

"A boudoir?"

And Harboro answered promptly: "That's it!"

The boudoir was at the front of the house, up-stairs, overlooking the Quemado Road. It made Sylvia's eyes glisten. It contained a piano, and a rather tiny divan in russet leather, and maple-wood furniture, and electric fixtures which made you think of little mediæval lanterns. But the bride looked at these things somewhat as if she were inspecting a picture, painted in bold strokes: as if they would become obscure if she went too close—as if they couldn't possibly be hers to be at home among.

It did not appear that Harboro was beginning to feel the absence of a spontaneous acceptance on the part of his wife. Perhaps he was rather full of his own pleasure just then.

They closed the door of the boudoir behind them after they had completed their inspection, and at another door Harboro paused impressively.

"This," he said, pushing the door open wide, "is the guest-chamber."

It would have been small wonder if Sylvia had felt suddenly cold as she crossed that threshold. Certainly she seemed a little strange as she stood with her back to Harboro and aimlessly took in the capacious bed and the few other simple articles.

"The guest-chamber?" she echoed presently, turning toward him.

"We'll have guests occasionally—after a while. Friends of yours from San Antonio, perhaps, or fellows I've known all the way from here to the City. We shouldn't want them to go to a hotel, should we? I mean, if they were people we really cared for?"

"I hadn't thought," she answered.

She went to the window and looked out; but the gray sands, pallid under the night sky, did not afford a soothing picture. She turned to Harboro almost as if she were a stranger to him. "Have you many friends?" she asked.

"Oh, no!—not enough to get in my way, you know. I've never had much of a chance for friendships—not for a good many years. But I ought to have a better chance now. I've thought you'd be able to help me in that way."

She did not linger in the room, and Harboro got the idea that she did not like to think of their sharing their home with outsiders. He understood that, too. "Of course we're going to be by ourselves for a long time to come. There shall not be any guests until you feel you'd like to have them." Then, as her eyes still harbored a shadow, he exclaimed gaily: "We'll pretend that we haven't any guest-chamber at all!" And taking a bunch of keys from his pocket he locked the door with a decisive movement.

On the way down the hall they passed their bedroom. "This room you've seen," he said, "our room. But you have not seen the balcony yet."

He was plainly confident that the balcony would make a pleasant impression upon her. He opened yet another door, and they stepped out under the night sky.

The thing had been planned with certain poetic or romantic values in mind. Standing on the balcony you were looking toward the Rio Grande—and Mexico. And you seemed pretty high. There was the

dull silver of the river, and the line of lights along the bridge, and beyond the huddled, dark structures of Piedras Negras. You might have imagined yourself on the deck of a Mediterranean steamer, looking at a town in Algeria or Tunis. And beyond, under the low-hanging stars, was the Mexican desert—a blank page, with only here and there the obscurity of a garden, or a *hacienda*, or a mere speck which would be a lonely casa built of earth.

"Do you like it?" he asked. He had seated himself with a sigh of contentment. His outstretched arms lay along the back of the settee, and he was looking at her eagerly.

Yes, she said, it was nice.... "It is strange that he should be thinking of the view just now," she was saying to herself. A painful turmoil raged within her; but outwardly she was so calm that Harboro was puzzled. To him, too, that view became a negative thing for the moment. "I suspect that house down under the mesquite-tree was a bit shabby," he was thinking. "She's oppressed by so many new things." He gave her time to find her bearings. That was a thing she would do better by being left alone.

And out of the chaos in Sylvia's mind there came the clear realization that Harboro was not living for the moment, but that he was looking forward, planning for a lifetime, and not for a swift, passing storm of passion. There was something static in his nature; there was a stability in the house he had provided and furnished. Her experiences with him were not to be like a flame: sanctioned, yet in all other respects like other experiences she had had in the past.

The silence between them had become uncomfortable—inappropriate; and Harboro put a gentle arm about her and drew her closer to him. "Sit down by me," he said.

He was dismayed by the result of that persuasive movement. The hand he had taken into his trembled, and she would not yield to the pressure of his arm. She hung her head as if desolate memories were crowding between him and her, and he saw that moisture glistened in her eyes.

"Eh?" he inquired huskily, "you're not afraid of me?"

She allowed him to draw her closer, and he felt the negative movement of her head as it lay on his shoulder; but he knew that she *was* afraid, though he did not gauge the quality of her fear. "You

mustn't be afraid, you know." He continued the pressure of his arm until she seemed to relax wholly against him. He felt a delicious sense of conquest over her by sympathy and gentleness. He was eager for that moment to pass, though he held it precious and knew that it would never return again. Then he felt her body tremble as it lay against his.

"That won't do!" he chided gently. "Look!" He stood her on her feet before him, and took her arms at the elbows, pinioning them carefully to her sides. Then he slowly lifted her above him, so that he had to raise his face to look into hers. The act was performed as if it were a rite.

"You mean ... I am helpless?" She checked the manifestation of grief as abruptly as a child does when its mind has been swiftly diverted.

"God bless me, no! I mean anything but that. That's just what I *don't* mean. I mean that you're to have all the help you want—that you're to look to me for your strength, that you are to put your burdens on me." He placed her on the seat beside him and took one of her hands in both his. "There, now, we'll talk. You see, we're one, you and I. That isn't just a saying of the preachers. It's a fact. I couldn't harm you without harming myself. Don't you see that? Nobody could harm you without harming me, too."

He did not notice that her hand stiffened in his at those words.

"When we've been together awhile we'll both realize in wonderful ways what it means really to be united. When you've laid your head on my shoulder a great many times, or against my heart, the very blood in my veins will be the blood in your veins. I can't explain it. It goes beyond physiology. We'll belong to each other so completely that wherever you go I shall be with you, and when I go to work I shall have only to put my hand on my breast to touch you. I'll get my strength from you, and it shall be yours again in return. There, those are things which will come to us little by little. But you must never be afraid."

I would rather not even try to surmise what was in Sylvia's mind when, following those words of his, she swiftly took his face in her hands with unsuspected strength and hungrily kissed him. But

Harboro read no dark meaning into the caress. It seemed to him the natural thing for her to do.

CHAPTER IV

Harboro adopted the plan, immediately after his marriage, of walking to his work in the morning and back to his home in the evening. It was only a matter of a mile or so, and if you kept out of the sun of midday, it was a pleasant enough form of exercise. Indeed, in the morning it was the sort of thing a man of varied experiences might have been expected to enjoy: the walk through Eagle Pass, with a glimpse of the Dolch hotel bus going to meet the early train from Spofford Junction, and a friendly greeting from an occasional merchant, and then the breezy passage across the Rio Grande bridge, spanning the meandering waters which never bore vessels of any sort to the far-off sea, and finally the negotiation of the narrow street in Piedras Negras, past the plaza and the bull-ring, and countless little wine-shops, and the market, with its attractively displayed fruits and vegetables from nobody knew where.

But it is not to be denied that his practice of making this journey to and fro afoot was not without its prejudicial result. The people of quality of either side of the river rarely ever set foot on the bridge, or on those malodorous streets of Piedras Negras which lay near the river. Such people employed a *cochero* and drove, quite in the European style, when business or pleasure drew them from their homes. There was an almost continuous stream of *peones* on the bridge in the mornings and evenings: silent, furtive people, watched closely by the customs guard, whose duties required him on occasion to examine a suspicious-appearing Mexican with decidedly indelicate thoroughness. And all this did not tend to make the bridge a popular promenade.

But Harboro was not squeamish, nor did he entertain slavish thoughts of how people would feel over a disregarded custom. He liked simplicity, and moreover he felt the need of exercise now that his work kept him inactive most of the time. He was at an age when men take on flesh easily.

Nevertheless, people weren't favorably impressed when they looked down from their old-fashioned equipages on their ride between the two republics, and caught a glimpse of the chief clerk marching along the bridge railing—often, as likely as not, in

company with some chance laborer or wanderer, whose garb clearly indicated his lowly estate.

And when, finally, Harboro persuaded Sylvia to accompany him on one of these walks of his, the limits of his eccentricity were thought to have been reached. Indeed, not a few people, who might have been induced to forget that his marriage had been a scandalous one, were inclined for the first time to condemn him utterly when he required the two towns to contemplate him in company with the woman he had married, both of them running counter to all the conventions.

The reason for this trip of Harboro's and Sylvia's was that Harboro wanted Sylvia to have a new dress for a special occasion.

It happened that two or three weeks after his marriage Harboro came upon an interesting bit of intelligence in the Eagle Pass *Guide*, the town's weekly newspaper. It was a Saturday afternoon (the day of the paper's publication), and Harboro had gone up to the balcony overlooking the garden. He had carried the newspaper with him. He did not expect to find anything in the chronicles of local happenings, past or prospective, that would interest him. But there was always a department of railroad news—consisting mainly of personal items—which had for him the quality of a letter from home.

Sylvia was down-stairs at work in the dining-room, directing the efforts of old Antonia. Perhaps I should say that she was extraordinarily happy. I doubt very much if she had come to contemplate the married state through Harboro's eyes; but she seemed to have feared that an avalanche would fall—and none had fallen. Harboro had manifested an unswerving gentleness toward her, and she had begun to "let down," as swimmers say, with confidence in her ability to find bottom and attain the shore.

When at length she went up to the balcony to tell Harboro that supper was ready, she stood arrested by the pleasantly purposeful expression in his eyes. She had learned, rather creditably, to anticipate him.

"You are to have a new dress," he announced.

"Yes.... Why?"

"I see here"—he tapped the paper on his knee—"that they're getting ready for their first dance of the winter at the Mesquite Club."

She forgot herself. "But *we're* not invited!" she said, frankly incredulous.

"Why no, not yet. But we shall be. Why shouldn't we be?"

Her hand went to her heart in the old wistful way. "I don't know ... I just thought we shouldn't be. Those affairs are for ... I've never thought they would invite me to one of their dances."

"Nonsense! They've invited me. Now they'll invite *us*. I suppose the best milliners are across the river, aren't they?"

She seemed unwilling to meet his eyes. "I believe some women get their dresses made over there, and wear them back to this side—so they needn't pay any duty. That is, if they're to be handsome dresses."

"Well, this is going to be a handsome dress."

She seemed pleased, undeniably; yet she changed the subject with evident relief. "Antonia will be cross if we don't go right down. And you must remember to praise the *enchalades*. She's tried with them ever so hard." This wasn't an affectation on Sylvia's part. She was a good-hearted girl.

"It's to be a handsome dress," repeated Harboro an hour later, when they had returned to the balcony. It was dusk now, and little tapers of light were beginning to burn here and there in the desert: small, open fires where Mexican women were cooking their suppers of dried goat's meat and *frijoles*.

Said Sylvia: "If only.... Does it matter so much to you that they should invite us?"

"It matters to me on your account. Such things are yours by right. You wouldn't be happy always with me alone. We must think of the future."

Sylvia took his hand and stroked it thoughtfully. There *were* moments when she hungered for a bit of the comedy of life: laughter and other youthful noises. The Mexican *bailes* and their humble feasts were delightful; and the song of the violins, and the odor of smoke, and the innocent rivalries, and the night air. But the Mesquite Club....

“If only we could go on the way we are,” she said finally, with a sigh of contentment—and regret.

CHAPTER V

Harboro insisted upon her going across the river with him the next day, a Sunday. It was now late in October, but you wouldn't have realized it unless you had looked at the calendar. The sun was warm—rather too warm. The air was extraordinarily clear. It was an election year and the town had been somewhat disorderly the night before. Harboro and Sylvia had heard the noises from their balcony: singing, first, and then shouting. And later drunken Mexicans had ridden past the house and on out the Quemado Road. A Mexican who is the embodiment of taciturnity when afoot, will become a howling organism when he is mounted.

Harboro had telephoned to see if an appointment could be made—to a madame somebody whose professional card he had found in the *Guide*. And he had been assured that monsieur would be very welcome on a Sunday.

Sylvia was glad that it was not on a weekday, and that it was in the forenoon, when she would be required to make her first public appearance with her husband. The town would be practically deserted, save by a few better-class young men who might be idling about the drug-store. They wouldn't know her, and if they did, they would behave circumspectly. Strangely enough, it was Sylvia's conviction that men are nearly all good creatures.

As it fell out it was Harboro and not Sylvia who was destined to be humiliated that day—a fact which may not seem strange to the discerning.

They had got as far as the middle of the Rio Grande bridge without experiencing anything which marred the general effect of a stage set for a Passion Play—but with the actors missing; and then they saw a carriage approaching from the Mexican side.

Harboro knew the horses. They were the General Manager's. And presently he recognized the coachman. The horses were moving at a walk, very slowly; but at length Harboro recognized the General Manager's wife, reclining under a white silk sunshade and listening to the vivacious chatter of a young woman by her side. They would be coming over to attend the services in the Episcopal church in Eagle Pass, Harboro realized. Then he recognized the young woman,

too. He had met her at one of the affairs to which he had been invited. He recalled her as a girl whose voice was too high-pitched for a reposeful effect, and who created the impression that she looked upon the social life of the border as a rather amusing adventure.

You might have supposed that they considered themselves the sole occupants of the world as they advanced, perched on their high seat; and this, Harboro realized, was the true fashionable air. It was an instinct rather than a pose, he believed, and he was pondering that problem in psychology which has to do with the fact that when people ride or drive they appear to have a different mental organism from those who walk.

Then something happened. The carriage was now almost at hand, and Harboro saw the coachman turn his head slightly, as if to hear better. Then he leaned forward and rattled the whip in its place, and the horses set off at a sharp trot. There was a rule against trotting on the bridge, but there are people everywhere who are not required to observe rules.

Harboro paused, ready to lift his hat. He liked the General Manager's wife. But the occupants of the carriage passed without seeing him. And Harboro got the impression that there was something determined in the casual air with which the two women looked straight before them. He got an odd feeling that the most finely tempered steel of all lies underneath the delicate golden filigree of social custom and laws.

He was rather pleased at a conclusion which came to him: people of that kind really *did* see, then. They only pretended not to see. And then he felt the blood pumping through the veins in his neck.

"What is it?" asked Sylvia, with that directness which Harboro comprehended and respected.

"Why, those ladies ... they didn't seem quite the type you'd expect to see here, did they?"

"Oh, there's every type here," she replied lightly. She turned her eyes away from Harboro. There was something in his face which troubled her. She could not bear to see him with that expression of wounded sensibilities and rebellious pride in his eyes. And she had understood everything.

She did not break in upon his thoughts soon. She would have liked to divert his mind, but she felt like a culprit who realizes that words are often betrayers.

And so they walked in silence up that narrow bit of street which connects the bridge with Piedras Negras, and leads you under the balcony of what used to be the American Consul's house, and on past the *cuartel*, where the imprisoned soldiers are kept. Here, of course, the street broadens and skirts the plaza where the band plays of an evening, and where the town promenades round and round the little square of palms and fountains, under the stars. You may remember that a little farther on, on one side of the plaza, there is the immense church which has been building for a century, more or less, and which is still incomplete.

There were a few miserable-looking soldiers, with shapeless, colorless uniforms, loitering in front of the *cuartel* as Harboro and Sylvia passed.

The indefinably sinister character of the building affected Sylvia. "What is it?" she asked.

"It's where the republic keeps a body of its soldiers," explained Harboro. "They're inside—locked up."

They were both glad to sit down on one of the plaza benches for a few minutes; they did so by a common impulse, without speaking.

"It's the first time I ever thought of prisoners having what you'd call an honorable profession," Sylvia said slowly. She gazed at the immense, low structure with troubled eyes. Flags fluttered from the ramparts at intervals, but they seemed oddly lacking in gallantry or vitality.

"It's a barbarous custom," said Harboro shortly. He was still thinking of that incident on the bridge.

"And yet ... you might think of them as happy, living that way."

"Good gracious! Happy?"

"They needn't care about how they are to be provided for—and they have their duties."

"But they're *prisoners*, Sylvia!"

"Yes, prisoners.... Aren't we all prisoners, somehow? I've sometimes thought that none of us can do just what we'd like to do, or come or go freely. We think we're free, as oxen in a treadmill think

of themselves as being free, I suppose. We think we're climbing a long hill, and that we'll get to the top after a while. But at sundown the gate is opened and the oxen are released. They've never really gotten anywhere."

He turned to her with the stanch optimism she had grown accustomed to in him. "A pagan doctrine, that," he said spiritedly.

"A pagan doctrine.... I wonder what that means."

"Pagans are people who don't believe in God. I am not speaking of the God of the churches, exactly. I mean a good influence."

"Don't they believe in their own gods?"

"No doubt. But you might call their own gods bad influences, as often as not."

"Ah—perhaps they're just simple folk who believe in their own experiences."

He had the troubled feeling that her intuitions, her fatalistic leanings, were giving her a surer grasp of the subject than his, which was based upon a rather nebulous, logical process that often brought him to confusion.

"I only know that I am free," he declared doggedly.

The sun had warmed her to an almost vagrant mood. Her smile was delicate enough, yet her eyes held a gentle taunt as she responded: "Not a bit of it; you have a wife."

"A wife—yes; and that gives me ten times the freedom I ever had before. A man is like a bird with only one wing—before he finds a wife. His wife becomes his other wing. There isn't any height beyond him, when he has a wife."

She placed her hands on her cheeks. "Two wings!" she mused.... "What's between the wings?"

"A heart, you may say, if you will. Or a soul. A capacity. Words are fashioned by scholars—dull fellows. But you know what I mean."

From the hidden depths of the *cuartel* a silver bugle-note sounded, and Sylvia looked to see if the soldiers sitting out in front would go away; but they did not do so. She arose. "Would you mind going into the church a minute?" she asked.

"No; but why?"

"Oh, anybody can go into those churches," she responded.

"Anybody can go into *any* church."

"Yes, I suppose so. What I mean is that these old Catholic churches seem different. In our own churches you have a feeling of being—what do you say?—personally conducted. As if you were a visitor being shown children's trinkets. There is something impersonal—something boundless—in churches like this one here. The silence makes you think that there is nobody in them—or that perhaps ... God isn't far away."

He frowned. "But this is just where the trinkets are—in these churches: the images, the painted figures, the robes, the whole mysterious paraphernalia."

"Yes ... but when there isn't anything going on. You feel an influence. I remember going into a church in San Antonio once—a Protestant chapel, and the only thing I could recall afterward was a Yankee clock that ticked too fast and too loud. I never heard of anything so horribly inappropriate. Time was what you thought of. Not eternity. You felt that the people would be afraid of wasting a minute too much—as if their real concerns were elsewhere."

Harboro was instinctively combating the thought that was in her mind, so far as there was a definite thought, and as far as he understood it. "But why shouldn't there be a clock?" he asked. "If people feel that they ought to give a certain length of time to worship, and then go back to their work again, why shouldn't they have a clock?"

"I suppose it's all right," she conceded; and then, with a faint smile: "Yes, if it didn't tick too loud."

She lowered her voice abruptly on the last word. They had passed across the doorless portal and were in the presence of a group of silent, kneeling figures: wretched women whose heads were covered with black cotton *rebozos*, who knelt and faced the distant altar. They weren't in rows. They had settled down just anywhere. And there were men: swarthy, ill-shapen, dejected. Their lips moved noiselessly.

Harboro observed her a little uneasily. Her sympathy for this sort of thing was new to him. But she made none of the customary signs of fellowship, and after a brief interval she turned and led the way back into the sunshine.

He was still regarding her strangely when she paused, just outside the door, and opened a little hand-bag which depended from her arm. She was quite intently devoted to a search for something. Presently she produced a coin, and then Harboro observed for the first time that the tortured figure of a beggar sat in the sun outside the church door.

Sylvia leaned over with an impassive face and dropped the coin into the beggar's cup.

She chanced to glance at Harboro's face an instant later, and she was dismayed a little by its expression: that of an almost violent distaste. What did it mean? Was it because she had given a coin to the beggar? There could have been no other reason. But why should he look as if her action had contaminated her in some fashion—as if there had been communication between her and the unfortunate *anciano*? As if there had been actual contact?

"You wouldn't have done that?" she said.

"No, I shouldn't have done it," he replied.

"I can't think why. The wretched creature—I should have felt troubled if I'd ignored him."

"But it's a profession. It's as much a part of the national customs as dancing and drinking."

"Yes, I know. A profession ... but isn't that all the more reason why we should give him a little help?"

"A reason why you should permit yourself to be imposed upon?"

"I can't help thinking further than that. After all, it's he and his kind that must have been imposed upon in the beginning. It's being a profession makes me believe that all the people who might have helped him, who might have given him a chance to be happy and respectable, really conspired against him in some way. You have to believe that it's the rule that some must be comfortable and some wretched."

"A beggar is a beggar," said Harboro. "And he was filthy."

"But don't you suppose he'd rather be the proprietor of a wine-shop, or something of that sort, if he had had any choice?"

"Well.... It's not a simple matter, of course. I'm glad you did what you felt you ought to do." It occurred to Harboro that he was setting up too much opposition to her whims—whims which seemed rooted

in her principles as well as her impulses. It was as if their minds were of different shapes: hers circular, his square; so that there could be only one point of contact between them—that one point being their love for each other. There would be a fuller conformity after a while, he was sure. He must try to understand her, to get at her odd point of view. She might be right occasionally, when they were in disagreement.

He touched her lightly on the shoulder. “I’m afraid we ought to be getting on to the madame’s,” he said.

CHAPTER VI

Harboro would have made you think of a bear in a toy-shop when he sat down in the tiny front room of Madame Boucher's millinery establishment. He was uncomfortably, if vaguely, conscious of the presence of many hats, displayed on affairs which were like unfinished music-racks.

He had given Madame Boucher certain instructions—or perhaps liberties would be a better word. Mrs. Harboro was to be shown only the best fabrics, he told her; and no pains were to be spared to make a dress which would be a credit to madame's establishment. Madame had considered this, and him, and had smiled. Madame's smile had impressed him curiously. There had been no co-operation between lips and eyes. The eyes had opened a little wider, as if with a stimulated rapaciousness. The lips had opened to the extent of a nicely achieved, symmetrical crescent of teeth. It made Harboro think of a carefully constructed Jack-o'-Lantern.

Sylvia had asked him if he wouldn't help in making a choice, but he had looked slightly alarmed, and had resolutely taken a seat which afforded a view of the big *Casa Blanca* across the way: an emporium conducted on a big scale by Germans. He even became oblivious to the discussion on the other side of the partition, where Sylvia and madame presently entered upon the preliminaries of the business in hand.

The street was quite familiar to him. There had been a year or so, long ago, when he had "made" Piedras Negras, as railroaders say, twice a week. He hadn't liked the town very well. He saw its vice rather than its romance. He had attended one bullfight, and had left his seat in disgust when he saw a lot of men and women of seeming gentility applauding a silly fellow whose sole stock in trade was an unblushing vanity.

His imagination travelled on beyond the bull-pen, to the shabby dance-halls along the river. It was a custom for Americans to visit the dance-halls at least once. He had gone into them repeatedly. Other railroaders who were his associates enjoyed going into these places, and Harboro, rather than be alone in the town, had followed disinterestedly in their wake, and had looked on with cold,

contemplative eyes at the disorderly picture they presented: unfortunate Mexican girls dancing with cowboys and railroaders and soldiers and nondescripts. Three Mexicans, with harp, violin, and 'cello had supplied the music: the everlasting national airs. It seemed to Harboro that the whole republic spent half its time within hearing of *Sobre las Olas*, and *La Paloma*, and *La Golondrina*. He had heard so much of the emotional noises vibrating across the land that when he got away from the throb of his engine, into some silent place, it seemed to him that his ears reverberated with flutes and strings, rather than the song of steam, which he understood and respected. He had got the impression that music smelled bad—like stale wine and burning corn-husks and scented tobacco and easily perishable fruits.

He remembered the only woman who had ever made an impression upon him down in those dance-halls: an overmature creature, unusually fair for a Mexican, who spoke a little English, manipulating her lips quaintly, like a child. He recalled her favorite expression: "My class is very fine!" She had told him this repeatedly, enunciating the words with delicacy. She had once said to him, commiseratingly: "You work very hard?" And when he had confessed that his duties were onerous, she had brightened. "Much work, much money," she had said, with the avidity of a boy who has caught a rabbit in a trap. And Harboro had wondered where she had got such a monstrously erroneous conception of the law of industrialism.

The picture of the whirling figures came back to him: the vapor of dust in the room, the loud voices of men at the bar, trying to be heard above the din of the music and the dancing. There came back to him the memory of a drunken cowboy, nudging the violinist's elbow as he played, and shouting: "Give us *Dixie*—give us a white man's tune"—and the look of veiled hatred in the slumbrous eyes of the Mexican musician, who had inferred the insult without comprehending the words.

He recalled other pictures of those nights: the Indian girls who might be expected to yell in the midst of a dance if they had succeeded in attracting the attention of a man who usually danced with some one else. And there were other girls with a Spanish strain in them—girls with a drop of blood that might have been traced back a hundred years to Madrid or Seville or Barcelona. Small wonder if

such girls felt like shrieking too, sometimes. Not over petty victories, and with joy; but when their hearts broke because the bells of memory called to them from away in the barred windows of Spain, or in walled gardens, or with the shepherd lovers of Andalusia.

If you danced with one of them you paid thirty cents at the bar and got a drink, while the girl was given a check good for fifteen cents in the trade of the place. The girls used to cash in their checks at the end of a night's work at fifty cents a dozen. It wasn't quite fair; but then the proprietor was a business man.

"My class is very fine!" The words came back to Harboro's mind. Good God!—what had become of her? There had been a railroad man, a fellow named Peterson, who was just gross enough to fancy her—a good chap, too, in his way. Courageous, energetic, loyal—at least to other men. He had occasionally thought that Peterson meant to take the poor, pretentious creature away from the dance-halls and establish her somewhere. He had not seen Peterson for years now.

... Sylvia emerged from behind the thin partition, sighing and smiling. "Did it seem very long?" she asked. "It's hard to make up your mind. It's like taking one color out of the rainbow and expecting it to look as pretty as the whole rainbow. But I'm ready now."

"Remember, a week from Wednesday," called Madame Boucher, as Harboro and Sylvia moved toward the door.

Harboro looked at Sylvia inquiringly.

"For the try-on," she explained. "Yes, I'll be here." She went out, Harboro holding the door open for her.

Out on the sidewalk she almost collided with a heavy man, an American—a gross, blond, good-natured creature who suddenly smiled with extreme gratification. "Hello!—*Sylvia!*" he cried. He seized her by the hand and drew her close.

Harboro stood on the door-step and looked down—and recognized Peterson.

PART II

THE TIME OF FLAME

CHAPTER VII

Peterson felt the dark shadow of Harboro immediately. He looked up into the gravely inquiring face above him, and then he gave voice to a new delight. “Hello!—Harboro!” He dropped Sylvia’s hand as if she no longer existed. An almost indefinable change of expression occurred in his ruddy, radiant face. It was as if his joy at seeing Sylvia had been that which we experience in the face of a beautiful illusion; and now, seeing Harboro, it was as if he stood in the presence of a cherished reality. He grasped Harboro’s hand and dragged him down from the step. “Old Harboro!” he exclaimed.

“You two appear to have met before,” remarked Harboro, looking with quiet inquiry from Sylvia to Peterson, and back to Sylvia.

“Yes, in San Antonio,” she explained. It had been in Eagle Pass, really, but she did not want Harboro to know.

The smile on Peterson’s face had become curiously fixed. “Yes, in San Antonio,” he echoed.

“He knew my father,” added Sylvia.

“A particular friend,” said Peterson. And then, the lines of mirth on his face becoming a little less rigid and the color a little less ruddy, he added to Sylvia: “Doesn’t your father occasionally talk about his old friend *Peterson?*”

Harboro interrupted. “At any rate, you probably don’t know that she is Mrs. Harboro now.”

Peterson appeared to be living entirely within himself for the moment. He might have made you think of the Trojan Horse—innocuous without, but teeming with belligerent activity within. He seemed to be laughing maliciously, though without movement or noise. Then he was all frank joyousness again. “Good!” he exclaimed. He smote Harboro on the shoulder. “Good!” He stood apart, vigorously erect, childishly pleased. “Enjoying a holiday?” he asked.

And when Harboro nodded he became animated again. “You’re both going to take dinner with me—over at the *Internacional.* We’ll celebrate. I’ve got to take my train out in an hour—I’ve got a train

now, Harboro." (Harboro had noted his conductor's uniform.) "We'll just have time. We can have a talk."

Harboro recalled a score of fellows he had known up and down the line, with most of whom he had gotten out of touch. Peterson would know about some of them. He realized how far he had been removed from the spontaneous joys of the railroad career since he had been in the office. And Peterson had always been a friendly chap, with lots of good points.

"Should you like it, Sylvia?" he asked.

She had liked Peterson, too. He had always been good-natured and generous. He had seemed often almost to understand.... "I think it would be nice," she replied. She was afraid there was a note of guilt in her voice. She wished Harboro had refused to go, without referring the matter to her.

"I could telephone to Antonia," he said slowly. It seemed impossible to quicken his pulses in any way. "She needn't get anything ready."

"I could do it," suggested Sylvia. She felt she'd rather not be left alone with Peterson. "I could use Madame Boucher's telephone."

But Harboro had already laid his hand on the door. "Better let me," he said. "I can do it quicker." He knew that Antonia would want to remonstrate, to ask questions, and he wanted Sylvia to enjoy the occasion whole-heartedly. He went back into the milliner's shop.

"*Peterson*," said the man who remained on the sidewalk with Sylvia.

"I remember," she replied, her lips scarcely moving, her eyes avoiding his burning glance. "And ... in San Antonio."

They were rather early for the midday meal when they reached the *Internacional*; indeed, they were the first to enter the dining-room. Nevertheless the attitudes of the Mexican waiters were sufficient assurance that they might expect to be served immediately.

Peterson looked at his watch and compared it with the clock in the dining-room. "The train from Spofford is late," he said. "It's due now." He pitched his head up like a dog. "There she is!" he exclaimed. There was the rumble of a train crossing the bridge. "They'll be coming in right away." He indicated the empty tables by a glance.

Harboro knew all about the train schedules and such matters. He knew that American tourists bound for Mexico would be coming over on that train, and that they would have an hour for dinner while their baggage was passing through the hands of the customs officials.

They had given their orders and were still waiting when the train pulled in at the station, close at hand, and in a moment the dining-room became noisy.

"Travel seems pretty light," commented Peterson. He appeared to be trying to make conversation; he was obviously under some sort of constraint. Still, he had the genuine interest of the railroader in the subjects he mentioned.

Harboro had not observed that there was not even one woman among the travellers who entered; but Peterson noted the fact, mentioning it in the tone of one who has been deprived of a natural right. And Harboro wondered what was the matter with a man who saw the whole world, always, solely in relation to women. He sensed the fact that Peterson was not entirely comfortable. "He's probably never grown accustomed to being in the company of a decent woman," he concluded. He tried to launch the subject of old associates. It seemed that Peterson had been out in Durango for some time, but he had kept in touch with most of the fellows on the line to the City. He began to talk easily, and Harboro was enjoying the meeting even before the waiter came back with their food.

Sylvia was ill at ease. She was glad that Harboro and Peterson had found something to talk about. She began to eat the amber-colored grapes the waiter had placed before her. She seemed absent-minded, absorbed in her own thoughts. And then she forgot self in the contemplation of a man and a child who had come in and taken a table at the other end of the dining-room. The man wore a band of crape around his arm. The child, a little girl of five or six, had plainly sobbed herself into a condition verging upon stupor. She was not eating the dinner which had been brought to her, though she occasionally glanced with miserable eyes at one dish or another. She seemed unable to help herself, and at intervals a dry sob shook her tiny body.

Sylvia forgot the grapes beside her plate; she was looking with womanly pity at that little girl, and at the man, who seemed sunk into the depths of despair.

Peterson followed her compassionate glance. “Ah,” he explained, “it’s a chap who came up from Paila a little while back. He had his wife with him. She was dying, and she wanted to be buried in Texas. I believe he’s in some sort of business down in Paila.”

The spirit of compassion surrounded Sylvia like a halo. She had just noted that the little girl was making a stupendous effort to conquer her sobs, to “be good,” as children say. With a heroic resolve which would have been creditable to a Joan of Arc, the little thing suddenly began to try to eat from one of the dishes, but her hands trembled so that she was quite helpless. Her efforts seemed about to suffer a final collapse.

And then Sylvia pushed her chair back and arose. There was a tremulous smile on her lips as she crossed the room. She paused by that man with crape on his sleeve. “I wonder if you won’t let me help,” she said. Her voice would have made you think of rue, or of April rain. She knelt beside the child’s chair and possessed herself of a tiny hand with a persuasive gentleness that would have worked miracles. Her face was uplifted, soft, beaming, bright. She was scarcely prepared for the passionate outburst of the child, who suddenly flung forth eager hands with a cry of surrender. Sylvia held the convulsed body against her breast, tucking the distorted face up under her chin. “There!” she soothed, “there!” She carried her charge out of the room without wasting words. She had observed that when the child came to her the man had seemed on the point of surrender, too. With an effort he had kept himself inert, with a wan face. He had the dubious, *sounding* expression of one who stands at a door with his back to the light and looks out into the dark.

Before she had brought the child back, washed and comforted, to help her with her food, Peterson had forgotten the interruption entirely. Taking advantage of Sylvia’s absence (as if she had been an interfering factor in the meeting, but scarcely a third person), he turned keen eyes upon Harboro. “Old Harboro!” he said affectionately and musingly. Then he seemed to be swelling up, as if he were a mobile vessel filled with water that had begun to boil. He became as red as a victim of apoplexy. His eyes filled with an unholy

mirth, his teeth glistened. His voice was a mere wheeze, issuing from a cataclysm of agonized mirth.

"*And so you've come to it at last!*" he managed to articulate.

"Come to what?" inquired Harboro. His level glance was disconcerting.

Peterson was on the defensive immediately. "You used not to care for women—or you claimed you didn't."

"Oh! I didn't understand. I used not to care for—a certain class of women. I don't yet."

The threatened boiling-over process was abruptly checked, as if a lid had been lifted. "Oh!" said Peterson weakly. He gazed at a fragment of roast beef on his plate. It might have been some sort of strange insect. He frowned at it. And then his eyes blazed steadily and brightly. He did not look at Harboro again for a long time.

Sylvia came back, moving a little shyly, and pushing a strand of hair back into its place. She looked across the dining-room to where the child was talking with old-fashioned sedateness to her father. She had forgotten her tragedy—for the moment. The man appeared to have forgotten, too.

But Peterson's dinner turned out to be a failure, after all. Conversation became desultory, listless.

They arose from their places at last and left the room. On the street they stood for a moment, but nothing was said about another meeting. Harboro thought of inviting Peterson over to the house; but he fancied Sylvia wouldn't like it; and besides, the man's grossness was there, more patent than ever, and it stood between them.

"Well, good-by," said Peterson. He shook hands with Harboro and with Sylvia. But while he shook hands with Sylvia he was looking at Harboro. All that was substantial in the man's nature was educed by men, not by women; and he was fond of Harboro. To him Sylvia was an incident, while Harboro was an episode. Harboro typified work and planning and the rebuffs of the day. Sylvia meant to him only a passing pleasure and the relaxation of the night or of a holiday.

As he went away he seemed eager to get around a corner somewhere. He seemed to be swelling up again. You might have supposed he was about to explode.

CHAPTER VIII

Sylvia's dress made its appearance in due course in the house on the Quemado Road.

Sylvia could not understand why Harboro should have arranged to have it delivered according to routine, paying the duty on it. It seemed to her a waste of money, a willingness to be a victim of extortion. Why should the fact that the river was there make any difference? It was some scheme of the merchants of Eagle Pass, probably, the purpose of which was to compel you to buy from them, and pay higher prices, and take what you didn't want.

The dress was a wonderful affair: a triumph of artful simplicity. It was white, with a suggestion of warmth: an effect produced by a second fabric underlying the visible silk. It made Sylvia look like a gentle queen of marionettes. A set of jewelry of silver filigree had been bought to go with it: circles of butterflies of infinite delicacy for bracelets, and a necklace. You would have said there was only wanting a star to bind in her hair and a wand for her to carry.

But the Mesquite Club ball came and went, and the Harboros were not invited.

Harboro was stunned. The ball was on a Friday night: and on Saturday he went up to the balcony of his house with a copy of the *Guide* clutched in his hand. He did not turn to the railroad news. He was interested only in the full-column, first-page account of the ball at the Mesquite Club. There was the customary amount of fine writing, including a patent straining for new adjectives to apply to familiar decorations. And then there was a list of the names of the guests. Possibly Piedras Negras hadn't been included—and possibly he was still regarded as belonging to the railroad offices, and the people across the river.

But no, there were the names: heads of departments and the usual presentable clerks—young Englishmen with an air. The General Manager, as Harboro knew, was on a trip to Torreon; but otherwise the list of names was sufficient evidence that this first ball of the season had been a particularly ambitious affair.

Sylvia was standing alone in the dining-room while Harboro frowned darkly over the list of names before him. The physical Sylvia

was in the dining-room; but her mind was up on the balcony with Harboro. She was watching him as he scowled at the first page of the *Guide*. But if chagrin was the essence of the thing that bothered Harboro, something far deeper caused Sylvia to stand like a slim, slumbering tree. She was frightened. Harboro would begin to ask why? And he was a man. He would guess the reason. He would begin to realize that mere obscurity on the part of his wife was not enough to explain the fact that the town refused to recognize her existence. And then...?

Antonia spoke to her once and again without being heard. Would the señora have the roast put on the table now, or would she wait until the señor came down-stairs? She decided for herself, bringing in the roast with an entirely erroneous belief that she was moving briskly. An ancient Mexican woman knows very well what the early months of marriage are. There is a flame, and then there are ashes. Then the ashes must be removed by mutual effort and embers are discovered. Then life is good and may run along without any annoyances.

When the señor went up-stairs with scarcely a word to the señora, Antonia looked within, seeming to notice nothing. But to herself she was saying: "The time of ashes." The bustle of the domestic life was good at such a time. She brought in the roast.

Harboro, with the keen senses of a healthy man who is hungry, knew that the roast had been placed on the table, but he did not stir. The *Guide* had slipped from his knee to the floor, and he was looking away to the darkening tide of the Rio Grande. He had looked at his problem from every angle, and now he was coming to a conclusion which did him credit.

... They had not been invited to the ball. Well, what had he done that people who formerly had gone out of their way to be kind to him should ignore him? (It did not occur to him for an instant that the cause lay with Sylvia.) He was not a conceited man, but ... an eligible bachelor must, certainly, be regarded more interestedly than a man with a wife, particularly in a community where the young women were blooming and eligible men were scarce. They had drawn him into their circle because they had regarded him as a desirable husband for one of their young women. He remembered now how the processes of the social mill had brought him up before this young

woman and that until he had met them all: how, often, he had found himself having a *tête-à-tête* with some kindly disposed girl whom he never would have thought of singling out for special attention. He hadn't played their game. He might have remained a bachelor and all would have been well. There would always have been the chance of something happening. But he had found a wife outside their circle. He had, in effect, snubbed them before they had snubbed him. He remembered now how entirely absorbed he had been in his affair with Sylvia, and how the entire community had become a mere indistinct background during those days when he walked with her and planned their future. There wasn't any occasion for him to feel offended. He had ignored the town—and the town had paid him back in his own coin.

He had conquered his black mood entirely when Sylvia came up to him. She regarded him a moment timidly, and then she put her hand on his shoulder. He looked up at her with the alert kindliness which she had learned to prize.

"I'm afraid you're fearfully disappointed," she said.

"I was. But I'm not now." He told her what his theory was, putting it into a few detached words. But she understood and brightened immediately.

"Do you suppose that's it?" she asked.

"What else could it be?" He arose. "Isn't Antonia ready?"

"I think so. And there are so many ways for us to be happy without going to their silly affairs. Imagine getting any pleasure out of sitting around watching a girl trying to get a man! That's all they amount to, those things. We'll get horses and ride. It's ever so much more sensible."

She felt like a culprit let out of prison as she followed him down into the dining-room. For the moment she was no longer the fatalist, foreseeing inevitable exposure and punishment. Nothing had come of their meeting with Peterson—an incident which had taken her wholly by surprise, and which had threatened for an instant to result disastrously. She had spent wakeful hours as a result of that meeting; but the cloud of apprehension had passed, leaving her sky serene again. And now Harboro had put aside the incident of the

Mesquite Club ball as if it did not involve anything more than a question of pique.

She took her place at the end of the table, and propped her face up in her hands while Harboro carved the roast. Why shouldn't she hope that the future was hers, to do with as she would—or, at least, as she could? That her fate now lay in her own hands, and not in every passing wind of circumstance, seemed possible, even probable. If only....

A name came into her mind suddenly; a name carved in jagged, sinister characters. If only Fectnor would stay away off there in the City.

She did not know why that name should have occurred to her just now to plague her. Fectnor was an evil bird of passage who had come and gone. Such creatures had no fixed course. He had once told her that only a fool ever came back the way he had gone. He belonged to the States, somewhere, but he would come back by way of El Paso, if he ever came back; or he would drift over toward Vera Cruz or Tampico.

Fectnor was one of those who had trod that path through the mesquite to Sylvia's back door in the days which were ended. But he was different from the others. He was a man who was lavish with money—but he expected you to pick it up out of the dust. He was of violent moods; and he had that audacity—that taint of insanity, perhaps—which enables some men to maintain the reputation of bad men, of "killers," in every frontier. When Fectnor had come he had seemed to assume the right of prior possession, and others had yielded to him without question. Indeed, it was usually known when the man was in town, and during these periods none came to Sylvia's door save one. He even created the impression that all others were poachers, and that they had better be wary of him. She had been afraid of him from the first; and it had seemed to her that her only cross was removed when she heard that Fectnor had got a contract down in the interior and had gone away. That had happened a good many months ago; and Sylvia remembered now, with a feeling as of an icy hand on her heart, that if her relationships with many of the others in those old days were innocent enough—or at best marred only by a kindly folly—there had been that in her encounters with Fectnor which would forever damn her in Harboro's eyes, if the truth

ever reached him. He would have the right to call her a bad woman; and if the word seemed fantastic and unreal to her, she knew that it would not seem so to Harboro.

If only Fectnor....

She winked quickly two or three times, as if she had been dreaming. Antonia had set her plate before her, and the aroma of the roast was in her nostrils. Harboro was regarding her serenely, affectionately.

CHAPTER IX

They were happier than ever, following that adjusting episode.

Harboro felt that his place had been assigned to him, and he was satisfied. He would have to think of ways of affording diversion for Sylvia, of course; but that could be managed, and in the meantime she seemed disposed to prolong the rapturous and sufficient joys of their honeymoon. He would be on the lookout, and when the moment of reaction came he would be ready with suggestions. She had spoken of riding. There would be places to go. The *bailes* out at the Quemado; weddings far out in the chaparral. Many Americans attended these affairs in a spirit of adventure, and the ride was always delightful. There was a seduction in the desert winds, in the low-vaulted skies with their decorative schemes of constellations.

He was rather at a loss as to how to meet the people who had made a fellow of him. There was Dunwoodie, for example. He ran into Dunwoodie one morning on his way to work, and the good fellow had stopped him with an almost too patent friendliness.

"Come, stop long enough to have a drink," said Dunwoodie, blushing without apparent cause and shaking Harboro awkwardly by the hand. And then, as if this blunt invitation might prove too transparent, he added: "I was in a game last night, and I'm needing one."

There was no need for Dunwoodie to explain his desire for a drink—or his disinclination to drink alone. Harboro saw nothing out of the ordinary in the invitation; but unfortunately he responded before he had quite taken the situation into account.

"It's pretty early for me," he said. "Another time—if you'll excuse me."

It was to be regretted that Harboro's manner seemed a trifle stiff; and Dunwoodie read uncomfortable meanings into that refusal. He never repeated the invitation; and others, hearing of the incident, concluded that Harboro was too deeply offended by what the town had done to him to care for anybody's friendship any more. The thing that the town had done to Harboro was like an open page to everybody. Indeed, the people of Eagle Pass knew that Harboro had

been counted out of eligible circles considerably before Harboro knew it himself.

As for Sylvia, contentment overspread her like incense. She was to have Harboro all to herself, and she was not to be required to run the gantlet of the town's too-knowing eyes. She felt safe in that house on the Quemado Road, and she hoped that she now need not emerge from it until old menaces were passed, and people had come and gone, and she could begin a new chapter.

She was somewhat annoyed by her father during those days. He sent messages by Antonia. Why didn't she come to see him? She was happy, yes. But could she forget her old father? Was she that kind of a daughter? Such was the substance of the messages which reached her.

She would not go to see him. She could not bear to think of entering his house. She had been homesick occasionally—that she could not deny. There had been moments when the new home oppressed her by its orderliness, by its strangeness. And she was fond of her father. She supposed she ought not to be fond of him; he had always been a worthless creature. But such matters have little to do with the law of cause and effect. She loved him—there was the truth, and it could not be ignored. But with every passing day the house under the mesquite-tree assumed a more terrible aspect in her eyes, and the house on the Quemado Road became more familiar, dearer.

Unknown to Harboro, she sent money to her father. He had intimated that if she could not come there were certain needs ... there was no work to be obtained, seemingly.... And so the money which she might have used for her own pleasure went to her father. She was not unscrupulous in this matter. She did not deceive Harboro. She merely gave to her father the money which Harboro gave her, and which she was expected to use without explaining how it was spent.

With the passing of days she ceased to worry about those messages of her father—she ceased to regard them as reminders that the tie between her old life and the new was not entirely broken. And following the increased assurances of her safety in Harboro's house and heart, she began to give rein to some of the coquetries of her nature.

She became an innocent siren, studying ways of bewitchment, of endearment. She became a bewildering revelation to him, amazing him, delighting him. After he had begun to conclude that he knew her she became not one woman, but a score of women: demure, elfin, pensive, childlike, sedate, aloof, laughing—but always with her delight in him unconcealed: the mask she wore always slipping from its place to reveal her eagerness to draw closer to him, and always closer.

The evenings were beginning to be cool, and occasionally she enticed him after nightfall into the room he had called her boudoir. She drew the blinds and played the infinitely varied game of love with him. She asked him to name some splendid lover, some famous courtier. Ingomar? Very well, he should be Ingomar. What sort of lover was he?... And forthwith her words, her gestures and touches became as chains of flowers to lead him to do her bidding. Napoleon? She saluted him, and marched prettily before him—and halted to claim her reward in kisses. He was Antony and Leander.

When she climbed on his knees with kisses for Leander he pretended to be surprised. “More kisses?” he asked.

“But these are the first.”

“And those other kisses?”

“They? Oh, they were for Antony.”

“Ah, but if you have kissed Antony, Leander does not want your kisses.”

Her face seemed to fade slightly, as if certain lights had been extinguished. She withdrew a little from him and did not look at him. “Why?” she asked presently. The gladness had gone out of her voice.

“Well ... kisses should be for one lover; not for two.”

She pondered, and turned to him with an air of triumph. “But you see, these are new kisses for Leander. They are entirely different. They’ve never been given before. They’ve got nothing to do with the others.”

He pretended to be convinced. But the kisses she gave to Leander were less rapturous. She was thinking.

“I’m afraid you don’t think so highly of ... Leander,” he suggested. “Suppose I be ... Samson?”

She leaned her head on his shoulder as if she had grown tired.

"Samson was a very strong man," he explained. "He could push a house down."

That interested her.

"Would you like to be Samson?" she asked.

"I think it might be nice ... but no—the woman who kissed Samson betrayed him. I think I won't be Samson, after all."

She had been nervously fingering the necklace of gold beads at her throat; and suddenly she uttered a distressed cry. The string had broken, and the beads fell in a yellow shower to the rug.

She climbed down on her knees beside him and picked up the beads, one by one.

"Let them go," he urged cheerfully, noting her distress. "Come back. I'll be anybody you choose. Even Samson."

That extinguished light seemed to have been turned on again. She looked up at him smiling. "No, I don't want you to be Samson," she said. "And I don't want to lose my beads."

He regarded her happily. She looked very little and soft there on the rug. "You look like a kitten," he declared.

She picked up the last bead and looked at the unstable baubles in her pink left palm. She tilted her hand so that they rolled back and forth. "Could a kitten look at a king?" she asked with mock earnestness.

"I should think it could, if there happened to be any king about."

She continued to make the beads roll about on her hand. "I'm going to be a kitten," she declared with decision. "Would you like me to be a kitten?" She raised herself on her knees and propped her right hand behind her on the rug for support. She was looking earnestly into his eyes.

"If you'd like to be," he replied.

"Hold your hand," she commanded. She poured the beads into his immense, hard palm. "Don't spill them." She turned about on the rug on hands and knees, and crept away to the middle of the floor. She turned and arose to her knees, and rested both hands before her on the floor. She held her head high and *meowed* twice so realistically that Harboro leaned forward, regarding her with

wonder. She lowered herself and turned and crept to the window. There she lifted herself a little and patted the tassel which hung from the blind. She continued this with a certain sedateness and concentration until the tassel went beyond her reach and caught in the curtain. Then she let herself down again, and crawled to the middle of the floor. Now she was on her knees, her hands on the floor before her, her body as erect as she could hold it. Again she *meowed*—this time with a certain ennui; and finally she raised one arm and rubbed it slowly to and fro behind her ear.... She quickly assumed a defensive attitude, crouching fiercely. An imaginary dog had crossed her path. She made an explosive sound with her lips. She regained her tranquillity, staring with slowly returning complacency and contempt while the imaginary dog disappeared.

Harboro did not speak. He looked on in amazed silence to see what she would do next. His swarthy face was too sphinx-like to express pleasure, yet he was not displeased. He was thinking: She is a child—but what an extraordinary child!

She crawled toward him and leaned against his leg. *She was purring!*

Harboro stooped low to see how she did it, but her hair hid her lips from him.

He seized her beneath the arms and lifted her until her face was on a level with his. He regarded her almost uncomfortably.

"Don't you like me to be a kitten?" She adjusted her knees on his lap and rested her hands on his shoulders. She regarded him gravely.

"Well ... a kitten gets to be a cat," he suggested.

She pulled one end of his long mustache, regarding him intently. "Oh, a cat. But this is a different kind of a kitten entirely. It's got nothing to do with cats." She held her head on one side and pulled his mustache slowly through her fingers. "It won't curl," she said.

"No, I'm not the curly sort of man."

She considered that. It seemed to present an idea that was new to her. "Anyway, I'm glad you're a big fellow."

As he did not respond to this, she went on: "Those little shrimps—you couldn't be a kitten with them. They would have to be puppies. That's the only fun you could have."

“Sylvia!” he remonstrated. He adjusted her so that she sat on his lap, with her face against his throat. He was recalling that other Sylvia: the Sylvia of the dining-room, of the balcony; the circumspect, sensible, comprehending Sylvia. But the discoveries he was making were not unwelcome. Folly wore for him a face of ecstasy, of beauty.

As she nestled against him, he whispered: “Is the sandman coming?”

And she responded, with her lips against his throat: “Yes—if you’ll carry me.”

Antonia was wrong. This was not the time of ashes. It was the time of flame.

PART III

FECTNOR, THE PEOPLE'S ADVOCATE

CHAPTER X

And then Fectnor came.

The date of the election was drawing near, and a new sheriff was to be jockeyed into office by the traditional practice of corralling all the male adult Mexicans who could be reached, and making them vote just so. The voice of the people was about to be heard in the land.

It was a game which enjoyed the greatest popularity along the border in those years. Two played at it: the opposing candidates. And each built him a corral and began capturing Mexicans two or three days before the election.

The Mexicans were supposed to have their abodes (of a sort) in Maverick County; but there was nothing conservative in the rules under which the game was played. If you could get a consignment of voters from Mexico you might do so, resting assured that your opponent would not hesitate to fill his corral with citizens from the other side of the river.

The corrals were amazing places. Dispensers of creature comforts were engaged. Barbecued meat and double rations of *mezcal* were provided. Your Mexican voters, held rigorously as prisoners, were in a state of collapse before the day of the election. They were conveyed in carryalls to the polls, and heads were counted, and the candidate got credit for the full number of constituents he had dumped out into the sunshine.

And then your voter disappeared back into the chaparral, or over the Rio Grande bridge, and pondered over the insanity of the *gringos*.

It will be seen that the process touched upon was less pleasant than simple. Among the constituents in the corrals there was often a tendency to fight, and occasionally a stubborn fellow had a clear idea that he wanted to be in a different corral from the one in which he found himself. There was needed a strong-handed henchman in these cases. Jesus Mendoza was the henchman for one faction, but the other faction needed a henchman, too.

And so Fectnor came.

He had the reputation of knowing every Mexican in Maverick County and in the territory immediately contiguous thereto. Many of them had been members of his gangs when he had contracts in the neighborhood of Eagle Pass. He knew precisely which of them could be depended upon to remain docile under all manner of indignity, and which of them had a bad habit of placing a sudden check on their laughter and lunging forward with a knife. They knew him, too. They feared him. They knew he could be coldly brutal—an art which no Mexican has ever mastered. The politicians knew that getting Fectnor was almost equivalent to getting the office. It was more economical to pay him his price than to employ uncertain aids who would have sold their services much more cheaply.

Harboro and Sylvia were sitting on their balcony the second night before the election. A warm wind had been blowing and it was quite pleasant out of doors.

One of the corrals lay not far from the house on the Quemado Road. Mounted Mexicans had been riding past the house and on into the town all day, and, contrary to usual custom, they were not to be seen later in the day returning to the chaparral. They were being prepared to exercise their suffrage privileges.

As Harboro and Sylvia listened it was to be noted that over in the corral the several noises were beginning to be blended in one note. The barbecue fires were burning down; the evening meal had been served, with reserved supplies for late comers. *Mezcal* and cheap whiskey were being dispensed. A low hum of voices arose, with the occasional uplifting of a drunken song or a shout of anger.

Suddenly Harboro sat more erect. A shout had arisen over in the corral, and a murmur higher and more sinister than the dominant note of the place grew steadily in intensity. It came to a full stop when a pistol-shot arose above the lesser noises like a sky-rocket.

“He’s getting his work in,” commented Harboro. He spoke to himself. He had forgotten Sylvia for the moment.

“He? Who?” inquired Sylvia.

He turned toward her in the dusk and replied—with indifference in his tone now—“Fectnor.”

She shrank back so that her face would be out of his line of vision. “Fectnor!” she echoed.

“A fellow they’ve brought up from the interior to help with the election. A famous bad man, I believe.”

There was silence for a long interval. Harboro supposed the matter did not interest her; but she asked at length: “You know him, then?”

“Only by reputation. A fellow with a lot of bluff, I think. I don’t believe very much in bad men. He’s managed to terrify the Mexicans somehow or other.” He had not noticed that her voice had become dull and low.

“Fectnor!” she breathed to herself. She rocked to and fro, and after a long interval, “Fectnor!” she repeated.

He hitched his chair so that he could look at her. Her prolonged silence was unusual. “Are you getting chilly?” he asked solicitously.

“It does seem chilly, doesn’t it?” she responded.

They arose and went into the house.

CHAPTER XI

Antonia went marketing the next morning, and when she came back Sylvia met her with fearful, inquiring eyes. She was terribly uneasy, and she was one of those creatures who must go more than half-way to meet impending danger. She was not at all surprised when Antonia handed her a sealed envelope.

The old servant did not linger to witness the reading of that written message. She possessed the discretion of her race, of her age. The señora had been married quite a time now. Doubtless there were old friends....

And Sylvia stood alone, reading the sprawling lines which her father had written:

"*Fectnor's here. He wants to see you. Better come down to the house. You know he's likely to make trouble if he doesn't have his way.*"

She spelled out the words with contracted brows; and then for the moment she became still another Sylvia. She tore the missive into bits. She was pale with rage—rage which was none the less obsessing because it had in it the element of terror. Her father dared to suggest such a thing! It would have been bad enough if Fectnor had sent the summons himself; but for her father to unite with him against her in such an affair!

She tried to calm herself, succeeding but illy. "Antonia!" she called. "Antonia!" For once her voice was unlovely, her expression was harsh.

The startled old woman came with quite unprecedented alacrity.

"Antonia, where did you see my father?"

"On the street. He seemed to have waited for me."

"Very well. You must find him again. It doesn't matter how long you search. I want you to find him."

She hurriedly framed a response to that note of her father's:

"*I will not come. Tell Fectnor I never will see him again. He will not dare to harm me.*"

As she placed this cry of defiance into an envelope and sealed and addressed it certain words of Harboro's came back to her. That night

of their wedding he had lifted her in his powerful arms and had given her a man's assurance: "I mean that you're to have all the help you want—that you're to look to me for your strength."

She reasoned shrewdly: Harboro wasn't the sort of man people would tell things to—about her. They would know what to expect: intense passion, swift punishment.

And yet as she watched Antonia go away down the road, suggesting supine submission rather than a friend in need, her heart failed her. Had she done wisely? Fectnor had never stepped aside for any man. He seemed actually to believe that none must deny him the things he wanted. He seemed an insane creature when you thwarted him. There was something terrible about his rages.

She imagined seemingly impossible things: that Fectnor would come to the house—perhaps while Harboro was there. He might kill Harboro.

Alas, the evil she had done in those other days loomed before her now in its true light: not merely as evil deeds, definitely ended with their commission, but as fearful forces that went on existing, to visit her again and destroy her.

She began to hope that Fectnor would actually come to her—now, before Harboro came home. At the worst she might save Harboro, and there was even a chance that she could make Fectnor see her position as she saw it—that she could persuade him to be merciful to her. Surely for the sake of security and peace in all the years that lay before her.... A definite purpose dawned in her eyes. She went to her room and began deliberately to choose her most becoming street costume.

She was ready to go out when Antonia returned.

"Did you find him?" she asked.

Yes, the old woman had found him and delivered the message. He had sent no word in return; he had only glared at the bearer of the message and had cursed her.

"Well, never mind," said Sylvia soothingly. It occurred to her that it must be a sad thing to be an old woman, and a Mexican, and to have to serve as the wire over which the electric current flowed—and to feel only the violence of the current without comprehending the words it carried.

And now to find Fectnor—for this was what she meant to do.

She would see him on the street, where publicity would protect her, even if there were no friends to take her part. She would see him on the street and explain why she could not meet him any more, why he must not ask it. Certainly it would not look very well for her to be seen talking to him; but she could not help that. She would be going out to do a little shopping, ostensibly, and she would hope to encounter him on the street, either coming or going.

However, her earnest planning proved to be of no avail. Fectnor was nowhere to be seen.

She walked rather leisurely through the town—moving barely fast enough to avoid the appearance of loitering. She walked circumspectly enough, seemingly taking little interest in events or individuals. That she was keenly on the alert for one familiar face no one would have guessed.

She got quite to the end of the main street, and then she halted in painful uncertainty. If she turned back now she would have to go on steadily back to her home, save for a brief stop at one of the stores, or else betray the fact to any who might be curiously observing her that she was on the street on some secret mission.

She stood for a space, trying to decide what to do. Often before she had stood on that very spot to view the picture which men and the desert had painted on a vast canvas down toward the river. She occupied a point of vantage at the top of a long flight of stone steps, broken and ancient, leading down to the Rio Grande and its basin. Along the water's edge in the distance, down in the depths below her, ancient Mexican women were washing garments by a process which must have been old in Pharaoh's time: by spreading them on clean rocks and kneading them or applying brushes. The river flowed placidly; the sunlight enveloped water and rock and shore and the patient women bending over their tasks. Nineveh or Tyre might have presented just such a picture of burdened women, concealing no one might say what passions and fires under an exterior which suggested docility or the unkind pressure of tradition's hand or even hopelessness.

But Sylvia scarcely saw the picture now. She was recalling the words she had written in that message to her father. If only she had

not defied Fectnor; if only she had made a plea for pity, or suggested a fear of her husband—or if she hadn't sent any answer at all!

It occurred to her that the exposure which menaced her was as nothing to the perils to which she had subjected Harboro. She knew instinctively that Harboro was not a man to submit to deliberate injury from any source. He would defend himself in the face of any danger; he would defend that which belonged to him. And Fectnor was cruel and unscrupulous and cunning. He knew how to provoke quarrels and to gain advantages.

She grew cold at the thought of losing Harboro. The inevitable consequences of such a loss occurred to her. She would have to submit always to Fectnor as long as he willed it. And afterward.... Ah, she must find Fectnor!

She retraced her steps. At a shop where silks were sold she entered. She asked for a piece of ribbon. A particular shade of blue; she could not describe it. She sat on a stool at the counter and kept an eye on the street.... No, something darker than that, something less lustrous. She examined bolt after bolt, and when at length it appeared that she was quite unwilling to be pleased she made a choice. And always she watched the street, hoping that Fectnor would pass.

At last she went up the Quemado Road, walking disconsolately. The withered immensity of the world broke her spirit. The vast stricken spaces were but a material manifestation of those cruelties of nature which had broken her long ago, and which could not be expected to withdraw their spell now that the time had come for her destruction.

She looked far before her and saw where the Quemado Road attained its highest point and disappeared on the other side of a ridge. A house stood there, lonely and serene. She had known it was a convent; but now she observed it with eyes which really saw it for the first time. It had looked cool even during the period of midsummer. There was shade—a friendly garden. She had seen the Mother Superior once or twice: a large, elderly woman who wore but lightly the sedate mien which concealed a gentle humanity.

What if she, Sylvia, were to go on past her own house, on up to the ridge, and appeal to that unworldly woman for succor? Was there a refuge there for such as she?

But this was the merest passing fancy. Where the tides of life ran high she had been moulded; here in the open she would meet her end, whatever the end might be.

She sat inside her house throughout that long day. Beside an open window she kept her place, staring toward Eagle Pass, her eyes widening whenever a figure appeared on the highway.

But the individual she feared—Fectnor, her father, a furtive messenger—did not appear.

Harboro came at last: Harboro, bringing power and placidity.

She ran out to the gate to meet him. Inside the house she flung herself into his arms.

He marvelled at her intensity. He held her a long moment in his embrace. Then he gazed into her eyes searchingly. "Everything is all right," he said—the words being an affirmation rather than a question. He had read an expression of dread in her eyes.

"Yes, everything is all right," she echoed. Everything *was* right now. She seemed to awaken from a horrible nightmare. Harboro's presence put to flight an army of fears. She could scarcely understand why she had been so greatly disturbed. No harm could come to him, or to her. He was too strong, too self-contained, to be menaced by little creatures. The bigness of him, the penetrating, kindly candor of his eyes, would paralyze base minds and violent hands seeking to do him an injury. The law had sanctioned their union, too—and the law was powerful.

She held to that supporting thought, and during the rest of the evening she was untroubled by the instinctive knowledge that even the law cannot make right what the individual has made wrong.

She was as light-hearted as a child that night, and Harboro, after the irksome restraints of the day, rejoiced in her. They played at the game of love again; and old Antonia, in her place down-stairs, thought of that exchange of letters and darkly pondered.

CHAPTER XII

The election came and went; the voice of the people had been heard, and Maverick County had a new sheriff. In the house on the Quemado Road Fectnor's name was heard no more.

On the Saturday night following the election Harboro came home and found a letter waiting for him on the table in the hall. He found also a disquieted Sylvia, who looked at him with brooding and a question in her eyes.

He stopped where he stood and read the letter, and Sylvia watched with parted lips—for she had recognized the handwriting on the envelope.

Harboro's brows lowered into a frown. "It's from your father," he said finally, lifting his eyes from the letter and regarding Sylvia.

She tried to achieve an effect of only mild interest. "What can he have to write to you about?" she asked.

"Poor fellow—it seems he's been ill. Sylvia, how long has it been since you visited your father?"

"Does he want me to come to see him?"

"He hints at that pretty strongly. Yes, that's really the substance of his letter."

"I've never been back since we were married."

She led the way into the dining-room. Her manner was not quite responsive. She made Harboro feel that this was a matter which did not concern him.

"But isn't that—doesn't that seem rather neglectful?"

She drew a chair away from the table and sat down facing him. "Yes, it does seem so. I think I've hinted that I wasn't happy in my old home life; but I've never talked very much about it. I ought to tell you, I think, that I want to forget all about it. I want the old relationship broken off completely."

Harboro shook his head with decision. "That won't do," he declared. "Believe me, you're making a mistake. You're a good deal younger than I, Sylvia, and it's the way of the young to believe that for every old tie broken a new one can be formed. At your age life seems to have an abundance of everything. But you'll be dismayed,

in a few years, to discover that most things come to us but once, and that nearly all the best things come to us in our youth."

He stood before her with an air of such quiet conviction, of such tranquil certainty of the truth of what he said that she could not meet his glance. She had placed an elbow on the table, and was supporting her face in her hand. Her expression was strangely inscrutable to the man who looked down at her.

"Your father must be getting old. If you shouldn't see him for a year or so, you'd be fearfully grieved to note the evidences of failure: a slight stoop, perhaps; a slower gait; a more troubled look in his eyes. I want to help you to see this thing clearly. And some day you'll get word that he is dead—and then you'll remember, too late, how you might have carried little joys to him, how you might have been a better daughter...."

She sprang up, shaking the tears from her eyes. "I'll go," she said. She startled Harboro by that note of despair in her voice. "When does he wish me to come?"

"He says he is ill and alone. I think he would be glad if I could persuade you to go this evening. Why not this evening?"

Unfortunately, Harboro concealed a part of the truth in this. Her father had quite definitely asked to have her come this evening. But Harboro wished her to feel that she was acting voluntarily, that she was choosing for herself, both as to the deed and as to the time of its doing.

And Sylvia felt a wave of relief at the assurance that her father had not set a definite time. Oh, surely the letter was just what it purported to be—a cry of loneliness and an honest desire to see her. And Sylvia really loved her father. There was that in her nature which made it impossible for her to judge him.

"I could go with you," ventured Harboro, "though he doesn't say anything about my coming. I've felt we must both go soon. Of course, I need not wait for an invitation."

But Sylvia opposed this. "If he's ill," she said, "I think I ought to go alone this time." She added to herself: "I don't want him ever to go. I must make him believe that enough has been done if I go myself. I must convince him that my father doesn't care to have him come."

Nevertheless, she was quite resigned to the arrangement that had been made for her. She helped Antonia make the final preparations for supper, and she set off down the road quite cheerfully after they arose from the table. Harboro watched her with a new depth of tenderness. This sweet submission, the quick recognition of a filial duty once it was pointed out to her—here were qualities which were of the essence of that childlike beauty which is the highest charm in women.

And Sylvia felt a strange eagerness of body and mind as she went on her way. She had put all thought of the house under the mesquite-tree out of mind, as far as possible. Becoming a closed book to her, the place and certain things which had been dear to her had become indistinct in her memory. Now that she was about to reopen the book various little familiar things came back to her and filled her mind with eagerness. The tiny canary in its cage—it would remember her. It would wish to take a bath, to win her praise. There had been a few potted plants, too; and there would be the familiar pictures—even the furniture she had known from childhood would have eloquent messages for her.

This was the frame of mind she was in as she opened her father's gate, and paused for an instant to recall the fact that here she had stood when Harboro appeared before her for the first time. It was near sundown now, just as it had been then; and—yes, the goatherd was there away out on the trail, driving his flock home.

She turned toward the house; she opened the door eagerly. Her eyes were beaming with happiness.

But she was chilled a little by the sight of her father. Something Harboro had said about her father changing came back to her. He *had* changed—just in the little while that had elapsed since her marriage. But the realization of what that change was hurt her cruelly. He looked mean and base as he had never looked before. The old amiable submission to adversities had given place to an expression of petulance, of resentment, of cunning, of cowardice. Or was it that Sylvia was looking at him with new eyes?

He sat just inside the door, by a window. He was in a rocking-chair, and his hands lay heavily against the back of it. He had a blanket about him, as if he were cold. He looked at her with a strange lack of responsiveness when she entered the room.

"I got your message," she said affectionately. "I am glad you let me know you weren't feeling very well." She touched his cheeks with her hands and kissed him. "You *are* cold," she added, as if she were answering the question that had occurred to her at sight of the blanket.

She sat down near him, waiting for him to speak. He would have a great many things to say to her, she thought. But he regarded her almost stolidly.

"Your marriage seems to have changed you," he said finally.

"For the better, I hope!"

"Well, that's according to the way you look at it. Cutting your old father cold isn't for the better, as far as I can see."

She did not resent the ungenerous use of that phrase, "old father," though she could not help remembering that he was still under fifty, and that he looked young for his years. It was just one of his mannerisms in speaking.

"I didn't do that, you know," she said. "Being married seems a wonderful adventure. There is so much that is strange for you to get used to. But I didn't forget you. You've seen Antonia—occasionally...?"

The man moved his head so that it lay on one side against the chair-back. "I thought you'd throw that up to me," he complained.

"Father!" she remonstrated. She was deeply wounded. It had not been her father's way to make baseless, unjust charges against her. Shiftless and blind he had been; but there had been a geniality about him which had softened his faults to one who loved him.

"Well, never mind," he said, in a less bitter tone. And she waited, hoping he would think of friendlier words to speak, now that his resentment had been voiced.

But he seemed ill at ease in her presence now. She might have been a stranger to him. She looked about her with a certain fond expression which speedily faded. Somehow the old things reminded her only of unhappiness. They were meaner than she had supposed them to be. Their influence over her was gone.

She brought her gaze back to her father. He had closed his eyes as if he were weary; yet she discerned in the lines of his face a hard fixity which troubled her, alarmed her. Though his eyes were closed

he did not present a reposeful aspect. There was something really sinister about that alert face with its closed eyes—as there is about a house with its blinds drawn to hide evil enterprises.

So she sat for interminable minutes, and it seemed to Sylvia that she was not surprised when she heard the sound of tapping at the back door.

She was not surprised, yet a feeling of engulfing horror came over her at the sound.

Her father opened his eyes now; and it seemed really that he had been resting. “The boy from the drug-store,” he said. “They were to send me some medicine.”

He seemed to be gathering his energies to get up and admit the boy from the drug-store, but Sylvia sprang to her feet and placed a restraining hand on his shoulder. “Let me go,” she said.

There was an expression of pity and concern for her father in her eyes when she got to the door and laid her hand on the latch. She was too absent-minded to observe at first that the bolt had been moved into its place, and that the door was locked. Her hand had become strange to the mechanism before her, and she was a little awkward in getting the bolt out of the way. But the expression of pity and concern was still in her eyes when she finally pulled the door toward her.

And then she seemed to have known all the time that it was Fectnor who stood there.

CHAPTER XIII

He slipped past her into the room, and when she uttered a forlorn cry of defeat and shrank back he gripped her by the wrist. Holding her so, he turned where he stood and locked the door again. Then he crossed the room, and closed and bolted that other door which opened into the room where Sylvia's father sat.

Then he released her and stood his ground stolidly while she shrank away from him, regarding him with incredulous questioning, with black terror. She got the impression that he believed himself to have achieved a victory; that there was no further occasion for him to feel anxious or wary. It was as if the disagreeable beginning to a profitable enterprise had been gotten over with. And that look of callous complacence was scarcely more terrifying than his silence, for as yet he had not uttered a word.

And yet Sylvia could not regard herself as being really helpless. That door into her father's room: while it held, her father could not come to her, but she could go to her father. She had only to wait until Fectnor was off his guard, and touch the bolt and make her escape. Yet she perceived now, that for all Fectnor's seeming complacence, he remained between her and that door.

She looked about for other means of escape; but she knew immediately that there was none. Her own bedroom opened off the room in which she was now trapped; but it was a mere cubby-hole without an outer door or even a window. On the other side of the room there was a window looking out toward the desert; but even as her glance sought relief in that direction she remembered that this window, of only half-sash dimensions, was nailed into its place and was immovable. Against the dusty panes a bird-cage hung, and she realized with an oddly ill-timed pang of sorrow that it was empty. It was plain that the canary had died during her absence; and she wondered if anything in all the world could seem so empty as a bird-cage which had once had an occupant and had lost it. The sunset sky beyond that empty cage and the uncleaned window-panes caught her glance: an infinitely far-off drift of saffron with never a moving figure between it and the window through which she looked.

Then all her terrors were renewed by Fectnor's voice. He had sauntered to a small table near the middle of the room and sat down on the end of it, after shoving a chair in Sylvia's direction.

"What's the matter with you, Sylvia?" he demanded. He scarcely seemed angry: impatient would be the word, perhaps.

Something in his manner, rather than his words, wiped out that chasm of time that had been placed between them. It was as if she had talked with him yesterday. She felt hideously familiar with him—on the same mental and moral plane with him.

"I am married," she said shortly. If she had thought she would resort to parleying and evasions, she now had no intention of doing so. It seemed inevitable that she should talk to Fectnor in his own language.

"I don't care anything about your marriage," he said. "A bit of church flummery. Use your brains, Sylvia. You know that couldn't make any difference."

"I'm not thinking about the flummery. That isn't it. It's the fact that I love the man I married."

"All very well and good. But you know you used to love me."

"No, I never did."

"Oh, yes you did. You just forget. At any rate, you was as much to me as you could ever be to a husband. You know you can't drop me just because it's convenient for you to take up with somebody else. You know that's not the way I'm built."

She had refused to use the chair he had shoved toward her. She stood beside it a little defiantly. Now she looked into his eyes with a kind of imperious reasonableness. "Whatever I was to you, Fectnor," she said, "I became because I was forced into it."

"I never forced you," he responded stoutly.

"In one way, you didn't; but just the same ... you had both hands reached out to seize me when I fell. You never tried to help me; you were always digging the pitfall under my feet. You were forever holding out your hand with money in it; and there was you on one side of me with your money, and my father on the other with his never-ending talk about poverty and debts and his fear of you—and you know you took pains to make him fear you—and his saying always that it wouldn't make any difference in what people thought

of me, whether I stood out against you or....” Her glance shifted and fell. There were some things she could not put into words.

“That’s book talk, Sylvia. Come out into the open. I know what the female nature is. You’re all alike. You all know when to lower your eyes and lift your fan and back into a corner. That’s the female’s job, just as it’s the male’s job to be bold and rough. But you all know to a hair how far to carry that sort of thing. You always stop in plenty of time to get caught.”

She looked at him curiously. “I suppose,” she said after a pause, “that roughly describes certain love-making processes. But it really wasn’t love-making between you and me, Fectnor. It was a kind of barter.”

His eyes seemed to snare hers relentlessly. “You’re not doing yourself justice, Sylvia,” he said. “You’re not one of the bartering kind. You’d have killed me—you’d have killed yourself—before you’d have let me touch you, if you hadn’t liked me. You know that’s a fact.”

The shadow of a frown darkened her brow. “There was a time when you had a kind of fascination for me. The way you had of making other men seem little and dumb, when you came in and spoke. You seemed so much alive. I noticed once that you didn’t count your change when you’d paid for some drinks. That was the way in everything you did. You seemed lavish with everything that was in you; you let the big things go and didn’t worry about the change. You were a big man in some ways, Fectnor. A girl needn’t have been ashamed of admiring you. But Fectnor ... I’ve come to see what a low life it was I was leading. In cases like that, what the woman yields is ... is of every possible importance to her, while the man parts only with his money.”

He smote the table with his fist. “I’m glad you said that,” he cried triumphantly. “There’s a lie in that, and I want to nail it. The man gives only his money, you say. Do you understand what that means where a hard-working devil is concerned? What has he got besides the few pennies he earns? When he gives his money, isn’t he giving his strength and his youth? Isn’t he giving his manhood? Isn’t he giving the things that are his for only a few years, and that he can’t get back again? I’m not talking about the dandies who have a lot of money they never earned. I should think a woman with as much as

one bone in her body would take a shotgun to that sort whenever they came around. I'm talking about the fellows that sweat for what they get. A lot of mollycoddles and virtuous damn fools have built up that Sunday-school junk about the woman giving everything, and the man giving nothing. But I want to tell you it's nip and tuck as to who gives the most. A woman takes a man's money as if it grew on bushes. Go and watch him earn it, if you want to know what his part of the bargain is."

She felt as if she were being crowded against a wall. She could not look at him. She groped for a weapon—for any weapon—with which to fight him. "That would sound a little more impressive, Fectnor," she said, "if I didn't know what brought you to Eagle Pass just now, and how you sweat for the pay you got."

This was unfortunately said, for there was malice in it, and a measure of injustice. He heard her calmly.

"This election business is only a side-line of mine," he replied. "I enjoy it. There's nothing like knowing you can make a lot of so-called men roll over and play dead. If a man wants to find out where he stands, let him get out and try to make a crowd do something. Let him try to pull any prunes-and-prism stuff, either with his pocketbook or his opinions, and see where he gets off at. No, Sylvia, you played the wrong card. Eleven months out of the year I work like a nigger, and if you don't know it, you'd better not say anything more about it."

He clasped his hands about his knee and regarded her darkly, yet with a kind of joyousness. There was no end of admiration in his glance, but of kindness there was never a suggestion.

She gathered new energy from that look in his eyes. After all, they had been arguing about things which did not matter now. "Fectnor," she said, "I'm sure there must be a good deal of justice in what you say. But I know you're forgetting that when the man and the woman are through with youth there is a reckoning which gives the man all the best of it. His wrong-doing isn't stamped upon him. He is respected. He may be poor, but he isn't shunned."

"That's more of the same lie. Did you ever see a poor man—a really poor man—who was respected? There may be two or three of the people who know him best who will give him credit for certain

things—if he denies himself to pay a debt, or forfeits his rest to sit up with a sick neighbor. But take the world as a whole, doesn't it ride over the man who's got nothing? Isn't he dreaded like a plague? Isn't he a kill-joy? I don't care what a woman's been, she's as well off. A few people will give her credit for the good she does, and that's all a man can hope for, if he's been generous enough or enough alive to let his money go. No, you can't build up any fences, Sylvia. We're all in the same herd."

She felt oppressed by the hardness, the relentlessness, of his words, his manner. She could not respond to him. But she knew that everything this man said, and everything he was, left out of the account all those qualities which make for hope and aspirations and faith.

Her glance, resting upon him as from a great distance, seemed to irritate him. "After all, Sylvia," he said, "you're putting on an awful lot of silk that don't belong to you. Suppose we say that you'd have kept away from me if you hadn't been too much influenced. There are other things to be remembered. Peterson, for example. Remember Peterson? I watched you and him together a good bit. You'll never tell me you wasn't loose with him."

Much of her strength and pride returned to her at this. Whatever the truth was, she knew that Fectnor had no right to bring such a charge against her. "Your language is very quaint at times," she said. A curve of disdain hovered about her lips. "I'm not aware of being, or of ever having been, loose in any way. I can't think where such a word originated."

"You know what I mean well enough. And some of those young fellows—the soldiers and railroaders—I don't suppose any of them have got anything on you, either?"

"They haven't, Fectnor!" she exclaimed hotly. She resolved to have nothing more to say to him. She felt that his brutality gave her the right to have done with him. And then her glance was arrested by his powerful hand, where it lay on the table beside him. It was blunt-fingered and broad and red, with the back covered by yellow hairs which extended down to the dabs of finger-nails.

He seemed to read her mind, and in answer he took up a heavy pewter cup and held it toward her. For an instant he permitted her to

scrutinize the cup, and then his fingers closed. He opened his hand and the shapeless mass of pewter fell to the floor. He threw his head back with the ecstasy of perfect physical fitness. His laughter arose, almost hysterically.

"Fectnor!" she cried, standing tense and white before him, "I think you're all brute—just common, hopeless brute."

He became perfectly serious; but presently he regarded her with a flicker of humor in his eyes, she thought. "You didn't say that as if you meant it, Sylvia," he declared. "You didn't say it as if you quite believed it. But I'm going to show you that you're right. What we've been together, Sylvia, you and I, we're going to continue to be until we both agree to quit. That's what you may call justice. And so far I'm not agreeing to quit."

He came toward her then, and she perceived that his bearing had altered completely. He seemed moved by some impulse stronger than himself—as if it were quite outside himself.

She felt that her heart had suddenly ceased to beat. A leopard crouching before her on a limb could not have seemed more pitiless, more terrible. She had sprung to the door opening into her father's room before he could reach her. Her fingers shot the bolt and the door was open. And then she knew she had made a fatal mistake in holding that long and quiet parley with the beast that had trapped her. She had led her father, doubtless, to believe that it was an amicable talk that had been going on behind the closed door. She knew now that at the first instant of Fectnor's appearance she should have given battle and cried for help.

Now, looking into the adjoining room, while Fectnor's grip closed upon her wrist, she saw the front door quietly close. Her father had gone out.

CHAPTER XIV

Sylvia climbed the hill in the dusk.

A casual observer would have remarked that all was not right with her. Beneath a calm exterior something brooded. You might have supposed that some of the trivial things of existence had gone wrong: that a favorite servant had left her, or that the dressmaker had failed to keep an appointment. Sylvia was not an unschooled creature who would let down the scroll of her life's story to be read by every idle eye.

But the gods of the desert, if any such there be—the spirit of the yucca and the cactus and the sage—must have known by the lines of that immobile face, by the unseeing stare in those weary eyes, that some fundamental change had come over the woman who passed along that road. Sylvia had seemed almost like a happy child when she descended the hill an hour before. It was a woman who fashioned a new philosophy of life who now returned.

It was her own father who had bade her come; it was the man she loved—for whom she had meant to create her life anew—who had bade her go; and it was one to whom she had never told an untruth, for whose pleasure she had been beautiful and gay, who had destroyed her.

She had not fully realized how beautiful a thing her new security had been; how deeply in her nature the roots of a new hope, of a decent orderliness had taken hold. But the transplanted blossom which had seemed to thrive naturally under the fostering care of Harboro—as if it had never bloomed elsewhere than in his heart—had been ruthlessly torn up again. The seeming gain had been turned into a hideous loss.

And so over that road where a woman with illusions had passed, a philosopher who no longer dreamed returned.

Harboro, from his seat on the balcony, saw her coming. And something which surrounded her like an aura of evil startled him. He dropped his newspaper to the floor and leaned forward, his pulse disturbed, his muscles tense. As she drew nearer he arose with the thought of hurrying down-stairs to meet her; and then it occurred to

him that she would wish to see him alone, away from the averted eyes of old Antonia, which saw everything.

A little later he heard her coming up the stairs with heavy, measured steps. And in that moment he warned himself to be calm, to discount the nameless fears—surely baseless fears—which assailed him.

She appeared in the doorway and stood, inert, looking at him as from a great distance.

"Well, Sylvia?" he said gently. He was seated now, and one arm was stretched out over the arm of his chair invitingly. He tried to smile calmly.

She did not draw any nearer to him. Her face was almost expressionless, save that her eyes seemed slowly to darken as she regarded him. And then he saw that certain muscles in her face twitched, and that this tendency swiftly strengthened.

"Sylvia!" he exclaimed, alarmed. He arose and took a step toward her.

She staggered toward him and rested her hands on his shoulders. Her eyes were averted, and Harboro realized with a pang that she did not touch him with the familiar touch which seemed to call to something within him to respond, to make itself manifest. She was merely seeking for support such as a wall or a gate might afford to one who is faint.

He touched her face with his hand and brought it about so that he could read her eyes; but this movement she resisted—not irritably, but hopelessly. He slipped an arm around her yearningly, and then the storm within her broke.

He thought she must be suffocating. She gasped for breath, lifting her chin high. She was shaken with sobs. She clasped his head in her hands and placed her face against it—but the movement was despairing, not loving.

He tried again to look into her eyes; and presently he discovered that they were quite dry. It seemed she had lost the power to weep; yet her sobs became rhythmic, even—like those of any woman who grieves deeply and is still uncomforted.

He held her tenderly and spoke her name over and over. The tears would come soon, and when she had wept he could ask her to tell

him what it was that had wounded her. He was suffering cruelly; he was in despair. But he admonished himself firmly to bear with her, to comfort her, to wait.

And at last, as if indeed she had been leaning against a wall for support until she could recover herself, she drew away from him. She was almost calm again; but Harboro realized that she was no nearer to him than she had been when first she had climbed the stairs and stood before him.

He placed a firm hand on her shoulder and guided her to a chair. He sat down and pulled her gently down to him. "Now, Sylvia!" he said with firmness.

She was kneeling beside him, her elbows on his knees, her face in her hands. But the strange remoteness was still there. She would not look at him.

"Come!" he admonished. "I am waiting."

She looked at him then; but she wore the expression of one who does not understand.

"Something has gone wrong," he said. "You see, I've not been impatient with you. But you ought to tell me now."

"You mean I ought to tell you what's gone wrong?"

He was startled by the even, lifeless quality of her voice. "Of course!"

"In just a word or two, I suppose?"

"If you can."

She knelt where she could look away toward the west—toward Mexico; and she noted, with mild surprise, that a new moon hung low in the sky, sinking slowly into the desert. It seemed to her that years had passed since she had seen the moon—a full moon, swinging, at this hour of the evening, in the eastern sky.

"Come, Sylvia!" It was Harboro's urgent voice again.

"If I only could!" she said, moving a little in token of her discomfort.

"Why not?"

"I mean, if any of us could ever say what it is that has gone wrong. Everything has gone wrong. From the very beginning. And now you ask me: 'What's gone wrong?' just as you might ask, 'What time is it,

Sylvia?' or, 'Who is it coming up the road?' I can't tell you what's gone wrong. If I talked to you a week—a month—I couldn't tell you half of it. I don't believe I ever could. I don't believe I know."

These vagaries might have touched Harboro at another time; they might have alarmed him. But for the moment wrath stirred in him. He arose almost roughly. "Very well," he said, "I shall go to your father. I shall have the facts."

This angry reference to her father—or perhaps it was the roughness of his withdrawal from her—affected her in a new way.

"No, you must not do that!" she cried despairingly, and then the tears came suddenly—the tears which had stubbornly refused to flow.

"There," he said, instantly tender again, "you'll feel better soon. I won't be impatient with you."

But Sylvia's tears were only incidental to some lesser fear or grief. They did not spring from the wrong she had suffered, or from the depths of her nature, which had been dwarfed and darkened. She listlessly pulled a chair into a better position and sat down where she need not look at Harboro. "Give me a little time," she said. "You know women have moods, don't you?" She tried to speak lightly. "If there is anything I can tell you, I will—if you'll give me time."

She had no intention of telling Harboro what had happened. The very thought of such a course was monstrous. Nothing could be undone. She could only make conditions just a little worse by talking. She realized heavily that the thing which had happened was not a complete episode in itself; it was only one chapter in a long story which had its beginnings in the first days in Eagle Pass, and even further away. Back in the San Antonio days. She could not give Harboro an intelligent statement of one chapter without detailing a long, complicated synopsis of the chapters that went before.

To be sure, she did not yet know the man she was dealing with—Harboro. She was entirely misled by the passive manner in which he permitted her to withdraw from him.

"Yes, you shall have time," he said. "I only want you to know that I am here to help you in any way I can."

She remained silent so long that he became impatient again. "Did you find your father very ill?" he hazarded.

“My father? Oh! No ... I can hardly say. He seemed changed. Or perhaps I only imagined that. Perhaps he really is very ill.”

Another long silence ensued. Harboro was searching in a thousand dark places for the cause of her abnormal condition. There were no guide-posts. He did not know Sylvia’s father. He knew nothing about the life she had led with him. He might be a cruel monster who had abused her—or he might be an unfortunate, unhappy creature, the very sight of whom would wound the heart of a sensitive woman.

He leaned forward and took her arm and drew her hand into his. “I’m waiting, Sylvia,” he said.

She turned toward him with a sudden passion of sorrow. “It was you who required me to go!” she cried. “If only you hadn’t asked me to go!”

“I thought we were both doing what was right and kind. I’m sorry if it has proved that we were mistaken. But surely you do not blame me?”

“Blame you? No ... the word hadn’t occurred to me. I’m afraid I don’t understand our language very well. Who could ever have thought of such a meaningless word as ‘blame’? You might think little creatures—ants, or the silly locusts that sing in the heat—might have need of such a word. You wouldn’t *blame* an apple for being deformed, would you?—or the hawk for killing the dove? We are what we are—that’s all. I don’t blame any one.”

The bewildered Harboro leaned forward, his hands on his knees. “We are what we make ourselves, Sylvia. We do what we permit ourselves to do. Don’t lose sight of that fact. Don’t lose sight of the fact, either, that we are here, man and wife, to help each other. I’m waiting, Sylvia, for you to tell me what has gone wrong.”

All that she grasped of what he said she would have denied passionately; but the iron in his nature, now manifesting itself again, she did not understand and she stood in awe of it.

“Give me until to-morrow,” she pleaded. “I think perhaps I’m ill to-night. You know how you imagine things sometimes? Give me until to-morrow, until I can see more clearly. Perhaps it won’t seem anything at all by to-morrow.”

And Harboro, pondering darkly, consented to question her no more that night.

Later he lay by her side, a host of indefinable fears keeping him company. He could not sleep. He did not even remotely guess the nature of her trouble, but he knew instinctively that the very foundations of her being had been disturbed.

Once, toward morning, she began to cry piteously. “No, oh no!” The words were repeated in anguish until Harboro, in despair, seized her in his arms. “What is it, Sylvia?” he cried. “No one shall harm you!”

He held her on his breast and soothed her, his own face harrowed with pain. And he noticed that she withdrew into herself again, and seemed remote, a stranger to him.

Then she fell into a sound sleep and breathed evenly for hours. The dawn broke and a wan light filled the room. Harboro saw that her face was the face of Sylvia again—the face of a happy child, as it seemed to him. In her sleep she reached out for him contentedly and found his throat, and her fingers rested upon it with little, intermittent, loving pressures.

Finally she awoke. She awoke, but Harboro’s crowning torture came when he saw the expression in her eyes. The horror of one who tumbles into a bottomless abyss was in them. But now—thank God!—she drew herself to him passionately and wept in his arms. The day had brought back to her the capacity to think, to compare the fine edifice she and Harboro had built with the wreck which a cruel beast had wrought. She sobbed her strength away on Harboro’s breast.

And when the sun arose she looked into her husband’s gravely steadfast eyes, and knew that she must tell the truth. She knew that there was nothing else for her to do. She spared her father, inventing little falsehoods on his behalf; herself she spared, confessing no fault of her own. But the truth, as to how on the night before Fectnor had trapped her and wronged her in her father’s house, she told. She knew that Harboro would never have permitted her to rest if she had not told him; she knew that she must have gone mad if she had not unbosomed herself to this man who was as the only tree in the desert of her life.

CHAPTER XV

She was puzzled by the manner in which he heard her to the end. She expected an outburst; and she found only that after one moment, during which his body became rigid and a look of incredulous horror settled in his eyes, a deadly quiet enveloped him. He did not try to comfort her—and certainly there was no evidence that he blamed her. He asked her a few questions when she had finished. He was not seeking to implicate her—she felt certain of that. He merely wanted to be quite sure of his ground.

Then he got up and began dressing, deliberately and quietly. It did not occur to her that he was not putting on the clothes he usually wore on Sunday, but this deviation from a rule would not have seemed significant to her even if she had noticed it. She closed her eyes and pondered. In Sylvia's world men did not calmly ignore injury. They became violent, even when violence could not possibly mend matters. Had Harboro decided to accept the inevitable, the irremediable, without a word? Her first thought, last night, had been that she would probably lose Harboro, too, together with her peace of mind. He would rush madly at Fectnor, and he would be killed. Was he the sort of man who would place discretion first and pocket an insult?

Oddly, the fear that he would attack Fectnor changed to a fear that he did not intend to do so. She could not bear to think of the man she loved as the sort of man who will not fight, given such provocation as Harboro had.

She opened her eyes to look at him, to measure him anew. But he was no longer in the room.

Then her fear for him returned with redoubled force. Quiet men were sometimes the most desperate, the most unswerving, she realized. Perhaps he had gone even now to find Fectnor.

The thought terrified her. She sprang from the bed and began dressing with feverish haste. She would overtake him and plead with him not to go. If necessary, she would tell him other things about herself—about the reasons she had given Fectnor, long ago, to believe that she was not a woman to be respected. Harboro would not forgive her, in that event. He would leave her. But he would not

go to his death. It seemed to her quite clear that the only unforgivable sin she could commit would be to permit Harboro to die for her sake.

She hurried down into the dining-room. Ah, Harboro was there! And again she was puzzled by his placidity. He was standing at a window, with his back to her, his hands clasped behind him. He turned when he heard her. “It promises to be another warm day,” he said pleasantly. Then he turned and looked out through the kitchen door as if hinting to Antonia that breakfast might now be served.

He ate his grapes and poached eggs and drank his coffee in silence. He seemed unaware that Sylvia was regarding him with troubled eyes.

When he arose from the table he turned toward the hall. As if by an afterthought, he called back, “I’m going to be busy for a little while, Sylvia,” and she heard him going up the stairs.

His tone had conveyed a hint that he did not wish to be disturbed, she thought, but she could not help being uncomfortably curious. What was there to be done on a Sunday morning that could compare in importance with the obviously necessary task of helping her to forget the injuries she had suffered? It was not his way to turn away from her when she needed him.

She could not understand his conduct at all. She was wounded; and then she began to think more directly, more clearly. Harboro was not putting this thing away from him. In his way he was facing it. But how?

She noiselessly climbed the stairs and opened the door of their bedroom.

With great exactitude of movement he was cleaning a pistol. He had taken it apart and just now a cylinder of burnished steel was in his hand.

He frowned when he heard her. “I am sorry you came up, Sylvia,” he said. “I had an idea I’d given you to understand....”

She hurriedly withdrew, closing the door behind her. She felt an inexplicable elation as she went down the stairs; yet she felt that she stood face to face with calamity, too. Her man was a fighting man, then—only he was not a madman. He was the sort of fighter who did not lose his head. But she could not picture him as a man skilled in

the brutal work of killing. He was too deliberate, too scrupulous, for that sort of work. And Fectnor was neither deliberate nor scrupulous. He was the kind of man who would be intently watchful for an advantage, and who would be elated as he seized that advantage.

... She would persuade Harboro not to go, after all. The thing was not known. It would never be known. Her searching woman's logic brought to her the realization that the only way to publish the facts broadcast was for Harboro to seek a quarrel with Fectnor. He would have to give his reasons.

But when Harboro came down the stairs she knew instantly that she could not stop him from going. That quiet look was not unreadable now. It meant unswerving determination.

He called to her, his hand outstretched; and when she went to him he kissed her. His voice was gentle and unshaken, in quite the habitual way, when he said: "*I shall be back in a little while.*"

She clasped her hands and looked at him imploringly. "Don't go," she pleaded.

"Ah, but I must go."

She touched his cheeks with her hands. "Don't go!" she repeated. "Nothing can be undone."

"But a man's job isn't to undo things—it's to do them."

She held her face high as if the waters were engulfing her. "Don't go!" she said again; and her eyes were swimming, so that at the last she did not see him go, and did not know that he had kept that look of placid courage to the end.

It was a little early for the usual Sunday morning loiterers to be about as Harboro entered the town. For a moment he believed there was no one about at all. The little town, with its main street and its secondary thoroughfares bordered by low structures, might have been regarded as the habitation of lesser creatures than human beings, as it stood there musing after the departed night, in the midst of limitless wastes of sand. That group of houses might have been likened to some kind of larger birds, hugging the earth in trepidation, ready to take flight at any moment.

Yet Harboro had been mistaken in supposing that no one was as yet astir. Two men stood out in the street, at the entrance to the

Maverick bar, near a hitching-post to which a small horse carrying a big saddle was tethered. One of the men was about to mount. As Harboro approached he untied his horse and lifted one foot to its stirrup, and stood an instant longer to finish what he was saying, or perhaps to hear the other out.

The other man was in his shirt-sleeves. He carried a blue-serge sack-coat over his arm. He stood facing Harboro as the latter approached; and the expression in his eyes seemed to change in a peculiar way at sight of the big, swarthy man who stepped off the sidewalk, down into the street, and seemed to be headed directly toward him.

The two men had never met before; but Harboro, taking in that compact, muscular figure, found himself musing with assurance: "That is Fectnor."

Nothing in his face or carriage betrayed his purpose, and the man with the blue-serge garment on his arm kept his ground complacently. The man with the horse mounted and rode away.

Harboro advanced easily until he was within arm's length of the other man in the street. "You're Fectnor, aren't you?" he asked.

"I am," replied the other crisply.

Harboro regarded him searchingly. At length he remarked: "Fectnor, I see you've got a gun on you."

"I have," was the steely response. Fectnor's narrow blue eyes became, suddenly, the most alert thing about a body which was all alertness.

"So have I," said Harboro.

The other's narrow eyes seemed to twinkle. His response sounded like: "The L you say!"

"Yes," said Harboro. He added: "My wife was the woman you trapped in Little's house last night."

Fectnor's mind went swiftly to the weapon in his holster; and something more than his mind, surely, since Harboro knew. Yet the man's hand had barely moved. However, he casually threw the coat he carried over his left arm, leaving his right hand free. If he had thought of reaching for his weapon he had probably realized that he must first get out of reach of Harboro's arm. "You might put that a

little different," he said lightly. "You might say—the woman I met in Little's house."

Harboro took in the insinuated insult. He remained unmoved. He could see that Fectnor was not a coward, no matter what else he was; and he realized that this man would seek to enrage him further, so that his eyes would be blinded, so that his hands would tremble.

"I'm going to kill you, Fectnor," Harboro continued. "But I'm going to give you a chance for your life. I want you to turn and walk down the street twelve paces. Then turn and draw. I'll not draw until you turn unless you try to play a trick on me. Your best chance lies in your doing just as I tell you to."

Fectnor regarded him shrewdly with his peering, merry eyes. He rather liked Harboro, so far as first impressions went. Yet his lips were set in a straight line. "All right," he drawled amiably. His voice was pitched high—almost to a falsetto.

"Remember, you'd better not draw until you've turned around," advised Harboro. "You'll be more likely to get your bearings right that way. You see, I want to give you an even break. If I'd wanted to murder you I could have slipped up from behind. You see that, of course."

"Clear as a whistle," said Fectnor. He gave Harboro a final searching look and then turned about unflinchingly. He proceeded a few steps, his hands held before him as if he were practising a crude cake-walk. The serge garment depended from one arm. He was thinking with lightning-like rapidity. Harboro had courage enough—that he could tell—but he didn't behave like a man who knew very many tricks with a gun. Nevertheless he, Fectnor, would be under a disadvantage in this test of skill which was being forced upon him. When he turned he would need just a second to get a perfect balance, to be quite sure of his footing, to get his bearings. And that one second might make all the difference in the outcome of the affair. Moreover, there was one other point in Harboro's favor, Fectnor realized. His was the stronger determination of the two. Fectnor had not flinched, but he knew that his heart was not in this fight. He could see that Harboro was a good deal of a man. A fool, perhaps, but still a decent fellow.

These were conclusions which had come in flashes, while Fectnor took less than half a dozen steps. Then he turned his head partly, and flung back almost amiably: “Wait until I get rid of my coat!”

“Drop it!” cried Harboro sharply.

But Fectnor plainly had another idea. He turned a little out of his course, still with his hands well in front of him. It was evident, then, that he meant to fling his coat on the sidewalk.

Harboro held him with eyes which were keen as knives, yet still a little dubious. He was puzzled by the man’s good humor; he was watchful for sudden stratagems. His own hands were at his sides, the right within a few inches of his hip.

Yet, after all, he was unprepared for what happened. Fectnor leaned forward as if to deposit his coat on the sidewalk. Then he seemed to stumble, and in two swift leaps he had gained the inner side of the walk and had darted into the inset of the saloon. He was out of sight in a flash.

As if by some feat in legerdemain Harboro’s weapon was in his hand; but it was a hand that trembled slightly. He had allowed Fectnor to gain an advantage.

He stared fixedly at that place where Fectnor had disappeared. His right hand was held in the position of a runner’s, and the burnished steel of the weapon in it caught the light of the sun. He had acquired the trick of firing while his weapon was being elevated—not as he lowered it; with a movement like the pointing of a finger. He was ready for Fectnor, who would doubtless try to take him by surprise.

Then he realized that the level rays of the sun made the whole entrance to the saloon, with its several facets of glass, a thing of dazzling opaqueness. He could not see Fectnor until the latter stepped forth from his ambush; yet it seemed probable that Fectnor might be able to see him easily enough through the glass barricade behind which he had taken refuge. He might expect to hear the report of a weapon and the crash of glass at any instant.

At this realization he had an ugly sensation at the roots of his hair—as if his scalp had gone to sleep. Yet he could only stand and wait. It would be madness to advance.

So he stood, almost single-mindedly. He had a disagreeable duty to perform, and he must perform it. Yet the lesser cells of his brain spoke to him, too, and he realized that he must present a shocking sight to law-abiding, happy people, if any should appear. He was glad that the street was still deserted, and that he might reasonably hope to be unseen.

Then his hand shot forward with the fierceness of a tiger's claw: there had been a movement in the saloon entrance. Only by the fraction of a second was the finger on the trigger stayed.

It was not Fectnor who appeared. Dunwoodie stepped into sight casually and looked in Harboro's direction. The expression of amused curiosity in his eyes swiftly gave place to almost comical amazement when he took in that spasmodic movement of Harboro's.

"What's up?" he inquired. He approached Harboro leisurely.

"Stand aside, Dunwoodie," commanded Harboro harshly.

"Well, wait a minute," insisted Dunwoodie. "Calm yourself, man. I want to talk to you. Fectnor's not in the saloon. He went on through and out the back way."

Harboro wheeled with an almost despairing expression in his eyes. He seemed to look at nothing, now—like a bird-dog that senses the nearness of the invisible quarry. The thought came to him: "Fectnor may appear at any point, behind me!" The man might have run back along the line of buildings, seeking his own place to emerge again.

But Dunwoodie went on reassuringly. He had guessed the thought in Harboro's mind. "No, he's quite gone. I watched him go. He's probably in Mexico by this time—or well on his way, at least."

Harboro drew a deep breath. "You watched him go?"

"When he came into the saloon, like a rock out of a sling, he stopped just long enough to grin, and fling out this—to me—'If you want to see a funny sight, go out front.' Fectnor never did like me, anyway. Then he scuttled back and out. I followed to see what was the matter. He made straight for the bridge road. He was sprinting. He's gone."

Harboro's gun had disappeared. He was frowning; and then he realized that Dunwoodie was looking at him with a quizzical expression.

He made no explanation, however.

“I must be getting along home,” he said shortly. He was thinking of Sylvia.

CHAPTER XVI

Dunwoodie was not given to talkativeness; moreover, he was a considerate man, and he respected Harboro. Therefore it may be doubted if he ever said anything about that unexplained drama which occurred on the main street of Eagle Pass on a Sunday morning, before the town was astir. But there was the bartender at the Maverick—and besides, it would scarcely have been possible for any man to do what Harboro had done without being seen by numbers of persons looking out upon the street through discreetly closed windows.

At any rate, there was talk in the town. By sundown everybody knew there had been trouble between Harboro and Fectnor, and men who dropped into the Maverick for a game of high-five or poker had their attention called to an unclaimed blue-serge coat hanging from the ice-box.

"He got away with his skin," was the way the bartender put the case, "but he left his coat."

There was a voice from one of the card-tables: "Well, any man that gets Fectnor's coat is no slouch."

There were a good many expressions of undisguised wonder at Fectnor's behavior; and nobody could have guessed that perhaps some sediment of manhood which had remained after all the other decent standards had disappeared had convinced Fectnor that he did not want to kill a man whom he had injured so greatly. And from the popular attitude toward Fectnor's conduct there grew a greatly increased respect for Harboro.

That, indeed, was the main outcome of the episode, so far as the town as a whole was concerned. Harboro became a somewhat looming figure. But with Sylvia ... well, with Sylvia it was different.

Of course Sylvia was connected with the affair, and in only one way. She was the sort of woman who might be expected to get her husband into trouble, and Fectnor was the kind of man who might easily appeal to her imagination. This was the common verdict; and the town concluded that it was an interesting affair—the more so because nearly all the details had to be left to the imagination.

As for Sylvia, the first direct result of her husband's gun-play was that a week or two after the affair happened, she had a caller—the wife of Jesus Mendoza.

She had not had any callers since her marriage. Socially she had been entirely unrecognized. The social stratum represented by the Mesquite Club, and that lower stratum identified with church "socials" and similar affairs, did not know of Sylvia's existence—had decided definitely never to know of her existence after she had walked down the aisle of the church to the strains of the Lohengrin march. Nevertheless, there had been that trip to the church, and the playing of the march; and this fact placed Sylvia considerably above certain obscure women in the town who were not under public condemnation, but whose status was even more hopeless—who were regarded as entirely negligible.

The wife of Jesus Mendoza was one of these. She was an American woman, married to a renegade Mexican who was notoriously evil. I have referred to Mendoza as a man who went about partly concealed in his own cloud of cigarette smoke, who looked at nothing in particular and who was an active politician of a sort. He had his place in the male activities of the town; but you wouldn't have known he had a wife from anything there was in his conversation or in his public appearances. Nobody remembered ever to have seen the two together. She remained indoors in all sorts of weather save when she had marketing to do, and then she looked neither to left nor right. Her face was like a mask. She had been an unfortunate creature when Mendoza married her; and she was perhaps thankful to have even a low-caste Mexican for a husband, and a shelter, and money enough to pay the household expenses.

That her life could not have been entirely complete, even from her own way of thinking, was evidenced by the fact that at last she came to call on Sylvia in the house on the Quemado Road.

Sylvia received her with reticence and with a knowing look. She was not pleased that Mrs. Mendoza had decided to call. She realized just what her own status was in the eyes of this woman, who had assumed that she might be a welcome visitor.

But Sylvia's outlook upon life, as has been seen, was distorted in many ways; and she was destined to realize that she must form new

conclusions as to this woman who had come to see her in her loneliness.

Mrs. Mendoza was tactful and kind. She assumed nothing, save that Sylvia was not very thoroughly acquainted in the town, and that as she had had her own house now for a month or two, she would expect people to be neighborly. She discussed the difficulties of housekeeping so far from the source of supplies. She was able, incidentally, to give Sylvia a number of valuable hints touching these difficulties. She discussed the subject of Mexican help without self-consciousness. During her call it developed that she was fond of music—that in fact she was (or had been) a musician. And for the first time since Sylvia's marriage there was music on the piano up in the boudoir.

Mrs. Mendoza played with a passionateness which was quite out of keeping with her mask-like expression. It was like finding a pearl in an oyster, hearing her at the piano. She played certain airs from *Fra Diavolo* so skilfully that she seemed to be letting bandits into the house; and when she saw that Sylvia was following with deep appreciation she passed on to the *Tower Scene*, giving to the minor chords a quality of massiveness. Her expression changed oddly. There was color in her cheeks and a stancher adjustment of the lines of her face. She suggested a good woman struggling through flames to achieve safety. When she played from *Il Trovatore* you did not think of a conservatory, but of a prison.

She stopped after a time and the color swiftly receded from her cheeks. "I'm afraid I've been rather in earnest," she said apologetically. "I haven't played on a good piano for quite a long time." She added, as if her remark might seem an appeal for pity, "the climate here injures a piano in a year or so. The fine sand, you know."

"You must come and use mine whenever you will," said Sylvia heartily. "I love it, though I've never cared to play myself."

"I wonder why?"

"Ah, I could scarcely explain. I've been too busy living. It has always seemed to me that music and pictures and books were for people who had been caught in an eddy and couldn't go on with the stream." She realized the tactlessness of this immediately, and

added: “That’s just a silly fancy. What I should have said, of course, is that I haven’t the talent.”

“Don’t spoil it,” remonstrated the other woman thoughtfully. “But you must remember that few of us can always go on with the stream.”

“Sometimes you get caught in the whirlpools,” said Sylvia, as they were going down the stairs, “and then you can’t stop, even if you’d like to.”

I doubt if either woman derived a great deal of benefit from this visit. They might have become helpful friends under happier conditions; but neither had anything to offer the other save the white logic of untoward circumstances and defeat.

The wife of Jesus Mendoza did not know Sylvia well enough to perceive that a certain blitheness and faith had abandoned her, never to return. Nevertheless, the fact of her visit has its place in this chronicle, since it had a cruel bearing upon a day which still lay in Sylvia’s future.

Sylvia’s caller went home; and, as it chanced, she never called again at the house on the Quemado Road. As for Sylvia, she did not speak to Harboro of her visitor. From his point of view, she thought, there would be nothing to be proud of in the fact that Mrs. Mendoza had called. And so Harboro was destined to go on to the end without knowing that there was any such person as the wife of Jesus Mendoza.

PART IV

THE HORSE WITH THE GOLDEN DAPPLES

CHAPTER XVII

Two events which had a bearing upon Sylvia's destiny occurred at about this time. I am not sure which came first: the invitation to a celebration out at the Quemado settlement, or the arrival on the border of Runyon, the mounted inspector.

The coming of Runyon caused a distinct ripple in the social circles of the two border towns. He was well connected, it was known: he was a cousin to a congressman in the San Angelo district, and he had a brother in the army.

He was a sort of frontier Apollo; a man in his prime, of striking build—a dashing fellow. He had the physical strength, combined with neatness of lines, which characterized Buffalo Bill in his younger days. He was a blond of the desert type, with a shapely mustache the color of flax, with a ruddy skin finely tanned by sun and wind, and with deep blue eyes which flashed and sparkled under his flaxen brows. He was a manly appearing fellow, though there was a glamour about him which made prosaic folk suspicious.

He rode a dun horse with golden dapples—a slim, proud thing which suited Runyon in every detail. When you saw him mounted you thought of a parade; you wondered where the rest of it was—the supernumerary complement.

The man was also characterized by the male contingent of the border as a "dresser." He was always immaculately clad, despite the exposure to which his work subjected him. He seemed to have an artist's sense of color effects. Everything he put on was not only faultless in itself, but it seemed specially designed and made for him. In the set of his sombrero and the style of his spurs he knew how to suggest rakishness without quite achieving it; and when he permitted his spirited horse to give way to its wayward or playful moods there was something just a little sinister in his mirth. He looked as much at home in conventional clothes as in his inspector's outfit, and he immediately became a social favorite on both sides of the river. It developed that he could sing quite amazingly. His voice was high-pitched, but there was power and fire in it. He sang easily and he loved to sing. His songs were the light-opera favorites, the fame of which reached the border from New York and London, and

even Vienna. And when there was difficulty about getting the accompaniments played he took his place unaffectedly at the piano and played them himself.

His name began to appear regularly in the Eagle Pass *Guide* in connection with social events; and he was not merely mentioned as "among those present," but there was always something about his skill as a musician.

Of course Sylvia was destined to see him sooner or later, though she stayed at home with almost morbid fidelity to a resolution she had made. He rode out the Quemado Road one matchless December day when the very air would have seemed sufficient to produce flowers without calling the ungracious desert into service. Sylvia sat in her boudoir by an open window and watched him approach. She immediately guessed that it was Runyon. The remarkable manner in which he had conquered the town had made him an occasional subject for comment between Sylvia and Harboro, and he had described the man to her.

Sylvia thought that the rider and his horse, with the sun on the man's flashing blue eyes and the horse's golden dapples, constituted the prettiest picture she had ever seen. Never before had she observed a man who sat his horse with such an air of gallantry.

And as she regarded him appraisingly he glanced up at her, and there was the slightest indication of pleased surprise in his glance. She withdrew from the window; but when she reckoned that he was well past the house she looked after him. He was looking back, and their eyes met again.

It is decidedly contrary to my conviction that either Sylvia or Runyon consciously paved the way for future mischief when they indulged in that second glance at each other. He was the sort of man who might have attracted a second glance anywhere, and he would have been a poor fellow if he had not considered Sylvia a sight worth turning his head for.

Nevertheless, Sylvia regretted that second glance. It had an effect upon her heart which was far from soothing; and when she realized that her heart seemed suddenly to hurt her, her conscience followed suit and hurt her too. She closed the window righteously; though she

was careful not to do so until she felt sure that Runyon was beyond sight and hearing.

And then there came to Harboro the invitation out to the Quemado. The belle of the settlement, a Mexican girl famed for her goodness and beauty, was to be married to one of the Wayne brothers, ranchers on an immense scale. The older of the two brothers was a conventional fellow enough, with an American wife and a large family; but the younger brother was known far and wide as a good-natured, pleasure-pursuing man who counted every individual in Maverick County, Mexican and American alike, his friend. It seemed that he was planning to settle down now, and he had won the heart of a girl who seemed destined to make an admirable mate for one of his nature-loving type, though his brother had mildly opposed the idea of a Mexican girl as a member of the family.

The wedding was to be in the fashion of the bride's race. It was to be an affair of some twenty-four hours' duration, counting the dancing and feasting, and it was to take place in a sort of stockade which served the Quemado settlement in lieu of a town hall or a public building of any kind.

Invitations had been practically unlimited in number. There was to be accommodation for hundreds. Many musicians had been engaged, and there was to be a mountain of viands, a flood of beverages. It was to be the sort of affair—democratic and broadly hospitable—which any honest man might have enjoyed for an hour or so, at least; and it was in that category of events which drew sightseers from a considerable distance. Doubtless there would be casual guests from Spofford (the nearest railroad point on the Southern Pacific) and from Piedras Negras, as well as from Eagle Pass and the remote corners of Maverick County.

Harboro's invitation had come to him through one of his fellow employees in the railroad offices—a Mexican who had spent four years in an American university, and who was universally respected for his urbane manner and kind heart. Valdez, his name was. He had heartily invited Harboro to go to the wedding with him as his guest; and when he saw traces of some sort of difficulty in Harboro's manner, he suggested, with the ready *simpatía* of his race, that doubtless there was a Mrs. Harboro also, and that he hoped Mrs.

Harboro, too, would honor him by accepting his invitation. He promised that the affair would be enjoyable; that it would afford an interesting study of a people whose social customs still included certain pleasures which dated back to the Cortez invasion, as well as many of the latest American diversions.

Harboro tactfully sought for more definite details; and when he gathered that the affair would be too immense to be at all formal—that there would be introductions only so far as separate groups of persons were concerned, and that guests would be expected to come and go with perfect freedom, he accepted the invitation gratefully. He had not forgotten the slight which the two towns had put upon him and Sylvia, and he was not willing to subject himself to snubs from people who had behaved badly. But he realized that it was necessary for Sylvia to see people, to get away from the house occasionally, to know other society than his own.

In truth, Harboro had been very carefully taking account of Sylvia's needs. It seemed to him that she had not been really herself since that Sunday morning when he had had to place his life in jeopardy. In a way, she seemed to love him more passionately than ever before; but not so light-heartedly, so gladly. Some elfin quality in her nature was gone, and Harboro would gladly have brought it back again. She had listless moods; and sometimes as they sat together he surprised a strange look in her eyes. She seemed to be very far away from him; and he had on these occasions the dark thought that even the substance of her body was gone, too—that if he should touch her she would vanish in a cloud of dust, like that woman in *Archibald Malmaison*, after she had remained behind the secret panel, undiscovered, for a generation.

And so Harboro decided that he and Sylvia would go to the big affair at the Quemado.

CHAPTER XVIII

There was an atmosphere of happiness and bustle in the house when the night of the outing came. Harboro easily managed a half-holiday (it was a Saturday), and he had ample time to make careful selection of horses for Sylvia and himself at an Eagle Pass stable. He would have preferred a carriage, but Sylvia had assumed that they would ride, and she plainly preferred that mode of travel. She had been an excellent horsewoman in the old San Antonio days.

Old Antonia was drawn out of her almost trance-like introspection. The young señora was excited, as a child might have been, at the prospect of a long ride through the chaparral, and she must not be disappointed. She had fashioned a riding-habit and a very charming little jacket, and to these the old woman made an addition of her own—a wonderful *rebozo*. She brought it forth from among her own possessions and offered it affectionately.

"But shall I need it?" asked Sylvia.

Very surely she might, she was assured. She would not wish to dance in her riding costume, certainly. And it might turn chilly after nightfall. She would find that other young women had such garments to protect them. And this particular *rebozo* was quite wonderful. She pointed out its wonderful qualities. It was of so delicate a weave that it might have been thrust into a man's pocket; yet, unfolded, it proved to be of the dimensions of a blanket. And there was warmth in it. She folded it neatly and explained how it might be tied to the pommel of the saddle. It would not be in the way.

Sylvia affected much gratitude for such kindness and foresight, though she thought it unlikely that she would need a wrap of any sort.

There was an early supper, Antonia contributing a quite unprecedented alacrity; and then there was a cheerful call from the road. The horses had been brought.

Sylvia ran out to inspect them; and Harboro, following, was not a little amazed to perceive how important a matter she considered the sort of horses he had engaged. Horses were not a mere medium of travel to Sylvia; they were persons in the drama, and it was highly

important that they should fit into the various romantic demands of the occasion. Harboro had stipulated that they should be safe horses, of good appearance; and the boy from the stable, who had brought them, regarded them with beaming eyes when Harboro examined them. The boy evidently looked at the affair much as Sylvia did—as if the selection of the horse was far more important than the determining of a destination.

"They seem to be all right," ventured Harboro.

"Yes, they are very good horses," agreed Sylvia; but she sighed a little.

Then there was the clatter of hoofs down the road, and Valdez appeared. He, too, bestrode a decidedly prosaic-appearing animal; but when Harboro exclaimed: "Ah, it's Valdez!" Sylvia became more interested in the man than in the horse. It would be a pity to have as companion on a long ride a man without merits. She was not very favorably impressed by Valdez. The man acknowledged his introduction to her too casually. There were no swift, confidential messages in his eyes. He seemed to be there for the purpose of devoting himself to Harboro, not to her.

Antonia came out to be sure that the cherished *rebozo* was tied to the pommel of Sylvia's saddle, and then Harboro and Sylvia went back into the house to get into their riding things. When they returned Harboro lifted her to her saddle with a lack of skill which brought a frown to her brows. But if she regretted the absence of certain established formalities in this performance, she yielded herself immediately to the ecstasy of being in the saddle. She easily assumed a pretty and natural attitude which made Harboro marvel at her.

She watched when it came time for him to mount. The horse moved uneasily, as horses have done since the beginning of time beneath the touch of unpractised riders. Harboro gathered the reins in too firm a grip, and the animal tried to pull away from him.

The boy from the stable sprang forward. "Let me hold his head," he said, with a too obvious intimation that Harboro needed help.

"Never mind," said Harboro crisply; and he achieved his place in the saddle by sheer force rather than by skill. Neither did he fall into an easy position; though under ordinary circumstances this fact

would not have been noted. But Sylvia swiftly recalled the picture of a dun horse with golden dapples, and of a rider whose very attitude in the saddle was like a hymn of praise. And again she sighed.

She had seen Runyon often since the afternoon on which he had made his first appearance on the Quemado Road. Seemingly, his duties took him out that way often; and he never passed without glancing toward Sylvia's window—and looking back again after he had passed. Nor had he often found that place by the window vacant. In truth, it was one of Sylvia's pleasures in those days to watch Runyon ride by; and the afternoon seemed unduly filled with tedium when he failed to appear.

The little picture in front of Harboro's house dissolved. The three riders turned their horses' heads to the north and rode away. Antonia stood at the gate an instant and looked after them; but she did not derive any pleasure from the sight. It was not a very gallant-appearing group. Sylvia was riding between the two men, and all three were moving away in silence, as if under constraint. The stable-boy went somewhat dispiritedly back along the way he had come.

Sylvia was the first of the three riders to find herself. There were certain things which made the springs of gladness within her stir. The road was perfect. It stretched, smooth and white, away into the dusk. The air was clear as on a mountain top, with just enough crispness to create energy. Of wind there was scarcely a breath.

She was not pleased at all with Harboro's friend. He had assumed the attitude of a deferential guide, and his remarks were almost entirely addressed to Harboro. But she was not to be put out by so small a part of the night's programme. After all, Valdez was not planning to return with them, and they were likely to have the ride back by themselves. Valdez, she had been informed, was to be a sort of best friend to the family of the bride, and it would be his duty to remain for the next day's ceremonies—the feasting and the marriage itself.

The dusk deepened, and a new light began to glow over the desert. A waxing moon, half-full, rode near the zenith; and as the light of day receded it took on a surprising brilliance. The road seemed in some strange way to be more clearly defined than under the light of day. It became a winding path to happiness. It began to beckon; to

whisper of the delights of swift races, of coquetries. It bade the riders laugh aloud and fling their cares away. Occasionally it rose or dipped; and then through little valleys between sand-dunes, or from low summits, the waters of the Rio Grande were visible away to the left. A mist was clinging to the river, making more mysterious its undisturbed progress through the desert.

After a long time the silence of the road was broken by the tinkle of a small bell, and Valdez pulled his horse in and looked sharply away into a mesquite-clad depression. Of old the road had been haunted by night-riders who were willing enough to ride away with a traveller's possessions, leaving the traveller staring sightlessly toward the sky. But Valdez thought of no menaces in connection with the border folk. He was a kind-hearted fellow, to whom all men were friends.

"Travellers, or a party camped for the night," he said interestedly, as if the presence of other human beings must be welcomed gladly. He rode out toward the sound of that tinkling bell, and in a moment he was guided more certainly by the blaze of a camp-fire.

Harboro and Sylvia followed, and presently they were quite near to two quaint old carts, heaped high with mesquite fagots destined for the humbler hearths of Eagle Pass. Donkeys were tethered near by, and two Mexicans, quite old and docile in appearance, came forward to greet the intruders.

Valdez exchanged greetings with them. He knew something of the loneliness of these people's lives, and the only religion he had was a belief that one must be friendly to travellers. He produced a flask and invited the old men to drink; and each did so with much nice formality and thoroughly comprehensive toasts to Harboro and Sylvia.

Then Valdez replaced his flask in his pocket.

"God go with you!" he called as he went away, and "God go with you!" came back the placid, kindly echo.

And Sylvia realized suddenly that it was a very good thing indeed to be riding along that golden road through the desert.

CHAPTER XIX

Harboro became aware that some one was staring almost insolently at Sylvia.

They were seated on one of the benches disposed around the side of the stockade, and there was a great deal of noise all about them. In the open space of the stockade a score or more of young men and women were dancing to the music of violins and flutes and 'cellos. Nearly all who were not dancing were talking or laughing. People who did not see one another for months at a time were meeting and expressing their pleasure in staccato showers of words.

There were other noises in the near-by corral, in which Valdez had put their horses away with the other horses; and in still another place the work of barbecuing large quantities of meat had begun. A pleasant odor from the fire and the meat floated fitfully over the stockade. There was still an almost singular absence of wind, and the night was warm for a midwinter night.

Valdez was remaining for the time being with his guests, and he was making friendly comments upon the scene.

"It's chiefly the young people who are dancing now," he observed. "But you'll notice men and women of all ages around in the seats. They will become intoxicated with the joy of it all—and maybe with other things—later in the night, and then the dancing will begin in earnest."

For the moment an old type of fandango was being danced—a dance not wholly unlike a quadrille, in that it admitted a number of persons to the set and afforded opportunity for certain individual exhibitions of skill.

And then Harboro, glancing beyond Valdez, observed that a man of mature years—a Mexican—was regarding Sylvia fixedly. He could not help believing that there was something of insolence, too, in the man's gaze.

He lowered his voice and spoke to Valdez: "That man sitting by himself over there, the fourth—the fifth—from us. Do you know him?"

Valdez turned casually and seemed to be taking in the general scene. He brought his glance back to Harboro without seeming to have noticed anything in particular.

"That's one of your most—er—conspicuous citizens," he said with a smile. "His name is Mendoza—Jesus Mendoza. I'm surprised you've never met him."

"I never have," replied Harboro. He got up and took a new position so that he sat between Sylvia and Mendoza, cutting off the view of her.

She had caught the name. She glanced interestedly at the man called Jesus Mendoza. She could not remember ever to have seen him before; but she was curious to know something about the man whose wife had been kind to her, and whose life seemed somehow tragically lonely.

Mendoza made no sign of recognition of Harboro's displeasure. He arose with a purposeless air and went farther along the stockade wall. Sylvia's glance followed him. She had not taken in the fact that the man's presence, or anything that he had done, had annoyed Harboro. She was wondering what kind of man it was who had captivated and held the woman who had filled her boudoir with passionate music, and who knew how to keep an expressionless mask in place so skilfully that no one on the border really knew her.

The fandango came to an end, and the smooth earth which constituted the floor of the enclosure was vacated for an instant. Then the musicians began a favorite Mexican waltz, and there was a scurrying of young men and women for places. There was an eager movement along the rows of seats by young fellows who sought partners for the waltz. Custom permitted any man to seek any disengaged woman and invite her to dance with him.

"We ought to find Wayne and pay our respects," suggested Valdez. "He will want to meet Mrs. Harboro, too, of course. Shall we look for him?"

They skirted the dancing space, leaving Sylvia with the assurance that they would soon return. Harboro was noting, with a relief which he could scarcely understand, that he was among strangers. The people of Eagle Pass were almost wholly unrepresented as yet. The

few Americans present seemed to be casual sightseers or ranchmen neighbors of the bridegroom.

Left alone, Sylvia looked eagerly and a little wistfully toward the dancers. Her muscles were yielding to the call of the violins. She was being caught by the spirit of the occasion. Here she would have been wholly in her element but for a vague fear that Harboro would not like her to yield unrestrainedly to the prevailing mood. She wished some one would ask her to dance. The waltz was wonderful, and there was plenty of room.

And then she looked up as a figure paused before her, and felt a thrill of interest as she met the steady, inquiring gaze of Jesus Mendoza.

"Mrs. Harboro, I believe?" he asked. The voice was musical and the English was perfect. He shrewdly read the glance she gave him and then held out his hand.

"I heard you spoken of as Mr. Mendoza," she replied. "Your wife has been very kind to me." She did not offer to make room for him on the seat beside her. She had been relieved of her riding-habit, and she held Antonia's *rebozo* across her knees. She had decided not to use it just yet. The night was still comfortably warm and she did not like to cover up the pretty Chinese silk frock she was wearing. But as Mendoza glanced down at her she placed the *rebozo* over one arm as if she expected to rise.

Mendoza must have noted the movement. A gleam of satisfaction shone in his inscrutable eyes—as when a current of air removes some of the ash from above a live coal. "Will you dance with me?" he asked. "When the young fellows overlook so charming a partner, surely an old man may become bold."

She arose with warm responsiveness, yet with undefined misgivings. He had an arm about her firmly in an instant, and when they had caught step with the music he held her close to him. He was an excellent dancer. Sylvia was instantly transported away from the world of petty discretions into a realm of faultless harmony, of singing rhythm.

Her color was heightened, her eyes were sparking, when they returned to their place. "It was nice," she said, releasing her partner's arm and drawing apart. A purple-and-gold Chinese lantern

glowed just above her head. And then she realized that Harboro and Valdez had returned. There was a stranger with them.

Harboro regarded her with unmistakable disapproval; but only for an instant. When something of the childlike glory of her face departed under the severe expression of his eyes, he relented immediately. “Are you enjoying yourself, Sylvia?” he inquired gently, and then: “I want you to meet our host.”

Wayne shook hands with her heartily. “You’re a very kind lady to get right into our merrymaking,” he said, “though I hope you’ll save a dance for me a little later.”

They all went to see the bride-to-be then. She was hidden away in one of the *adobe* houses of the settlement near by, receiving congratulations from friends. She was a dark little creature, nicely demure and almost boisterously joyous by turns.

But later Sylvia danced with Wayne, and he thought of a dozen, a score, of young fellows who would wish to meet her. He brought them singly and in groups, and they all asked to dance with her. She was immediately popular. Happiness radiated from her, and she added to the warmth of every heart that came within her influence.

Harboro watched her with wonder. She was like a flame; but he saw her as a sacred flame.

CHAPTER XX

Sylvia was resting. She had not danced to her heart's content, but she had become weary, and she threw Antonia's *rebozo* over her shoulders and leaned back in her seat. For the moment Harboro and Valdez and Wayne were grouped near her, standing. The girl Wayne was to marry the next day had made her formal appearance now and was the centre of attention. She was dancing with one after another, equally gracious toward all.

Then Sylvia heard Valdez and Wayne cry out simultaneously:

"Runyon!"

And then both men hurried away toward the entrance to the stockade.

Sylvia drew her wrap more snugly about her. "Runyon!" she repeated to herself. She closed her eyes as if she were pondering—or recuperating. And she knew that from the beginning she had hoped that Runyon would appear.

"It's that inspector fellow," explained Harboro, without looking at her. His tone was not at all contemptuous, though there was a note of amusement in it. "He seems a sort of Prince Charming that everybody takes a liking to." Wayne and Valdez were already returning, with Runyon between them. They pretended to lead him captive and his face radiated merriment and good nature. He walked with the elasticity of a feline creature; he carried his body as if it were the depository of precious jewels. Never was there a man to whom nature had been kinder—nor any man who was more graciously proud of what nature had done for him. For the occasion he was dressed in a suit of fawn-colored corduroy which fitted him as the rind fits the apple.

"Just a little too much so," Harboro was thinking, ambiguously enough, certainly, as Runyon was brought before him and Sylvia. Runyon acknowledged the introduction with a cheerful urbanity which was quite without discrimination as between Harboro and Sylvia. Quite impartially he bestowed a flashing smile upon both the man and the woman. And Harboro began vaguely to understand. Runyon was popular, not because he was a particularly good fellow, but because he was so supremely cheerful. And he seemed entirely

harmless, despite the glamour of him. After all, he was not a mere male coquette. He was in love with the world, with life.

Wayne was reproaching him for not having come sooner. He should have been there for the beginning, he said.

And Runyon's response was characteristic enough, perhaps: "Everything is always beginning."

There was gay laughter at this, though the meaning of it must have been obscure to all save Sylvia. The words sounded like a song to her. It was a song she had wished to sing herself. But she was reflecting, despite her joy in the saying: "No, everything is always ending."

Runyon was borne away like a conqueror. He mingled with this group and that. His presence was like a stimulant. His musical voice penetrated everywhere; his laughter arose now and again. He did not look back toward Sylvia. She had the strange feeling that even yet they had not met—they had not met, yet had known each other always. He ignored her, she felt, as one ignores the best friend, the oldest associate, on the ground that no explanations are necessary, no misunderstanding possible.

Harboro sat down beside Sylvia. When he spoke there was a note of easy raillery in his voice. "They're getting him to sing," he said, and Sylvia, bringing her thoughts back from immeasurable distances, realized that the dancing space had been cleared, and that the musicians had stopped playing and were engaged in a low-spoken conference with Runyon. He nodded toward them approvingly and then stepped out into the open, a little distance from them.

The very sky listened; the desert became dumb. The orchestra played a prelude and then Runyon began to sing. The words came clear and resonant:

"By the blue Alsatian mountains Dwelt a maiden young and fair...."

Runyon sang marvellously. Although he was accustomed to the confines of drawing-rooms with low ceilings, he seemed quite at home on this earthen floor of the desert, with the moon sinking regretfully beyond the top of the stockade. He was perfectly at ease. His hands hung so naturally by his sides that they seemed invisible.

"But the blue Alsatian mountains Seem to watch and wait alway."

The song of a woman alone, and then another, “A Warrior Bold,” and then “Alice, Where Art Thou?” And finally “Juanita.” They were songs his audience would appreciate. And all those four songs of tragedy he sang without banishing the beaming smile from his eyes. He might have been relating the woes of marionettes.

He passed from the scene to the sound of clapping hands, and when he returned almost immediately after that agreeable theatrical exit, he began to dance. He danced with the bride-to-be, and then with the bridesmaids. He found obscure girls who seemed to have been forgotten—who might be said to have had no existence before he found them—and danced with them with natural gallantry. He came finally to Sylvia, and she drifted away with him, her hand resting on his shoulder like a kiss.

“I thought you would never come to me,” she said in a lifeless voice.

“You knew I would,” was the response.

Her lips said nothing more. But her heart was beating against him; it was speaking to him with clarity, with eloquence.

PART V

A WIND FROM THE NORTH

CHAPTER XXI

Harboro and Sylvia were taking leave of Wayne and Valdez. Their horses had been brought and they were in their saddles, their horses' heads already in the direction of Eagle Pass. Valdez was adding final instructions touching the road.

"If you're not quite sure of the way I'll get some one to ride in with you," said Wayne; but Harboro would not listen to this.

"I'll not lose the way," he declared; though there remained in his mind a slight dubiousness on this point. The moon would be down before the ride was finished, and there were not a few roads leading away from the main thoroughfare.

Then, much to Harboro's surprise, Runyon appeared, riding away from the corral on his beautiful dun horse. He overheard the conference between Harboro and the others, and he made himself one of the group with pleasant familiarity.

"Ah, Harboro, must you be going, too?" he inquired genially; and then: "If you don't mind, I'll ride with you. It's rather a lonely road at this hour, and I've an idea I know the way better than you."

Harboro's eyes certainly brightened with relief. "It's good of you to offer," he declared heartily. "By all means, ride with us." He turned toward Sylvia, plainly expecting her to second the invitation.

"It will be much pleasanter," she said; though it seemed to Harboro that her words lacked heartiness. She was busying herself with the little package at her pommel—old Antonia's *rebozo*.

"And you must all remember that there's one more latch-string out here at the Quemado," said Wayne, "whenever you feel inclined to ride this way."

They were off then. The sound of violins and the shuffle of feet became faint, and the last gay voice died in the distance. Only now and then, when the horses' feet fell in unison, there drifted after them the note of a violin—like a wind at night in an old casement. And then the three riders were presently aware of being quite alone on a windless waste, with a sentinel yucca standing on a distant height here and there between them and the descending moon, and distant groups of mesquite wreathing themselves in the silver mist of

early morning. It had been a little past midnight when they left the Quemado.

Sylvia, riding between the two men, was so obviously under some sort of constraint that Harboro sought to arouse her. “I’m afraid you overtaxed yourself, Sylvia,” he suggested. “It’s all been pleasant, but rather—heroic.” It was an effort for him to speak lightly and cheerfully. The long ride out to the Quemado was a thing to which he was not accustomed, and the merrymaking had seemed to him quite monotonous after an hour or two. Even the midnight supper had not seemed a particularly gay thing to him. He was not quite a youth any more, and he had never been young, it seemed to him, in the way in which these desert folk were young. Joy seemed to them a kind of intoxication—as if it were not to be indulged in save at long intervals.

“I didn’t overtax myself,” replied Sylvia. “The ending of things is never very cheerful. I suppose that’s what I feel just now—as if, at the end, things don’t seem quite worth while, after all.”

Harboro held to his point. “You *are* tired,” he insisted.

Runyon interposed cheerfully. “And there are always the beginnings,” he said. “We’re just beginning a new day and a fine ride.” He looked at Harboro as if inviting support and added, in a lower tone: “And I’d like to think we were beginning a pleasant acquaintance.”

Harboro nodded and his dark eyes beamed with pleasure. It had seemed to him that this final clause was the obvious thing for Runyon to say, and he had waited to see if he would say it. He did not suppose that he and Sylvia would see a great deal of Runyon in Eagle Pass, where they were not invited to entertainments of any kind, but there might be occasional excursions into the country, and Runyon seemed to be invited everywhere.

But Sylvia refused to respond to this. The pagan in her nature reasserted itself, and she felt resentful of Runyon’s affable attitude toward Harboro. The attraction which she and Runyon exerted toward each other was not a thing to be brought within the scope of a conventionally friendly relationship. Its essence was of the things furtive and forbidden. It should be fought savagely and kept within bounds, even if it could never be conquered, or it should be acknowledged and given way to in secret. Two were company and

three a crowd in this case. She might have derived a great deal of tumultuous joy from Runyon's friendship for her if it could have been manifested in secret, but she could feel only a sense of duplicity and shame if his friendship included Harboro, too. The wolf does not curry favor with the sheep-dog when it hungers for a lamb. Such was her creed. In brief, Sylvia had received her training in none of the social schools. She was a daughter of the desert—a bit of that jetsam which the Rio Grande leaves upon its arid banks as it journeys stealthily to the sea.

They were riding along in silence half an hour later, their horses at a walk, when the stillness of the night was rudely shattered by the sound of iron wheels grinding on stone, and in an instant a carriage could be seen ascending a branch road which arose out of a near-by *arroyo*.

The riders checked their horses and waited: not from curiosity, but in response to the prompting of a neighborly instinct. Travellers in the desert are never strangers to one another.

The approaching carriage proved to be an impressively elegant affair, the locality considered, drawn by two horses which were clearly not of the range variety. And then further things were revealed: a coachman sat on the front seat, and a man who wore an air of authority about him like a kingly robe sat alone on the back seat. Then to Harboro, sitting high with the last rays of the moon touching his face, came the hearty hail: "Harboro! How are you, Harboro?"

It was the voice of the General Manager.

Harboro turned his horse so that he stood alongside the open carriage. He leaned over the wheel and shook hands with the General Manager. The encounter seemed to him to add the one desirable touch of familiarity to the night ride. He explained his presence away out on the Quemado Road; and the General Manager also explained. He had been spending the evening with friends on a near-by ranch. His family were remaining for the night, but it had been necessary for him to return to Piedras Negras.

Harboro looked about for his companions, intending to introduce them. But they were a little too far away to be included comfortably

in such a ceremony. For some reason Runyon had chosen to ride on a few steps.

"How many are you?" inquired the General Manager, with a note of purposefulness in his voice. "Three? That's good. You get in with me. Tie your horse behind. Two can ride abreast more comfortably than three, and you and I can talk. I've never felt so lonesome in my life." He moved over to one side of the seat, and looked back as if he expected to help in getting Harboro's horse tied behind the carriage. His invitation did not seem at all like a command, but it did seem to imply that a refusal would be out of the question.

The arrangement seemed quite simple and desirable to Harboro. He was not a practised horseman, and he was beginning to feel the effect of saddle strain. Moreover, he had realized a dozen times during the past hour that two could ride easily side by side on the desert road, while a third rider was continually getting in the way.

He called to Runyon cheerfully: "You two go on ahead—I'm going to ride the rest of the way in."

"Fine!" called back Runyon. To Runyon everything always seemed precisely ideal—or at least such was the impression he created.

It became a little cavalcade now, the riders leading the way. Riders and carriage kept close together for a time. Sylvia remained silent, but she felt the presence of her companion as a deliciously palpable thing. Harboro and the General Manager were talking, Harboro's heavy tones alternating at unequal intervals with the crisp, penetrating voice of the General Manager—a voice dry with years, but vital nevertheless.

After a time the horses in the carriage broke into a rhythmic trot. In the darkness Runyon's eyes gleamed with satisfaction. "We'll have to have a little canter, or we'll get run over," he said gayly, and he and Sylvia gave rein to their horses.

In a very few minutes they had put a distance of more than a hundred yards between them and the occupants of the carriage.

"This is more like it!" exclaimed Runyon exultantly. Tone and words alike implied all too strongly his satisfaction at being rid of Harboro—and Sylvia perversely resented the disloyalty of it, the implication of intrigue carried on behind a mask.

And then she forgot her scruples. The boy who had chosen her horse for her had known what he was doing, after all. The animal galloped with a dashing yet easy movement which was delightful. She became exhilarated by a number of things. The freedom of movement, the occasional touch of her knee against Runyon's, the mysterious vagueness of the road, now that the moon had gone down.

Perhaps they both forgot themselves for a time, and then Sylvia checked her horse with a laugh in which there was a sound of dismay. "We ought to wait for them to catch up," she said.

Runyon was all solicitude immediately. "We seem to have outdistanced them completely," he said. They turned their horses about so that they faced the north. "I can't even hear them," he added. Then, with the irrepressible optimism which was his outstanding quality, he added laughingly: "They'll be along in a few minutes. But wasn't it a fine ride?"

She had not framed an answer to this question when her mind was diverted swiftly into another channel. She held her head high and her body became slightly rigid. She glanced apprehensively at Runyon and realized that he, too, was listening intently.

A faint roar which seemed to come from nowhere fell on their ears. The darkness swiftly deepened, so that the man and the woman were almost invisible to each other. That sinister roaring sound came closer, as if mighty waters were rolling toward them far away. The northern sky became black, as if a sable curtain had been let down.

And then upon Sylvia's startled senses the first breath of the norther broke. The little winds, running ahead as an advance-guard of the tempest, flung themselves upon her and caught at her hair and her riding-habit. They chilled her.

"A norther!" she exclaimed, and Runyon called back through the whistle of the winds: "It's coming!"

His voice had the quality of a battle-cry, joined to the shouts of the descending storm.

CHAPTER XXII

Fortunately, Runyon knew what to do in that hour of earth's desolation and his own and Sylvia's peril.

He sprang from his horse and drew his bridle-rein over his arm; and then he laid a firm hand on the bridle of Sylvia's horse. His own animal he could trust in such an emergency; but the other had seemed to lose in height and he knew that it was trembling. It might make a bolt for it at any moment.

"Keep your seat," he shouted to Sylvia, and she realized that he was leading both horses away from the road. She caught glimpses of his wraith-like figure as the whirling dust-cloud that enveloped them thinned occasionally.

She knew that he had found a clump of mesquite after a faltering progress of perhaps fifty yards. Their progress was checked, then, and she knew he was at the hitching straps, and that he was tethering the animals to the trees. The powdered dust and sand were stinging her face, and the cold wind was chilling her; yet she felt a strange elation as she realized that she was here alone with Runyon, and that he was managing the situation with deftness and assurance.

She felt his hand groping for her then, and, leaning forward, she was borne to the ground. He guided her to a little depression and made her understand that she was to sit down. He had removed his saddle-blanket and spread it on the earth, forming a rug for her. "The *rebozo*?" he cried in her ear.

"It's fastened to the pommel," she called back.

She could neither see nor hear him; but soon he was touching her on the shoulders. The *rebozo* was flung out on the wind so that it unfolded, and he was spreading it about her.

She caught his hand and drew him close so that she could make herself heard. "There's room under it for two," she said. She did not release his hand until he had sat down by her. Together they drew the *rebozo* about them like a little tent.

Immediately they were transformed into two sheltered and undismayed Arabs. The *rebozo* was pinioned behind them and under their feet. The finest dust could not penetrate its warp and

woof. The wind was as a mighty hand, intent upon bearing them to earth, but it could not harm them.

Sylvia heard Runyon's musical laugh. He bent his head close to hers. "We're all right now," he said.

He had his arm across her shoulder and was drawing her close. "It's going to be cold," he said, as if in explanation. He seemed as joyous as a boy—as innocent as a boy. She inclined her head until it rested on his shoulder, so that both occupied little more than the space of one. The storm made this intimacy seem almost natural; it made it advantageous, too.

And so the infinite sands swarmed over them, and the norther shrieked in their ears, and the earth's blackness swallowed them up until they seemed alone as a man and a woman never had been alone before.

The *rebozo* sagged about them at intervals, weighted down with the dust; but again it rippled like a sail when an eccentric gust swept away the accumulated sediment.

The desert was a thing of blank darkness. A protected torch would have been invisible to one staring toward it a dozen steps away. A temporary death had invaded the world. There was neither movement nor sound save the frenzied dance of dust and the whistle of winds which seemed shunted southward from the north star.

Runyon's hand travelled soothingly from Sylvia's shoulder to her cheek. He held her to him with a tender, eloquent pressure. He was the man, whose duty it was to protect; and she was the woman, in need of protection.

And Sylvia thought darkly of the ingenuities of Destiny which set at naught the petty steps which the proprieties have taken—as if the gods were never so diverted as when they were setting the stage for tragedy, or as if the struggles and defeats of all humankind were to them but a proper comedy.

But Runyon was thinking how rare a thing it is for a man and a woman to be quite alone in the world; how the walls of houses listen, and windows are as eyes which look in as well as out; how highways forever hold their malicious gossips to note the movements of every pair who do not walk sedately; how you may mount the stairway of a strange house—and encounter one who knows you at the top, and

who laughs in his sleeve; how you may emerge from the house in which you have felt safe from espionage—only to encounter a familiar talebearer at the door.

But here indeed were he and Sylvia alone.

CHAPTER XXIII

Before the next spring came two entirely irreconcilable discoveries were made in Eagle Pass.

The first of these was made by certain cronies of the town who found their beer flat if there was not a bit of gossip to go with it, and it was to the effect that the affair between Sylvia and Runyon was sure to end disastrously if it did not immediately end otherwise.

The other discovery was made by Harboro, and it was to the effect that Sylvia had at last blossomed out as a perfectly ideal wife.

A certain listlessness had fallen from her like a shadow. Late in the winter—it was about the time of the ride to the Quemado, Harboro thought it must have been—a change had come over her. There was a glad tranquillity about her now which was as a tonic to him. She was no longer given to dark utterances which he could not understand. She was devoted to him in a gentle, almost maternal fashion—studying his needs and moods alertly and affectionately. Something of the old tempestuous ardor was gone, but that, of course, was natural. Harboro did not know the phrases of old Antonia or he would have said: "It is the time of embers." She was softly solicitous for him; still a little wistful at times, to be sure; but then that was the natural Sylvia. It was the quality which made her more wonderful than any other woman in the world.

And Sylvia? Sylvia had found a new avenue of escape from that tedium which the Sylvias of the world have never been able to endure.

Not long after that ride to the Quemado a horse had been brought to her front gate during a forenoon when Harboro was over the river at work. Unassisted she had mounted it and ridden away out the Quemado Road. A mile out she had turned toward the Rio Grande, and had kept to an indistinct trail until she came to a hidden *adobe* hut, presided over by an ancient Mexican.

To this isolated place had come, too, Runyon—Runyon, whose dappled horse had been left hidden in the mesquite down by the river, where the man's duties lay.

And here, in undisturbed seclusion, they had continued that intimacy which had begun on the night of the norther. They were like two children, forbidden the companionship of each other, who find something particularly delicious in an unguessed rendezvous. All that is delightful in a temporary escape from the sense of responsibility was theirs. Their encounters were as gay and light as that of two poppies in the sun, flung together by a friendly breeze. They were not conscious of wronging any one—not more than a little, at least—though the ancient genius of the place, a Mexican who had lost an eye in a jealous fight in his youth, used to shake his head sombrely when he went away from his hut, leaving them alone; and there was anxiety in the glance of that one remaining eye as he kept a lookout over the trail, that his two guests might not be taken by surprise.

Sometimes they remained in the hut throughout the entire noon-hour, and on these occasions their finely discreet and taciturn old host placed food before them. Goat's milk was brought from an earthenware vessel having its place on a wooden hook under the eaves of the house; and there was a delicious stew of dried goat's flesh, served with a sauce which contained just a faint flavor of peppers and garlic and herbs. And there was *pan*, as delicate as wafers, and coffee.

Time and again, throughout the winter, the same horse made its appearance at Sylvia's gate at the same hour, and Sylvia mounted and rode away out the Quemado Road and disappeared, returning early in the afternoon.

If you had asked old Antonia about these movements of her mistress she would have said: "Does not the señora need the air?" And she would have added: "She is young." And finally she would have said: "I know nothing."

It is a matter of knowledge that occasionally Sylvia would meet the boy from the stable when he arrived at the gate and instruct him gently to take the horse away, as she would not require it that day; and I am not sure she was not trying still to fight the battle which she had already lost; but this, of course, is mere surmise.

And then a little cog in the machine slipped.

A ranchman who lived out on the north road happened to be in Eagle Pass one evening as Harboro was passing through the town on his way home from work. The ranchman's remark was entirely innocent, but rather unfortunate. "A very excellent horsewoman, Mrs. Harboro," he remarked, among other things.

Harboro did not understand.

"I met her riding out the road this forenoon," explained the ranchman.

"Oh, yes!" said Harboro. "Yes, she enjoys riding. I'm sorry, on her account, that I haven't more liking for it myself."

He went on up the hill, pondering. It was strange that Sylvia had not told him that she meant to go for a ride. She usually went into minute details touching her outings.

He expected her to mention the matter when he got home, but she did not do so. She seemed disposed not to confide in him throughout the entire evening, and finally he remarked with an air of suddenly remembering: "And so you went riding to-day?"

She frowned and lowered her eyes. She seemed to be trying to remember. "Why, yes," she said, after a moment's silence. "Yes, I felt rather dull this morning. You know I enjoy riding."

"I know you do," he responded cordially. "I'd like you to go often, if you'll be careful not to take any chances." He smiled at the recollection of the outcome of that ride of theirs to the Quemado, and of the excitement with which they compared experiences when they got back home. Sylvia and Runyon had made a run for it and had got home before the worst of it came, she had said. But Harboro and the General Manager had waited until the storm had spent itself, both sitting in the carriage with their handkerchiefs pressed to their nostrils, and their coats drawn up about their heads. He remembered, too, how the dust-fog had lingered in the air until well into the next day, like a ghost which could not be laid.

He brought himself back from the recollection of that night. "If you like, I'll have the horse sent every day—or, better still, you shall have a horse of your own."

"No," replied Sylvia, "I might not care to go often." She had let her hair down and was brushing it thoughtfully. "The things which are

ordered for you in advance are always half spoiled," she added. "It's better to think of things all of a sudden, and do them."

He looked at her in perplexity. That wasn't his way, certainly; but then she was still occasionally something of an enigma to him. He tried to dismiss the matter from his mind. He was provoked that it came back again and again, as if there were something extraordinary about it, something mysterious. "She only went for a ride," he said to himself late at night, as if he were defending her.

CHAPTER XXIV

A month later Harboro came home one afternoon to find an envelope addressed to him on the table in the front hall.

He was glad afterward that Sylvia was engaged with Antonia in the dining-room, and did not have a chance to observe him as he examined the thing which that envelope contained.

It was a statement from one of the stables of the town, and it set forth the fact that Harboro was indebted to the stable for horse-hire. There were items, showing that on seven occasions during the past month a horse had been placed at the disposal of Mrs. Harboro.

Harboro was almost foolishly bewildered. Sylvia had gone riding seven times during the month, and she had not even mentioned the matter to him! Clearly here was a mystery. Her days were not sufficiently full of events to make seven outings a matter of little consequence to her. She was not given to reticence, even touching very little things. She had some reason for not wishing him to know of these movements of hers.

But this conclusion was absurd, of course. She would understand that the bill for services rendered would eventually come to him. He was relieved when that conclusion came to him. No, she was not seeking to make a mystery out of the matter. Still, the question recurred: Why had she avoided even the most casual mention of these outings?

He replaced the statement in the envelope thoughtfully and put it away in his pocket. He was trying to banish the look of dark introspection from his eyes when Sylvia came in from the kitchen and gave a little cry of joy at sight of him. She *was* happy at the sight of him—Harboro knew it. Yet the cloud did not lift from his brow as he drew her to him and kissed her slowly. She was keeping a secret from him. The conclusion was inescapable.

His impulse was to face the thing frankly, affectionately. He had only to ask her to explain and the thing would be cleared up. But for the first time he found it difficult to be frank with her. If the thing he felt was not a sense of injury, it was at least a sense of mystery: of resentment, too. He could not deny that he felt resentful. At the foundation of his consciousness there was, perhaps, the belief and

the hope that she would explain voluntarily. He felt that something precious would be saved to him if she confided in him without prompting, without urging. If he waited, perhaps she would do so. His sense of delicacy forbade him to inquire needlessly into her personal affairs. Surely she was being actuated by some good reason. That she was committed to an evil course was a suspicion which he would have rejected as monstrous. Such a suspicion did not occur to him.

It did not occur to him until the next day, when a bolt fell.

He received another communication from the stable. It was an apology for an error that had been made. The stableman found that he had no account against Mr. Harboro, but that one which should have been made out against Mr. Runyon had been sent to him by mistake.

Quite illogically, perhaps, Harboro jumped to the conclusion that the service had really been rendered to Sylvia, as the original statement had said, and that for some obscure reason it was to be charged against Runyon. But even now it was not a light that he saw. Rather, he was enveloped in darkness. He heard the envelope crackle in his clinched hand. He turned and climbed the stairs heavily, so that he need not encounter Sylvia until he had had time to think, until he could understand.

Sylvia was taking rides, and Runyon was paying for them. That was to say, Runyon was the moving factor in the arrangement. Therefore, Runyon was deriving a pleasure from these rides of Sylvia's. How? Why, he must be riding with her. They must be meeting by secret appointment.

Harboro shook his head fiercely, like a bull that is being tortured and bewildered by the matadors. No, no! That wasn't the way the matter was to be explained. That could indicate only one thing—a thing that was impossible.

He began at the beginning again. The whole thing had been an error. Sylvia had been rendered no services at all. Runyon had engaged a horse for his own use, and the bill had simply been sent to the wrong place. That was the rational explanation. It was a clear and sufficient explanation.

Harboro held his head high, as if his problem had been solved. He held himself erect, as if a burden had been removed. He had been almost at the point of making a fool of himself, he reflected. Reason asserted itself victoriously. But something which speaks in a softer, more insistent voice than reason kept whispering to him: "Runyon and Sylvia! Runyon and Sylvia!"

He faced her almost gayly at supper. He had resolved to play the rôle of a happy man with whom all is well. But old Antonia looked at him darkly. Her old woman's sense told her that he was acting a part, and that he was overacting it. From the depths of the kitchen she regarded him as he sat at the table. She lifted her eyes like one who hears a signal-cry when he said casually:

"Have you gone riding any more since that other time, Sylvia?"

Sylvia hesitated. "'That other time'" she repeated vaguely.... "Oh, yes, once since then—once or twice. Why?"

"I believe you haven't mentioned going."

"Haven't I? It doesn't seem a very important thing. I suppose I've thought you wouldn't be interested. I don't believe you and I look at a horseback-ride alike. I think perhaps you regard it as quite an event."

He pondered that deliberately. "You're right," he said. "And ... about paying for the horse. I'm afraid your allowance isn't liberal enough to cover such things. I must increase it next month. Have you been paying out of your own pocket?"

"Yes—yes, of course. It amounts to very little."

His sombre glance travelled across the table to her. She was looking at her plate. She had the appearance of a child encountering a small obstacle in the way of a coveted pleasure. There was neither guilt nor alarm in her bearing, but only an irksome discomfort.

But old Antonia withdrew farther within the kitchen. She took her place under a picture of the Virgin and murmured a little prayer.

PART VI

THE GUEST-CHAMBER

CHAPTER XXV

It was remarked in the offices of the Mexican International Railroad about this time that something had gone wrong with Harboro. He made mistakes in his work. He answered questions at random—or he did not answer them at all. He passed people in the office and on the street without seeing them. But worse than all this, he was to be observed occasionally staring darkly into the faces of his associates, as if he would read something that had been concealed from him. He came into one room or another abruptly, as if he expected to hear his name spoken.

His associates spoke of his strange behavior—being careful only to wait until he had closed his desk for the day. They were men of different minds from Harboro's. He considered their social positions matters which concerned them only; but they had duly noted the fact that he had been taken up in high places and then dropped without ceremony. They knew of his marriage. Certain rumors touching it had reached them from the American side.

They were rather thrilled at the prospect of a dénouement to the story of Harboro's eccentricity. They used no harsher word than that. They liked him and they would have deplored anything in the nature of a misfortune overtaking him. But human beings are all very much alike in one respect—they find life a tedious thing as a rule and they derive a stimulus from the tale of downfall, even of their friends. They are not pleased that such things happen; they are merely interested, and they welcome the break in the monotony of events.

As for Harboro, he was a far more deeply changed man than they suspected. He was making a heroic effort in those days to maintain a normal bearing. It was only the little interstices of forgetfulness which enabled any one to read even a part of what was taking place in his thoughts.

He seemed unchanged to Sylvia, save that he admitted being tired or having a headache, when she sought to enliven him, to draw him up to her own plane of merriment. He was reminding himself every hour of the night and day that he must make no irretrievable

blunder, that he must do nothing to injure his wife needlessly. Appearances were against her, but possibly that was all.

Yet revelations were being made to him. Facts were arraying themselves and marching before him for review. Suspicion was pounding at him like a body blow that is repeated accurately and relentlessly in the same vulnerable spot.

Why had Sylvia prevented him from knowing anything about her home life? Why had she kept him and her father apart? Why had Eagle Pass ceased to know him, immediately after his marriage? And Peterson, that day they had gone across the river together—why had Peterson behaved so clownishly, following his familiar greeting of Sylvia? Peterson hadn't behaved like himself at all. And why had she been so reluctant to tell him about the thing that had happened in her father's house? Was that the course an innocent woman would have pursued?

What was the explanation of these things? Was the world cruel by choice to a girl against whom nothing more serious could be charged than that she was obscure and poor?

These reflections seemed to rob Harboro of the very marrow in his bones. He would have fought uncomplainingly to the end against injustice. He would cheerfully have watched the whole world depart from him, if he had had the consciousness of righting in a good cause. He had thought scornfully of the people who had betrayed their littleness by ignoring him. But what if they had been right, and his had been the offense against them?

He found it almost unbearably difficult to walk through the streets of Eagle Pass and on across the river. What had been his strength was now his weakness. His loyalty to a good woman had been his armor; but what would right-thinking people say of his loyalty to a woman who had deceived him, and who felt no shame in continuing to deceive him, despite his efforts to surround her with protection and love?

And yet ... what did he know against Sylvia? She had gone riding—that was all. That, and the fact that she had made a secret of the matter, and had perhaps given him a false account of the manner in which she had paid for her outings.

He must make sure of much more than he already knew. Again and again he clinched his hands in the office and on the street. He would not wrong the woman he loved. He would not accept the verdict of other people. He would have positive knowledge of his own before he acted.

CHAPTER XXVI

Harboro had admitted a drop of poison to his veins and it was rapidly spreading to every fibre of his being. He was losing the power to think clearly where Sylvia was concerned. Even the most innocent acts of hers assumed new aspects; and countless circumstances which in the past had seemed merely puzzling to him arose before him now charged with deadly significance.

His days became a torture to him. He could not lose himself in a crowd, and draw something of recuperation from a sense of obscurity, a feeling that he was not observed. He seemed now to be cruelly visible to every man and woman on both sides of the river. Strangers who gave more than the most indifferent glance to his massive strength and romantic, swarthy face, with its fine dark eyes and strong lines and the luxuriant black mustache, became to him furtive witnesses to his shame—secret commentators upon his weakness. He recalled pictures of men held in pillories for communities to gibe at—and he felt that his position was not unlike theirs. He had at times a frantic realization that he had unconquerable strength, but that by some ironic circumstance he could not use it.

If his days were sapping his vigor and driving him to the verge of madness, his nights were periods of a far more destructive torture. He had resolved that Sylvia should see no change in him; he was trying to persuade himself that there *was* no change in him. Yet at every tenderly inquiring glance of hers he felt that the blood must start forth on his forehead, that body and skull must burst from the tumult going on within them.

It was she who brought matters to a climax.

"Harboro, you're not well," she said one evening when her hand about his neck had won no response beyond a heavy, despairing gesture of his arm. His eyes were fixed on vacancy and were not to be won away from their unseeing stare.

"You're right, Sylvia," he said, trying to arouse himself. "I've been trying to fight against it, but I'm all out of sorts."

"You must go away for a while," she said. She climbed on his knee and assumed a prettily tyrannical manner. "You've been working too

hard. They must give you a vacation, and you must go entirely away. For two weeks at least."

The insidious poison that was destroying him spread still further with a swift rush at that suggestion. She would be glad to have him out of the way for a while. Were not unfaithful wives always eager to send their husbands away? He closed his eyes resolutely and his hands gripped the arms of his chair. Then a plan which he had been vaguely shaping took definite form. She was really helping him to do the thing he felt he must do.

He turned to her heavily like a man under the influence of a drug. "Yes, I'll go away for a while," he agreed. "I'll make arrangements right away—to-morrow."

"And I'll go with you," she said with decision, "and help to drive the evil hours away." She had his face between her hands and was smiling encouragingly.

The words were like a dagger thrust. Surely, they were proof of fidelity, of affection, and in his heart he had condemned her.

"Would you like to go with me, Sylvia?" he asked. His voice had become husky.

She drew back from him as if she were performing a little rite. Her eyes filled with tears. "Harboro!" she cried, "do you need to ask me that?" Her fingers sought his face and traveled with ineffable tenderness from line to line. It was as if she were playing a little love-lyric of her own upon a beautiful harp. And then she fell upon his breast and pressed her cheek to his. "Harboro!" she cried again. She had seen only the suffering in his eyes.

He held her in his arms and leaned back with closed eyes. A hymn of praise was singing through all his being. She loved him! she loved him! And then that hymn of praise sank to pianissimo notes and was transformed by some sort of evil magic to something shockingly different. It was as if a skillful yet unscrupulous musician were constructing a revolting medley, placing the sacred song in juxtaposition with the obscene ditty. And the words of the revolting thing were "Runyon and Sylvia! Runyon and Sylvia!"

He opened his eyes resolutely. "We're making too much over a little matter," he said with an obvious briskness which hid the cunning in his mind. "I suppose I've been sticking to things too close.

I'll take a run down the line and hunt up some of the old fellows—down as far as Torreon at least. I'll rough it a little. I suspect things have been a little too soft for me here. Maybe some of the old-timers will let me climb up into a cab and run an engine again. That's the career for a man—with the distance rushing upon you, and your engine swaying like a bird in the air! That will fix me!"

He got up with an air of vigor, helping Sylvia to her feet. "It wouldn't be the sort of experience a woman could share," he added. "You'll stay here at home and get a little rest yourself. I must have been spoiling things for you, too." He looked at her shrewdly.

"Oh, no," she said honestly. "I'm only sorry I didn't realize earlier that you need to get away."

She went out of the room with something of the regal industry of the queen bee, as if she were the natural source of those agencies which sustain and heal. He heard her as she busied herself in their bedroom. He knew that she was already making preparations for that journey of his. She was singing a soft, wordless song in her throat as she worked.

And Harboro, with an effect of listening with his eyes, stood in his place for a long interval, and then shook his head slowly.

He could not believe in her; he would not believe in her. At least he would not believe in her until she had been put to the test and met the test triumphantly. He could not believe in her; and yet it seemed equally impossible for him to hold with assurance to his unbelief.

CHAPTER XXVII

Returning from the office the next forenoon, Harboro stopped at the head of the short street on which the chief stable of Eagle Pass was situated.

He had had no difficulty in obtaining a leave of absence, which was to be for one week with the privilege of having it extended to twice that time if he felt he needed it. In truth, his immediate superior had heartily approved of the plan of his going for an outing. He had noticed, he admitted, that Harboro hadn't been altogether fit of late. He was glad he had decided to go away for a few days. He good-naturedly insisted upon the leave of absence taking effect immediately.

And Harboro had turned back toward Eagle Pass pondering darkly.

He scanned the street in the direction of the stable. A stable-boy was exercising a young horse in the street, leading it back and forth, but otherwise the thoroughfare seemed somnolently quiet.

He sauntered along until he came to the stable entrance. He had the thought of entering into a casual conversation with the proprietor. He would try to get at the actual facts touching that mistake the stable people had made. He would not question them too pointedly. He would not betray the fact that he believed something was wrong. He would put his questions casually, innocently.

The boy was just turning in with the horse he had been exercising. He regarded Harboro expectantly. He was the boy who had brought the horses on the night of that ride to the Quemado.

"I didn't want anything," said Harboro; "that is, nothing in particular. I'll be likely to need a horse in a day or two, that's all."

He walked leisurely into the shady, cool place of pungent odors. He had just ascertained that the proprietor was out when his attention was attracted by a dog which lay with perfect complacency under a rather good-looking horse.

"A pretty dangerous place, isn't it?" he asked of the stable-boy.

"You *would* think so, wouldn't you? But it isn't. They're friends. You'll always find them together when they can get together. When Prince—that's the horse—is out anywhere, we have to pen old Mose up to keep him from following. Once when a fellow hired Prince to make a trip over to Spofford, old Mose got out, two or three hours later, and followed him all the way over. He came back with him the next day, grinning as if he'd done something great. We never could figure out how old Mose knew where he had gone. Might have smelled out his trail. Or he might have heard them talking about going to Spofford, and understood. The more you know about dogs the less you know about them—same as humans."

He went back farther into the stable and busied himself with a harness that needed mending.

Harboro was looking after him with peculiar intensity. He looked at the horse, which stood sentinel-like, above the drowsing dog. Then he engaged the stable-boy in further conversation.

"A pretty good-looking horse, too," he said. And when the boy nodded without enthusiasm, he added: "By the way, I suppose it's usually your job to get horses ready when people want them?"

"Yes, mostly."

Harboro put a new note of purposefulness into his voice. "I believe you send a horse around for Mrs. Harboro occasionally?"

"Oh, yes; every week or so, or oftener."

Harboro walked to the boy's side and drew his wallet from his pocket deliberately. "I wish," he said, "that the next time Mrs. Harboro needs a horse you'd send this fine animal to her. I have an idea it would please her. Will you remember?" He produced a bank-note and placed it slowly in the boy's hand.

The boy looked up at him dubiously, and then understood. "I'll remember," he said.

Harboro turned away, but at the entrance he stopped. "You'd understand, of course, that the dog wouldn't be allowed to go along," he called back.

"Oh, yes. Old Mose would be penned up. I'd see to it."

"And I suppose," said Harboro finally, "that if I'd telephone to you any day it wouldn't take you long to get a horse ready for me, would it? I've been thinking of using a horse a little myself."

He was paying little attention to the boy's assurances as he went away. His step had become a little firmer as he turned toward home. He seemed more like himself when he entered the house and smiled into his wife's alertly questioning eyes.

"It's all right, I'm to get away," he explained. "I'm away now, strictly speaking. I want to pack up a few things some time to-day and get the early morning train for Torreon."

She seemed quite gleeful over this cheerful information. She helped him make selection of the things he would need, and she was ready with many helpful suggestions. It seemed that his train left the Eagle Pass station at five o'clock in the morning—a rather awkward hour; but he did not mind, he said.

They spent the day together without any restraints, seemingly. There were a good many things to do, and Sylvia was happy in the thought of serving him. If he regarded her now and again with an expression of smouldering fire in his eyes she was unaware of the fact. She sang as she worked, interrupting her song at frequent intervals to admonish him against this forgetfulness or that.

She seemed to be asleep when, an hour before daybreak, he stirred and left her side. But she was awake immediately.

"Is it time to go?" she asked sleepily.

"I hoped I needn't disturb you," he said. "Yes, I ought to be getting on my way to the station."

She lay as if she were under a spell while he dressed and made ready to go out. Her eyes were wide open, though she seemed to see nothing. Perhaps she was merely stupid as a result of being awakened; or it may be that indefinable, foreboding thoughts filled her mind.

When he came to say good-by to her she put her arms around his neck. "Try to have a good time," she said, "and come back to me your old self again."

She felt fearfully alone as she heard him descend the stairs. She held her head away from the pillow until she heard the sharp closing of the street-door. "He's gone," she said. She shivered a little and drew the covers more closely about her.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Runyon rode out past Harboro's house that afternoon.

Sylvia, in her place by the window, watched him come. In the distance he assumed a new aspect in her eyes. She thought of him impersonally—as a thrilling picture. She rejoiced in the sight of him as one may in the spectacle of an army marching with banners and music.

And then he became to her a glorious troubadour, having no relationship with prosaic affairs and common standards, but a care-free creature to be loved and praised because of his song; to be heard gladly and sped on his way with a sigh.

The golden notes of his songs out at the Quemado echoed in her ears like the mournful sound of bells across lonely fields. Her heart ached again at the beauty of the songs he had sung.

... She went down-stairs and stood by the gate, waiting for him.

They talked for a little while, Runyon bending down toward her. She thought of him as an incomparably gay and happy creature. His musical powers gave him a mystic quality to her. She caressed his horse's mane and thrilled as she touched it, as if she were caressing the man—as if he were some new and splendid type of centaur. And Runyon seemed to read her mind. His face became more ruddy with delight. His flashing eyes suggested sound rather than color—they were laughing.

Their conference ended and Runyon rode on up the hill. Sylvia carried herself circumspectly enough as she went back into the house, but she was almost giddy with joy over the final words of that conference. Runyon had lowered his voice almost to a whisper, and had spoken with intensity as one sometimes speaks to children.

She did not ride that afternoon. It appeared that all her interests for the time being were indoors. She spent much of her time among the things which reminded her most strongly of Harboro; she sought out little services she could perform for him, to delight him when he returned. She talked with more than common interest with Antonia, following the old woman from kitchen to dining-room and back again. She seemed particularly in need of human companionship, of

sympathy. She trusted the old servant without reserve. She knew that here was a woman who would neither see nor speak nor hear evil where either she or Harboro was concerned. Not that her fidelity to either of them was particular; it was the home itself that was sacred. The flame that warmed the house and made the pot boil was the thing to be guarded at any cost. Any winds that caused this flame to waver were evil winds and must not be permitted to blow. The old woman was covertly discerning; but she had the discretion common to those who know that homes are built only by a slow and patient process—though they may be destroyed easily.

When it came time to light the lamps Sylvia went up into her boudoir. She liberated the imprisoned currents up in the little mediæval lanterns. She drew the blinds so that she should feel quite alone. She had put on one of the dresses which made her look specially slim and soft and childlike. She knew the garment became her, because it always brought a tender expression to Harboro's eyes.

And then she sat down and waited.

At eight o'clock Runyon came. So faint was his summons at the door that it might have been a lost bird fluttering in the dark. But Sylvia heard it. She descended and opened the door for him. In the dimly lighted hall she whispered: "Are you sure nobody saw you come?"

He took both her hands into his and replied: "Nobody!"

They mounted the steps like two children, playing a slightly hazardous game. "The cat's away," she said, her eyes beaming with joy.

He did not respond in words but his eyes completed the old saying.

They went up into the boudoir, and he put away his coat and hat.

They tried to talk, each seeking to create the impression that what was being said was quite important. But neither heard what the other said. They were like people talking in a storm or in a house that is burning down.

He took his place at the piano after a while. It seemed that he had promised to sing for her—for her alone. He glanced apprehensively toward the windows, as if to estimate the distance which separated him from the highway. It was no part of their plan that he should be

heard singing in Sylvia's room by casual passers-by on the Quemado Road.

He touched the keys lightly and when he sang his voice seemed scarcely to carry across the room. There was a rapid passage on the keyboard, like the patter of a pony's hoofs in the distance, and then the words came:

"From the desert I come to thee On my Arab shod with fire...."

It was a work of art in miniature. The crescendo passages were sung relatively with that introductory golden whisper as a standard. For the moment Sylvia forgot that the singer's shoulders were beautifully compact and vigorous. She was visualizing the Bedouin who came on his horse to declare his passion.

"And I faint in thy disdain!..."

She stood near him, spellbound by the animation of his face, the seeming reality of his plea. He was not a singer; he was the Bedouin lover.

There was a fanatic ardor in the last phrase:

"Till the leaves of the Judgment Book unfold!"

He turned lightly away from the piano. He was smiling radiantly. He threw out his arms with an air of inviting approval; but the gesture was to her an invitation, a call. She was instantly on her knees beside him, drawing his face down to hers. His low laughter rippled against her face as he put his arms around her and drew her closer to him.

They were rejoicing in an atmosphere of dusky gold. The light from the mediæval lanterns fell on her hair and on his laughing face which glowed as with a kind of universal good-will. A cloud of delicate incense seemed to envelop them as their lips met.

And then the shadow fell. It fell when the door opened quietly and Harboro came into the room.

He closed the door behind him and regarded them strangely—as if his face had died, but as if his eyes retained the power of seeing.

Sylvia drew away from Runyon, not spasmodically, but as if she were moving in her sleep. She left one hand on Runyon's sleeve. She was regarding Harboro with an expression of hopeless bewilderment. She seemed incapable of speaking. You would not

have said she was frightened. You would have thought: “She has been slain.”

Harboro’s lips were moving, but he seemed unable to speak immediately.

It was Sylvia who broke the silence.

“You shouldn’t have tricked me, Harboro!” she said. Her voice had the mournful quality of a dove’s.

He seemed bewildered anew by that. The monstrous inadequacy of it was too much for him. He had tricked her, certainly, and that wasn’t a manly thing to do. He seemed to be trying to get his faculties adjusted. Yet the words he uttered finally were pathetically irrelevant, it would have seemed. He addressed Runyon.

“Are you the sort of man who would talk about—about this sort of thing?” he asked.

Runyon had not ceased to regard him alertly with an expression which can be described only as one of infinite distaste—with the acute discomfort of an irrepressible creature who shrinks from serious things.

“I am not,” he said, as if his integrity were being unwarrantably questioned.

Harboro’s voice had been strained like that of a man who is dying of thirst. He went on with a disconcerting change of tone. He was trying to speak more vigorously, more firmly; but the result was like some talking mechanism uttering words without shading them properly. “I suppose you are willing to marry her?” he asked.

It was Sylvia who answered this. “He does not wish to marry me,” she said.

Harboro seemed staggered again. “I want his answer to that,” he insisted.

“Well, then, I don’t want to marry him,” continued Sylvia.

Harboro ignored her. “What do you say, Runyon?”

“In view of her unwillingness, and the fact that she is already married——”

“Runyon!” The word was pronounced almost like a snarl. Runyon had adopted a facetious tone which had stirred Harboro’s fury.

Something of the resiliency of Runyon's being vanished at that tone in the other man's voice. He looked at Harboro ponderingly, as a child may look at an unreasoning parent. And then he became alert again as Harboro threw at him contemptuously: "Go on; get out!"

PART VII

SYLVIA

CHAPTER XXIX

Sylvia did not look at Runyon as he picked up his coat and hat and vanished. She did not realize that he had achieved a perfect middle ground between an undignified escape and a too deliberate going. She was regarding Harboro wanly. "You shouldn't have come back," she said. She had not moved.

"I didn't go away," said Harboro.

Her features went all awry. "You mean——"

"I've spent the day in the guest-chamber. I had to find out. I had to make sure."

"Oh, Harboro!" she moaned; and then with an almost ludicrously swift return to habitual, petty concerns: "You've had no food all day."

The bewildered expression returned to his eyes. "Food!" he cried. He stared at her as if she had gone insane. "Food!" he repeated.

She groped about as if she were in the dark. When her fingers came into contact with a chair she drew it toward her and sat down.

Harboro took a step forward. He meant to take a chair, too; but his eyes were not removed from hers, and she shrank back with a soft cry of terror.

"You needn't be afraid," he assured her. He sat down opposite her, slowly, as very ill people sit down.

As if she were still holding to some thought that had been in her mind, she asked: "What *do* you mean to do, then?"

He was breathing heavily. "What does a man do in such a case?" he said—to himself rather than to her, it might have seemed. "I shall go away," he said at length. "I shall clear out." He brought his hands down upon the arms of his chair heavily—not in wrath, but as if surrendering all hope of seeing clearly. "Though it isn't a very simple thing to do," he added slowly. "You see, you're a part of me. At least, that's what I've come to feel. And how can a man go away from himself? How can a part of a man go away and leave the other part?" He lifted his fists and smote his breast until his whole body shook. And then he leaned forward, his elbows on the arms of his chair, his hands clasped before him. He was staring into vacancy. He aroused himself after a time. "Of course, I'll have to go," he said. He seemed

to have become clear on that one point. And then he flung himself back in his chair and thrust his arms out before him. “What were you driving at, Sylvia?” he asked.

“Driving at…?”

“I hadn’t done you any harm. Why did you marry me, if you didn’t love me?”

“I do love you!” She spoke with an intensity which disturbed him.

“Ah, you mean—you did?”

“I mean I do!”

He arose dejectedly with the air of a man who finds it useless to make any further effort. “We’ll not talk about it, then,” he said. He turned toward the door.

“I do love you,” she repeated. She arose and took a step toward him, though her limbs were trembling so that they seemed unable to sustain her weight. “Harboro!” she called as he laid his hand on the door. “Harboro! I want you to listen to me.” She sank back into her chair, and Harboro turned and faced her again wonderingly.

“If you’d try to understand,” she pleaded. “I’m not going to ask you to stay. I only want you to understand.” She would not permit her emotions to escape bounds. Something that was courageous and honorable in her forbade her to appeal to his pity alone; something that was shrewd in her warned her that such a course would be of no avail.

“You see, I was what people call a bad woman when you first met me. Perhaps you know that now?”

“Go on,” he said.

“But that’s such a silly phrase—*a bad woman*. Do you suppose I ever felt like a *bad woman*—until now? Even now I can’t realize that the words belong to me, though I know that according to the rules I’ve done you a bad turn, Harboro.”

She rocked in silence while she gained control over her voice.

“What you don’t know,” she said finally, “is how things began for me, in those days back in San Antonio, when I was growing up. It’s been bad luck with me always; or if you don’t believe in luck, then everything has been a kind of trick played on me from the beginning. Not by anybody—I don’t mean that. But by something bigger.

There's the word Destiny...." She began to wring her hands nervously. "It seems like telling an idle tale. When you frame the sentences they seem to have existed in just that form always. I mean, losing my mother when I was twelve; and the dreadful poverty of our home and its dulness, and the way my father sat in the sun and seemed unable to do anything. I don't believe he *was* able to do anything. There's the word Destiny again. We lived in what's called the Mexican section, where everybody was poor. What's the meaning of it; there being whole neighborhoods of people who are hungry half the time?

"I was still nothing but a child when I began to notice how others escaped from poverty a little—the Mexican girls and women I lived among. It seemed to be expected of them. They didn't think anything of it at all. It didn't make any difference in their real selves, so far as you could see. They went on going to church and doing what little tasks they could find to do—just like other women. The only precaution they took when a man came was to turn the picture of the Virgin to the wall...."

Harboro had sat down again and was regarding her darkly.

"I don't mean that I felt about it just as they did when I got older. You see, they had their religion to help them. They had been taught to call the thing they did a sin, and to believe that a sin was forgiven if they went and confessed to the priest. It seemed to make it quite simple. But I couldn't think of it as a sin. I couldn't clearly understand what sin meant, but I thought it must be the thing the happy people were guilty of who didn't give my father something to do, so that we could have a decent place to live in. You must remember how young I was! And so what the other girls called a sin seemed to me ... oh, something that was untidy—that wasn't nice."

Harboro broke in upon her narrative when she paused.

"I'm afraid you've always been very fastidious."

She grasped at that straw gratefully. "Yes, I have been. There isn't one man in a hundred who appeals to me, even now." And then something, as if it were the atmosphere about her, clarified her vision for the moment, and she looked at Harboro in alarm. She knew, then, that he had spoken sarcastically, and that she had fallen into the trap he had set for her. "Oh, Harboro! You!" she cried. She

had not known that he could be unkind. Her eyes swam in tears and she looked at him in agony. And in that moment it seemed to him that his heart must break. It was as if he looked on while Sylvia drowned, and could not put forth a hand to save her.

She conquered her emotion. She only hoped that Harboro would hear her to the end. She resumed: "And when I began to see that people are expected to shape their own lives, mine had already been shaped. I couldn't begin at a beginning, really; I had to begin in the middle. I had to go on weaving the threads that were already in my hands—the soiled threads. I met nice women after a while—women from the San Antonio missions, I think they were; and they were kind to me and gave me books to read. One of them took me to the chapel—where the clock ticked. But they couldn't really help me. I think they did influence me more than I realized, possibly; for my father began to tell them I wasn't at home ... and he brought me out here to Eagle Pass soon after they began to befriend me."

Harboro was staring at her with a vast incredulity. "And then—?" he asked.

"And then it went on out here—though it seemed different out here. I had the feeling of being shut out, here. In a little town people know. Life in a little town is like just one checker-board, with a game going on; but the big towns are like a lot of checkerboards, with the men on some of them in disorder, and not being watched at all."

Harboro was shaking his head slowly, and she made an effort to wipe some of the blackness from the picture. "You needn't believe I didn't have standards that I kept to. Some women of my kind would have lied or stolen, or they would have made mischief for people. And then there were the young fellows, the mere boys.... It's a real injury to them to find that a girl they like is—is not nice. They're so wonderfully ignorant. A woman is either entirely good or entirely bad in their eyes. You couldn't really do anything to destroy their faith, even when they pretended to be rather rough and wicked. I wasn't that kind of a bad woman, at least."

Harboro's brow had become furrowed, with impatience, seemingly. "But your marriage to me, Sylvia?" He put the question accusingly.

"I thought you knew—at first. I thought you *must* know. There are men who will marry the kind of woman I was. And it isn't just the little or worthless men, either. Sometimes it is the big men, who can understand and be generous. Up to the time of our marriage I thought you knew and that you were forgiving everything. And at last I couldn't bear to tell you. Not alone from fear of losing you, but I knew it would hurt you horribly, and I hoped ... I had made up my mind ... I *was* truly loyal to you, Harboro, until they tricked me in my father's house."

Harboro continued to regard her, a judge unmoved. "And Runyon, Sylvia—Runyon?" he asked accusingly.

"I know that's the thing you couldn't possibly forgive, and yet that seems the slightest thing of all to me. You can't know what it is to be humbled, and so many innocent pleasures taken away from you. When Fectnor came back ... oh, it seemed to me that life itself mocked me and warned me coldly that I needn't expect to be any other than the old Sylvia, clear to the end. I had begun to have a little pride, and to have foolish dreams. And then I went back to my father's house. It wasn't my father; it wasn't even Fectnor. It was Life itself whipping me back into my place again.

"... And then Runyon came. He meant pleasure to me—nothing more. He seemed such a gay, shining creature!" She looked at him in the agony of utter despair. "I know how it appears to you; but if you could only see how it seemed to me!"

"I'm trying," said Harboro, unmoved.

"If I'd been a little field of grass for the sheep to graze on, do you suppose I shouldn't have been happy if the birds passed by, or that I shouldn't have been ready for the sheep when they came? If I'd been a little pool in the desert, do you suppose I wouldn't have been happier for the sunlight, and just as ready for the rains when they came?"

He frowned. "But you're neither grass nor water," he said.

"Ah, I think I am just that—grass and water. I think that is what we all are—with something of mystery added."

He seized upon that one tangible thought. "There you have it, that *something of mystery*," he said. "That's the thing that makes the world move—that keeps people clean."

"Yes," she conceded dully, "or makes people set up standards of their own and compel other people to accept them whether they understand them or believe in them or not."

When he again regarded her with dark disapproval she went on:

"What I wanted to tell you, Harboro, is that my heart has been like a brimming cup for you always. It was only that which ran over that I gave to another. Runyon never could have robbed the cup—a thousand Runyons couldn't. He was only like a flower to wear in my hair, a ribbon to put on for an outing. But you ... you were the hearth for me to sit down before at night, a wall to keep the wind away. What was it you said once about a man and woman becoming one? You have been my very body to me, Harboro; and any other could only have been a friendly wind to stir me for a moment and then pass on."

Harboro's face darkened. "I was the favorite lover," he said.

"You won't understand," she said despairingly. And then as he arose and turned toward the door again she went to him abjectly, appealingly. "Harboro!" she cried, "I know I haven't explained it right, but I want you to believe me! It is you I love, really; it is you I am grateful to and proud of. You're everything to me that you've thought of being. I couldn't live without you!" She sank to her knees and covered her eyes with one hand while with the other she reached out to him: "Harboro!" Her face was wet with tears, now; her body was shaken with sobs.

He looked down at her for an instant, his brows furrowed, his eyes filled with horror. He drew farther away, so that she could not touch him. "Great God!" he cried at last, and then she knew that he had gone, closing the door sharply after him.

She did not try to call him back. Some stoic quality in her stayed her. It would be useless to call him; it would only tear her own wounds wider open, it would distress him without moving him otherwise. It would alarm old Antonia.

If he willed to come back, he would come of his own accord. If he could reconcile the things she had done with any hope of future happiness he would come back to her again.

But she scarcely hoped for his return. She had always had a vague comprehension of those pragmatic qualities in his nature which

placed him miles above her, or beneath her, or beyond her. She had drunk of the cup which had been offered her, and she must not rebel because a bitter sediment lay on her lips. She had always faintly realized that the hours she spent with Runyon might some day have to be paid for in loneliness and despair.

Yet now that Harboro was gone she stood at the closed door and stared at it as if it could never open again save to permit her to pass out upon ways of darkness. She leaned against it and laid her face against her arm and wept softly. And then she turned away and knelt by the chair he had occupied and hid her face in her hands.

She knew he would no longer be visible when she went to the window. She had spared herself the sight of him on his way out of her life. But now she took her place and began, with subconscious hope, the long vigil she was to keep. She stared out on the road over which he had passed. If he came back he would be visible from this place by the window.

Hours passed and her face became blank, as the desert became blank. The light seemed to die everywhere. The little home beacons abroad in the desert were blotted out one by one. Eagle Pass became a ghostly group of houses from which the last vestiges of life vanished. She became stiff and inert as she sat in her place with her eyes held dully on the road. Once she dozed lightly, to awaken with an intensified sense of tragedy. Had Harboro returned during that brief interval of unconsciousness? She knew he had not. But until the dawn came she sat by her place, steadfastly waiting.

CHAPTER XXX

When Harboro went down the stairs and out of the house he had a purposeful air which vanished as soon as his feet were set on the highway. Where was he going? Where *could* he go? That beginning he had made usually ended in the offices across the river. But he could not go to his office now. There was nothing there for him to do. And even if he were able to get in, and to find some unfinished task to which he could turn, his problem would not be solved. He could not go on working always. A man must have some interests other than his work.

He pulled himself together and set off down the road. He realized that his appearance must be such that he would attract attention and occasion comment. The foundations of his pride stiffened, as they had always done when he was required to face extraordinary difficulties. He must not allow casual passers-by to perceive that things were not right with him. They would know that he and Sylvia were having difficulties. Doubtless they had been expecting something of the sort from the beginning.

He seemed quite himself but for a marked self-concentration as he walked through the town. Dunwoodie, emerging from the Maverick bar, hailed him as he passed. He did not hear—or he was not immediately conscious of hearing. But half a dozen steps farther on he checked himself. Some one had spoken to him. He turned around. "Ah, Dunwoodie—good evening!" he said. But he did not go back, and Dunwoodie looked after him meditatively and then went back into the bar, shaking his head. He had always meant to make a friend of Harboro, but the thing evidently was not to be done.

Harboro was scarcely conscious of the fact that he crossed the river. If he encountered any one whom he knew—or any one at all—he passed without noticing. And this realization troubled him. The customs guard, who was an old acquaintance, must have been in his place on the bridge. He tried to arouse himself anew. Surely his conduct must seem strange to those who chanced to observe him.

With an air of briskness he went into the *Internacional* dining-room. He had had nothing to eat all day. He would order supper and then he would feel more like himself. He did not realize

what it was that made his situation seem like a period of suspense, which kept in his mind the subconscious thought that he would come out of the dark into a clearing if he persevered.

The fact was that something of what Sylvia had said to him had touched his conscience, if it had not affected his sense of logic. She really could not be quite what she seemed to be—that was the unshaped thought in the back of his brain. There were explanations to make which had not yet been made. If he told himself that he had solved the problem by leaving the house, he knew in reality that he had not done so. He was benumbed, bewildered. He must get back his reasoning faculties, and then he would see more clearly, both as to what had been done and what he must set about doing.

He had an idea that he could now understand the sensations of people who had indulged too freely in some sort of drug. He had temporarily lost the power to feel. Here was Sylvia, a self-confessed wanton—and yet here was Sylvia as deeply intrenched in his heart as ever. This was a monstrous contradiction. One of these things must be a fact, the other a fantastic hallucination.

The waiter brought food which he looked at with distaste. It was a typical frontier meal—stereotyped, uninviting. There were meat and eggs and coffee, and various heavy little dishes containing dabs of things which were never eaten. He drank the coffee and realized that he had been almost perishing from thirst. He called for a second cup; and then he tried to eat the meat and eggs; but they were like dust—it seemed they might choke him. He tried the grapes which had got hidden under the cruet, and the acid of these pleased him for an instant, but the pulp was tasteless, unpalatable.

He finished the second cup of coffee and sat listlessly regarding the things he had not touched. He had hoped he might prolong the supper hour, since he could think of nothing else to engage his attention. But he was through, and he had consumed only a few minutes.

His glance wandered to a railroad poster in the dining-room, and this interested him for an instant. Attractive names caught his eye: Torreon, Tampico, Vera Cruz, the City, Durango. They were all waiting for him, the old towns. There was the old work to be done, the old life to resume.... Yes, but there was Sylvia. Sylvia, who had said with the intentness of a child, “I love you,” and again, “I love

you." She did not want Runyon. She wanted him, Harboro. And he wanted her—good God, how he wanted her! Had he been mad to wander away from her? His problem lay with her, not elsewhere.

And then he jerked his head in denial of that conclusion. No, he did not want her. She had laid a path of pitch for his feet, and the things he might have grasped with his hands, to draw himself out of the path which befouled his feet—they too were smeared with pitch. She did not love him, certainly. He clung tenaciously to that one clear point. There lay the whole situation, perfectly plain. She did not love him. She had betrayed him, had turned the face of the whole community against him, had permitted him to affront the gentle people who had unselfishly aided him and given him their affection.

He wandered about the streets until nearly midnight, and then he engaged a room in the *Internacional* and assured himself that it was time to go to bed. He needed a good rest. To-morrow he would know what to do.

But the sight of the room assigned to him surprised him in some odd way—as if every article of furniture in it were mocking him. It was not a room really to be used, he thought. At least, it was not a room for him to use. He did not belong in that bed; he had a bed of his own, in the house he had built on the Quemado Road. And then he remembered the time when he had been able to hang his hat anywhere and consider himself at home, and how he had always been grateful for a comfortable bed, no matter where. That was the feeling which he must get back again. He must get used to the strangeness of things, so that such a room as this would seem his natural resting-place, and that other house which had been destroyed for him would seem a place of shame, to be avoided and forgotten.

He slept fitfully. The movements of trains in the night comforted him in a mournful fashion. They reminded him of that other life, which might be his again. But even in his waking moments he reached out to the space beside him to find Sylvia, and the returning full realization of all that had happened brought a groan to his throat.

He dressed in the morning with a feeling of guilt, mingled with a sense of relief. He had slept where he had had no business to sleep. He had been idle at a time when he should have been active. He had

done nothing, and there was much to be done. He had not even rested.

He put on an air of briskness, as one will don a garment, as he ordered coffee and rolls in the dining-room. There were things to be attended to. He must go over to the offices and write out his resignation. He must see the General Manager and ask him for work on the road elsewhere. He must transfer his holdings—his house and bank-account—to Sylvia. He had no need of house or money, and she would need them badly now. And then ... then he must begin life anew.

It was all plain; yet his feet refused to bear him in the direction of the railroad offices; his mind refused to grapple with the details of the task of transferring to Sylvia the things he owned. Something constructive, static, in the man's nature stayed him.

He wandered away from the town during the day, an aimless impulse carrying him quite out into the desert. He paused to inspect little irrigated spots where humble gardens grew. He paused at mean *adobe* huts and talked to old people and to children. Again and again he came into contact with conditions which annoyed and bewildered him. People were all bearing their crosses. Some were hopelessly ill, waiting for death to relieve them, or they were old and quite useless. And all were horribly poor, casting about for meagre food and simple clothing which seemed beyond their reach. They were lonely, overburdened, despondent, darkly philosophical.

What was the meaning of human life, he wondered? Were men and women created to suffer, to bear crosses which were not of their own making, to suffer injustices which seemed pointless?...

Late in the afternoon he was back in Piedras Negras again. He had eaten nothing save a handful of figs which an old woman had given him, together with a bowl of goat's milk. He had wished to pay for them, but the old woman had shaken her head and turned away.

He encountered a tourist in clerical garb—a thin-chested man with a colorless face, but with sad, benevolent eyes—sitting in the plaza near the sinister old *cuartel*. He sat down and asked abruptly in a voice strangely high-pitched for his own:

"Is a man ever justified in leaving his wife?"

The tourist looked startled; but he was a man of tact and wisdom, evidently, and he quickly adjusted himself to what was plainly a special need, an extraordinary condition. “Ah, that’s a very old question,” he replied gently. “It’s been asked often, and there have been many answers.”

“But is he?” persisted Harboro.

“There are various conditions. If a man and a woman do not love each other, wouldn’t it seem wiser for them to rectify the mistake they had made in marrying? But if they love each other ... it seems to me quite a simple matter then. I should say that under no circumstances should they part.”

“But if the wife has sinned?”

“My dear man ... sinned; it’s a difficult word. Let us try to define it. Let us say that a sin is an act deliberately committed with the primary intention of inflicting an injury upon some one. It becomes an ugly matter. Very few people sin, if you accept my definition.”

Harboro was regarding him with dark intentness.

“The trouble is,” resumed the other man, “we often use the word sin when we mean only a weakness. And a weakness in an individual should make us cleave fast to him, so that he may not be wholly lost. I can’t think of anything so cruel as to desert one who has stumbled through weakness. The desertion would be the real sin. Weaknesses are a sort of illness—and even a pigeon will sit beside its mate and mourn, when its mate is ill. It is a beautiful lesson in fidelity. A soldier doesn’t desert his wounded comrade in battle. He bears him to safety—or both perish together. And by such deeds is the consciousness of God established in us.”

“Wait!” commanded Harboro. He clinched his fists. A phrase had clung to him: “He bears him to safety or both perish together!”

He arose from the seat he had taken and staggered away half a dozen steps, his hands still clinched. Then, as if remembering, he turned about so that he faced the man who had talked to him. Beyond loomed the ancient church in which Sylvia had said it would seem possible to find God. Was He there in reality, and was this one of His angels, strayed a little distance from His side? It was not the world’s wisdom that this man spoke, and yet how eternally true his words had been! A flock of pigeons flew over the plaza and

disappeared in the western glow where the sun was setting. “Even a pigeon will sit by its mate and mourn....”

Harboro gazed at the man on the bench. His face moved strangely, as a dark pool will stir from the action of an undercurrent. He could not speak for a moment, and then he called back in a voice like a cry: “I thank you.”

“You are welcome—brother!” was the response. The man on the bench was smiling. He coughed a little, and wondered if the open-air treatment the physician had prescribed might not prove a bit heroic. When he looked about him again his late companion was gone.

Harboro was hurrying down toward the Rio Grande bridge. He was trying to put a curb on his emotions, on his movements. It would never do for him to hurry through the streets of Eagle Pass like a madman. He must walk circumspectly.

He was planning for the future. He would take Sylvia away—anywhere. They would begin their married life anew. He would take her beyond the ordinary temptations. They would live in a tent, an igloo, in the face of a cliff. He would take her beyond the reach of the old evil influences, where he could guide her back to the paths she had lost. He would search out some place where there was never a dun horse with golden dapples, and a rider who carried himself like a crier of God, carrying glad tidings across the world.

Yet he was never conscious of the manner in which he made that trying journey. He was recalled to self when he reached his own door. He realized that he was somewhat out of breath. The night had fallen and the house revealed but little light from the front. Through the door he could see that the dining-room was lighted. He tried the door stealthily and entered with caution. It would not do to startle Sylvia.

Ah—that was her voice in the dining-room. The telephone bell had sounded, just as he opened the door, and she was responding to the call.

Her voice seemed cold at first: “I didn’t catch the name.” And then it turned to a caress: “Oh, Mendoza—I didn’t hear at first. Of course, I want to see you.” There was now a note of perplexity in her tone, and then: “No, don’t come here. It would be better for me to see you at my father’s. In the afternoon.”

Harboro found himself leaning against the wall, his head in his hands. Mendoza! The town's notorious philanderer, who had regarded Sylvia with insolent eyes that night out at the Quemado! Yes, and she had danced with him the minute his back was turned; danced with him with unconcealed joy. Mendoza....

He climbed the stairs slowly. He heard Sylvia's footsteps as she moved away; into the kitchen, probably. He climbed stealthily, like a thief. He mustn't permit Sylvia to hear him. He couldn't see her now.

CHAPTER XXXI

Sylvia had spent the entire day by her window, looking down the road. She had refused the food that old Antonia had brought, and the comforting words that came with it. Something that was not a part of herself argued with her that Harboro would come back, though all that she was by training and experiences warned her that she must not look for him.

At nightfall she turned wearily when Antonia tapped at her door.

"*Niña!*" The troubled old woman held out a beseeching hand. "You must have food. I have prepared it for you, again. There are very good eggs, and a glass of milk, and coffee—coffee with a flavor! Come, there will be another day, and another. Sorrows pass in the good God's time; and even a blind sheep will find its blade of grass." Her hand was still extended.

Sylvia went to her and kissed her withered cheek. "I will try," she said with docility.

And they went down the stairs as if they were four; the young woman walking with Despair, the old woman moving side by side with Knowledge.

It was then that the telephone rang and Sylvia went to the instrument and took down the receiver with trembling fingers. If it were only Harboro!... But it was a woman's voice, and the hope within her died. She could scarcely attend, after she realized that it was a woman who spoke to her. The name "Mrs. Mendoza" meant nothing to her for an instant. And then she aroused herself. She must not be ungracious. "Oh, Mendoza," she said; "I didn't hear at first." She felt as if a breath of cold air had enveloped her, but she shook off the conviction. From habit she spoke cordially; with gratitude to the one woman in Eagle Pass who had befriended her she spoke with tenderness. The wife of Jesus Mendoza wanted to call on her.

But Sylvia had planned the one great event of her life, and it occurred to her that she ought not to permit this unfortunate woman to come to the house on the morrow. It would be an unforgivable cruelty. And then she thought of her father's house, and suggested that her visitor come to see her there.

She hung up the receiver listlessly and went into the kitchen, where Antonia was eagerly getting a meal ready for her. She looked at these affectionate preparations indulgently, as she might have looked at a child who assured her that a wholly imaginary thing was a real thing.

She ate dutifully, and then she took a bit of husk from Antonia's store and made a cigarette. It was the first time she had smoked since her marriage. "He's not coming back," she said in a voice like that of a helpless old woman. She leaned her elbows on the table and smoked. Her attitude did not suggest grief, but rather a leave-taking.

Then with returning briskness she got up and found street apparel and left the house.

She went down into the town almost gayly—like the Sylvia of old. In the drug-store she told an exciting little story to the clerk. There had been a nest of scorpions ... would he believe it? In the kitchen! She had been given such a start when the servant had found them. The servant had screamed; quite naturally, too. She had been told that a weak solution, sprinkled on the floor, would drive them away. What was it?... Yes, that was it. She had forgotten.

She received the small phial and paid the price with fingers which were perfectly firm. And then she started back up the hill.

Under a street light she became aware that she was being followed. She turned with a start. It was only a dog—a forlorn little beast which stopped when she stopped, and regarded her with soft, troubled eyes.

She stooped and smoothed the creature's head. "You mustn't follow," she said in a voice like hidden water. "I haven't any place to take you—nowhere at all!" She went on up the hill. Once she turned and observed that the lost dog stood where she had left him, still imploring her for friendship.

At her door she paused and turned. She leaned against the door-post in a wistful attitude. A hundred lonely, isolated lights were burning across the desert, as far as the eye could reach. They were little lights which might have meant nothing at all to a happier observer; but to Sylvia they told the story of men and women who had joined hands to fight the battle of life; of the sweet, humble activities which keep the home intact—the sweeping of the hearth,

the mending of the fire, the expectant glance at the clock, the sound of a foot-fall drawing near. There lay the desert, stretching away to the Sierra Madre, a lonely waste; but it was a paradise to those who tended their lights faithfully and waited with assurance for those who were away.

... She turned and entered her house stealthily.

At the top of the stairs she paused in indecision. Antonia had not heard her enter. (She did not know that the old woman was standing in the kitchen under the picture of the Virgin, with her hands across her eyes like a bandage.) The lovely boudoir called to her, but she would not enter it.

"I will go into the guest-chamber," she said; "that is the room set apart for strangers. I think I must always have been a stranger here."

She opened the door quietly.

A pungent odor of smoke filled her nostrils. She groped for the light and turned it on.

Through little horizontal wisps of smoke she saw Harboro lying across the bed, his great chest standing high, his muscular throat exposed to the light, a glint of teeth showing under the sweeping black mustache. His eyes, nearly closed, seemed to harbor an eager light—as if he had travelled along a dark path and saw at last a beacon on a distant hilltop. A pistol was still clasped in his dead hand.

The unopened phial Sylvia carried slipped to the floor. She clutched at her lips with both hands, to suppress the scream that arose within her.

He had no right to lie so, in this room. That was her thought. He had taken the place she had chosen for her own.

And then she thought of Harboro as a stranger, too. Had she ever known him, really?

Her first thought recurred. It should have been her right to lie here in the guest-chamber, not Harboro's.

And yet, and yet....

The End

THE END

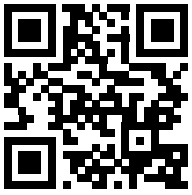
Children of the desert

FROM THE PUBLISHER



Discover your next classic.

Explore the Pipcub collection.



pipcub.com