THE GIRL OF THE GOLDEN WEST



DAVID BELASCO

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THE AUTHOR



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1853 - 1931

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Belasco

David Belasco was an American playwright, director and producer, born in San Francisco in 1853. He began acting as a child and learned the practical work of the theatre as a call boy and stage manager. In 1882 he moved to New York, where he built a career that combined writing with the organisation of performance.

His productions became known for elaborate scenery and experiments in lighting. He sought convincing physical environments even when the dramatic action belonged to sentimental melodrama. He also trained and promoted performers, including David Warfield, Blanche Bates and Frances Starr.

His stage works include *Madame Butterfly*, *The Girl of the Golden West* and *The Return of Peter Grimm*. Much of his writing involved adaptation or collaboration, making his career a reminder that theatrical authorship often extends beyond a single person at a desk. He remained associated with the Belasco Theatre until his death in 1931.

When reading a play, imagine the timing and placement of its actions as well as the words spoken. A pause, a change of light or an object in a room may carry part of the meaning. Belasco's interest in production makes those possibilities particularly relevant: the printed text offers a framework that actors, designers and an audience bring into fuller life.

Biographical references: New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Division. Portrait source: photograph in University of Washington Libraries, J. Willis Sayre Collection, SAYRE 11635. Full source records retained in the edition archive.

I.

It was when coming back to the mines, after a trip to Monterey, that the Girl first met him. It happened, too, just at a time when her mind was ripe to receive a lasting impression. But of all this the boys of Cloudy Mountain Camp heard not a word, needless to say, until long afterwards.

Lolling back on the rear seat of the stage, her eyes half closed,—the sole passenger now, and with the seat in front piled high with boxes and baskets containing *rebozos*, silken souvenirs, and other finery purchased in the shops of the old town,—the Girl was mentally reviewing and dreaming of the delights of her week's visit there,—a visit that had been a revelation to one whose sole experience of the world had until now been derived from life in a rough mining camp. Before her half-closed eyes still shimmered a vista of strange, exotic scenes and people, the thronging crowds of carnivals and fêtes; the Mexican girls swaying through the movements of the fandango to the music of guitars and castanets; the great *rodeo* with its hundreds of *vaqueros*, which was held at one of the ranchos just outside the town; and, lastly, and most vividly of all, the never-to-be-forgotten thrill of her first bull-fight.

Still ringing in her ears was the piercing note of the bugle which instantly silenced the expectant throng; the hoarse roar that greeted the entrance of the bull, and the thunder of his hoofs when he made his first mad charge. She saw again, with marvellous fidelity, the whole colour-scheme just before the death of the big, brave beast: the huge arena in its unrivalled setting of mountain, sea and sky; the eager multitude, tense with expectancy; the silver-mounted bridles and trappings of the horses; the many-hued capes of the *capadors*; the gaily-dressed *banderilleros*, poising their beribboned barbs; the red flag and long, slender, flashing sword of the cool and ever watchful *matador*; and, most prominent of all to her eyes, the brilliant, gold-laced packets of the gentlemen-*picadors*, who, after the Mexican fashion,—so she had been told,—deemed it in nowise beneath them to enter the arena in person.

And so it happened that now, as the stage swung round a corner, and a horseman suddenly appeared at a point where two roads converged, and was evidently spurring his horse with the intent of

coming up with the stage, it was only natural that, even before he was near enough to be identified, the *caballero* should already have become a part of the pageant of her mental picture.

Up to the moment of the stranger's appearance, nothing had happened to break the monotony of her long return journey towards Cloudy Mountain Camp. Far back in the distance now lay the Mission where the passengers of the stage had been hospitably entertained the night before; still further back the red-tiled roofs and whitewashed walls of the little pueblo of San Jose,—a veritable bower of roses; and remotest of all, the crosses of San Carlos and the great pines, oaks and cypresses, which bordered her dream-memory of the white-beach crescent formed by the waves of Monterey Bay.

The dawn of each day that swept her further from her week in wonderland had ushered in the matchless spring weather of California,—the brilliant sunshine, the fleecy clouds, the gentle wind with just a tang in it from the distant mountains; and as the stage rolled slowly northward through beautiful valleys, bright with yellow poppies and silver-white lupines, every turn of the road varied her view of the hills lying under an enchantment unlike that of any other land. Yet strange and full of interest as every mile of the river country should have been to a girl accustomed to the great forest of the Sierras, she had gazed upon it for the most part with unseeing eyes, while her thoughts turned, magnet-like, backward to the delights and the bewilderment of the old Mexican town. So now, as the pursuing horseman swept rapidly nearer, each swinging stride of the powerful horse, each rhythmic movement of the graceful rider brought nearer and more vivid the vision of a handsome *picador* holding off with his lance a thoroughly maddened bull until the crowd roared forth its appreciation.

"See, Señorita," said the horseman, at last galloping close to the coach and lifting his sombrero, "A beautiful bunch of syringa," and then, with his face bent towards her and his voice full of appeal, he added in lower tone: "for you!"

For a brief second, the Girl was too much taken back to find the adequate words with which to accept the stranger's offering. Notwithstanding that in his glance she could read, as plainly as though he had spoken: "I know I am taking a liberty, but please don't be angry with me," there was something in his sweeping bow and

grace of manner that, coupled with her vague sense of his social advantage, disconcerted her. A second more, however, and the embarrassment had passed, for on lifting her eyes to his again she saw that her memory had not played her false; beyond all chance of a mistake, he was the man who, ten days earlier, had peered into the stage, as she was nearing Monterey, and later, at the bull-fight, had found time to shoot admiring glances at her between his daring feats of horsemanship. Therefore, genuine admiration was in her eyes and extreme cordiality in her voice when, after a word or two of thanks, she added, with great frankness:

"But it strikes me sort o' forcible that I've seen you before." Then, with growing enthusiasm: "My, but that bull-fight was jest grand! You were fine! I'm right glad to know you, sir."

The *caballero's* face flushed with pleasure at her free-and-easy reception of him, while an almost inaudible "*Gracias*" fell from his lips. At once he knew that his first surmise, that the Girl was an American, had been correct. Not that his experience in life had furnished him with any parallel, for the Girl constituted a new and unique type. But he was well aware that no Spanish lady would have received the advances of a stranger in like fashion. It was inevitable, therefore, that for the moment he should contrast, and not wholly to her advantage, the Girl's unconventionality with the enforced reserve of the *dulcineas* who, custom decrees, may not be courted save in the presence of *duennas*. But the next instant he recalled that there were, in Sacramento, young women whose directness it would never do to mistake for boldness; and,—to his credit be it said,—he was quick to perceive that, however indifferent the Girl seemed to the customary formality of introduction, there was no suggestion of indelicacy about her. All that her frank and easy manner suggested was that she was a child of nature, spontaneous and untrammelled by the dictates of society, and normally and healthily at home in the company of the opposite sex.

"And she is even more beautiful than I supposed," was the thought that went through his mind.

And yet, the Girl was not beautiful, at least if judged by Spanish or Californian standards. Unlike most of their women, she was fair, and her type purely American. Her eyes of blue were lightly but clearly browed and abundantly fringed; her hair of burnished gold was

luxuriant and wavy, and framed a face of singularly frank and happy expression, even though the features lacked regularity. But it was a face, so he told himself, that any man would trust,—a face that would make a man the better for looking at it,—a face which reflected a soul that no environment could make other than pure and spotless. And so there was, perhaps, a shade more of respect and a little less assurance in his manner when he asked:

"And you like Monterey?"

"I love it! Ain't it romantic—an', my, what a fine time the girls there must have!"

The man laughed; the Girl's enthusiasm amused him.

"Have you had a fine trip so far?" he asked, for want of something better to say.

"Mercy, yes! This 'ere stage is a pokey ol' thing, but we've made not bad time, considerin'."

"I thought you were never going to get here!"

The Girl shot a coquettish glance at him.

"How did you know I was comin' on this 'ere stage?"

"I did not know,"—the stranger broke off and thought a moment. He may have been asking himself whether it were best for him to be as frank as she had been and admit his admiration for her; at last, encouraged perhaps by a look in the Girl's blue eyes, he ventured: "But I've been riding along this road every day since I saw you. I felt that I must see you again."

"You must like me powerful well...?" This remark, far from being a question, was accompanied with all the physiognomical evidences of an assertion.

The stranger shot a surprised glance at her, out of the corner of his eye. Then he admitted, in all truthfulness:

"Of course I do. Who could help...?"

"Have you tried not to?" questioned the Girl, smiling in his face now, and enjoying in the full this stolen intimacy.

"Ah, Señorita, why should I...? All I know is that I do."

The Girl became reflective; presently she observed:

"How funny it seems, an' yet, p'r'aps not so strange after all. The boys—all my boys at the camp like me—I'm glad you do, too."

Meanwhile the good-natured and loquaciously-inclined driver had turned his head and was subjecting the man cantering alongside of his stage to a rigid inspection. With his knowledge of the various types of men in California at that time, he had no difficulty in placing the status of this straight-limbed, broad-shouldered, young fellow as a native Californian. Moreover, it made no difference to him whether his passenger had met an old acquaintance or not; it was sufficient for him to observe that the lady, as well as himself—for the expression on her face could by no means be described as bored or scornful—liked the stranger's appearance; and so the better to take in all the points of the magnificent horse which the young Californian was riding, not to mention a commendable desire to give his only passenger a bit of pleasant diversion on the long journey, he slowed his horse down to a walk.

"But where do you live? You have a rancho near here?" the Girl was now asking.

"My father has—I live with him."

"Any sisters?"

"No,—no sisters or brothers. My mother was an American; she died a few years ago." And so saying, his glance sought and obtained an answering one full of sympathy.

"I'm downright sorry for you," said the Girl with feeling; and then in the next breath she added:

"But I'm pleased you're—you're half American."

"And you, Señorita?"

"I'm an orphan—my family are all dead," replied the Girl in a low voice. "But I have my boys," she went on more cheerfully, "an' what more do I need?" And then before he had time to ask her to explain what she meant by the boys, she cried out: "Oh, jest look at them wonderful berries over yonder! La, how I wish I could pick 'em!"

"Perhaps you may," the stranger hastened to say, and instantly with his free hand he made a movement to assist her to alight, while with the other he checked his horse; then, with his eyes resting appealingly upon the driver, he inquired: "It is possible, is it not, Señor?"

Curiously enough, this apparently proper request was responsible for changing the whole aspect of things. For, keenly desirous to

oblige him, though she was, there was something in the stranger's eyes as they now rested upon her that made her feel suddenly shy; a flood of new impressions assailed her: she wanted to evade the look and yet foster it; but the former impulse was the stronger, and for the first time she was conscious of a growing feeling of restraint. Indeed, some inner voice told her that it would not be quite right for her to leave the stage. True, she belonged to Cloudy Mountain Camp where the conventions were unknown and where a rough, if kind, comradery existed between the miners and herself; nevertheless, she felt that she had gone far enough with a new acquaintance, whose accent, as well as the timbre of his voice, gave ample evidence that he belonged to another order of society than her own and that of the boys. So, hard though it was not to accede to his request and, at the same time, break the monotony of her journey with a few minutes of berry-picking with him in the fields, she made no move to leave the stage but answered the questioning look of the obliging driver with a negative one. Whereupon, the latter, after declaring to the young Californian that the stage was late as it was, called to his horses to show what they could do in the way of getting over the ground after their long rest.

The young man's face clouded with disappointment. For two hundred yards or more he spoke not a word, though he spurred his horse in order to keep up with the now fast-moving stage. Then, all of a sudden, as the silence between them was beginning to grow embarrassing, the Girl made out the figure of a man on horseback a short distance ahead, and uttered an exclamation of surprise. The stranger followed the direction of the Girl's eyes and, almost instantly, it was borne in upon them that the horseman awaited their coming. The Girl turned to speak, but the tender, sorrowful expression that she saw on the young man's face kept her silent.

"That is one of my father's men," he said, somewhat solemnly. "His presence here may mean that I must leave you. The road to our ranch begins there. I fear that something may be wrong."

The Girl shot him a look of sympathetic inquiry, though she said nothing. To tell the truth, the first thought that entered her mind at his words was one of concern that their companionship was likely to cease abruptly. During the silence that preceded his outspoken premonition of trouble, she had been studying him closely. She

found herself admiring his aquiline features, his olive-coloured skin with its healthful pallor, the lazy, black Spanish eyes behind which, however tranquil they generally were, it was easy for her to discern, when he smiled, that reckless and indomitable spirit which appeals to women all the world over.

As the stage approached the motionless horseman, the young man cried out to the *vaquero*, for such he was, and asked in Spanish whether he had a message for him; an answer came back in the same language, the meaning of which the Girl failed to comprehend. A moment later her companion turned to her and said:

"It is as I feared."

Once more a silence fell upon them. For a half-mile or so, apparently deep in thought, he continued to canter at her side; at last he spoke what was in his mind.

"I hate to leave you, Señorita," he said.

In an instant the light went out of the Girl's eyes, and her face was as serious as his own when she replied:

"Well, I guess I ain't particularly crazy to have you go neither."

The unmistakable note of regret in the Girl's voice flattered as well as encouraged him to go further and ask:

"Will you think of me some time?"

The Girl laughed.

"What's the good o' my thinkin' o' you? I seen you talkin' with them gran' Monterey ladies an' I guess you won't be thinkin' often o' me. Like 's not by to-morrow you'll 'ave clean forgot me," she said with forced carelessness.

"I shall never forget you," declared the young man with the intense fervour that comes so easily to the men of his race.

At that a half-mistrustful, half-puzzled look crossed the Girl's face. Was this handsome stranger finding her amusing? There was almost a resentful glitter in her eyes when she cried out:

"I 'mos' think you're makin' fun o' me!"

"No, I mean every word that I say," he hastened to assure her, looking straight into her eyes where he could scarcely have failed to read something which the Girl had not the subtlety to conceal.

"Oh, I guess I made you say that!" she returned, making a child-like effort to appear to disbelieve him.

The stranger could not suppress a smile; but the next moment he was serious, and asked:

"And am I never going to see you again? Won't you tell me where I can find you?"

Once more the Girl was conscious of a feeling of embarrassment. Not that she was at all ashamed of being "The Girl of The Polka Saloon," for that never entered her mind; but she suddenly realised that it was one thing to converse pleasantly with a young man on the highway and another to let him come to her home on Cloudy Mountain. Only too well could she imagine the cool reception, if it stopped at that, that the boys of the camp there would accord to this stylish stranger. As a consequence, she was torn by conflicting emotions: an overwhelming desire to see him again, and a dread of what might happen to him should he descend upon Cloudy Mountain with all his fine airs and graces.

"I guess I'm queer—" she began uncertainly and then stopped in sudden surprise. Too long had she delayed her answer. Already the stage had left him some distance behind. Unperceived by her a shade of annoyance had passed over the Californian's face at her seeming reluctance to tell him where she lived. The quick of his Spanish pride was touched; and with a wave of his sombrero he had pulled his horse down on his haunches. Of no avail now was her resolution to let him know the whereabouts of the camp at any cost, for already his "*Adios, Señorita*" was sounding faintly in her ears.

With a little cry of vexation, scarcely audible, the young woman flung herself back on the seat. She was only a girl with all a girl's ways, and like most of her sex, however practical her life thus far, she was not without dreams of a romance. This meeting with the handsome *caballero* was the nearest she had come to having one. True, there was scarcely a man at Cloudy but what had tried at one time or another to go beyond the stage of good comradeship; but none of them had approached the idealistic vision of the hero that was all the time lying dormant in her mind. Of course, being a girl, and almost a queen in her own little sphere, she accepted their rough homage in a manner that was befitting to such an exalted personage, and gave nothing in return. But now something was stirring within

her of which she knew nothing; a feeling was creeping over her that she could not analyse; she was conscious only of the fact that with the departure of this attractive stranger, who had taken no pains to conceal his admiration for her, her journey had been robbed of all its joy.

A hundred yards further on, therefore, she could not resist the temptation to put her head out of the stage and look back at the place where she had last seen him.

He was still sitting quietly on his horse at the place where they had parted so unceremoniously, his face turned in her direction—horse and rider silhouetted against the western sky which showed a crimson hue below a greenish blue that was sapphire farther from the horizon.

II.

Not until a turn of the road hid the stage from sight did the stranger fix his gaze elsewhere. Even then it was not easy for him, and there had been a moment when he was ready to throw everything to the winds and follow it. But when on the point of doing so there suddenly flashed through his mind the thought of the summons that he had received. And so, not unlike one who had come to the conclusion that it was indeed a farewell, he waved his hand resignedly in the direction that the stage had taken and, calling to his *vaquero*, he gave his horse a thrust of the long rowel of his spur and galloped off towards the foothills of the Sierras.

For some miles the riders travelled a road which wound through beautiful green fields; but master and man were wholly indifferent, seeing neither the wild flowers lining each side of the road nor the sycamores and live oaks which were shining overhead from the recent rains. In the case of the young man every foot of the way to his father's rancho was familiar. All hours of the day and night he had made the trip to the highway, for with the exception of the few years that had been given to his education in foreign lands, his whole life had been passed on the rancho. Scarcely less acquainted with the road than his young master was the *vaquero*, so neither gave a glance at the country through which they were passing, but side by side took the miles in silence.

An hour passed with the young man still wrapt in thought. The truth was, though he was scarcely ready to admit it, he had been hard hit. In more ways than one the Girl had made a deep impression on him. Not only had her appearance awakened his interest to the point of enthusiasm, but there was something irresistibly attractive to him in her lack of affectation and audacious frankness. Over and over again he thought of her happy face, her straightforward way of looking at things and, last but not least, her evident pleasure in meeting him. And when he reflected on the hopelessness of their ever meeting again, a feeling of depression seized him. But his nature—always a buoyant one—did not permit him to remain downcast very long.

By this time they were nearing the foothills. A little while longer and the road that they were travelling became nothing more than a bridle path. Indeed, so dense did the *chaparral* presently become that it would have been utterly impossible for one unacquainted with the way to keep on it. Animal life was to be seen everywhere. At the approach of the riders innumerable rabbits scurried away; quail whirred from bush to bush; and, occasionally, a deer broke from the thickets.

At the end of another hour of hard riding they were forced to slacken their pace. In front of them the ground could be seen, in the light of a fast disappearing moon, to be gradually rising. Another mile or two and vertical walls of rock rose on each side of them; while great ravines, holding mountain torrents, necessitated their making a short detour for the purpose of finding a place where the stream could be safely forded. Even then it was not an easy task on account of the boulder-enclosing whirlpools whose waters were whipped into foam by the wind that swept through the forest.

At a point of the road where there was a break in the *chaparral*, a voice suddenly cried out in Spanish:

"Who comes?"

"Follow us!" was the quick answer without drawing rein; and, instantly, on recognition of the young master's voice, a mounted sentinel spurred his horse out from behind an overhanging rock and closed in behind them. And as they were challenged thus several times, it happened that presently there was quite a little band of men pushing ahead in the darkness that had fallen.

And so another hour passed. Then, suddenly, there sprung into view the dark outlines of a low structure which proved to be a corral, and finally they made their way through a gate and came upon a long adobe house, situated in a large clearing and having a kind of courtyard in front of it.

In the centre of this courtyard was what evidently had once been a fountain, though it had long since dried up. Around it squatted a group of *vaqueros*, all smoking cigarettes and some of them lazily twisting lariats out of horsehair. Close at hand a dozen or more wiry little mustangs stood saddled and bridled and ready for any emergency. In colour, one or two were of a peculiar cream and had silver white manes, but the rest were greys and chestnuts. It was evident that they had great speed and bottom. All in all, what with the fierce and savage faces of the men scattered about the courtyard, the remoteness of the adobe, and the care taken to guard against surprise, old Bartolini's *hacienda* was an establishment not unlike that of the feudal barons or a nest of banditti according to the point of view.

At the sound of the fast galloping horses, every man on the ground sprang to his feet and ran to his horse. For a second only they stood still and listened intently; then, satisfied that all was well and that the persons approaching belonged to the rancho, they returned to their former position by the fountain—all save an Indian servant, who caught the bridle thrown to him by the young man as he swung himself out of the saddle. And while this one led his horse noiselessly away, another of the same race preceded him along a corridor until he came to the *Maestro's* room.

Old Ramerrez Bartolini, or Ramerrez, as he was known to his followers, was dying. His hair, pure white and curly, was still as luxuriant as when he was a young man. Beneath the curls was a patrician, Spanish face, straight nose and brilliant, piercing, black eyes. His gigantic frame lay on a heap of stretched rawhides which raised him a few inches from the floor. This simple couch was not necessarily an indication of poverty, though his property had dwindled to almost nothing, for in most Spanish adobes of that time, even in some dwellings of the very rich, there were no beds. Over him, as well as under him, were blankets. On each side of his head, fixed on the wall, two candles were burning, and almost within reach

of his hand there stood a rough altar, with crucifix and candles, where a padre was making preparations to administer the Last Sacraments.

In the low-studded room the only evidence remaining of prosperity were some fragments of rich and costly goods that once had been piled up there. In former times the old Spaniard had possessed these in profusion, but little was left now. Indeed, whatever property he had at the present time was wholly in cattle and horses, and even these were comparatively few.

There had been a period, not so very long ago at that, when old Ramerrez was a power in the land. In all matters pertaining to the province of Alta California his advice was eagerly sought, and his opinion carried great weight in the councils of the Spaniards. Later, under the Mexican regime, the respect in which his name was held was scarcely less; but with the advent of the *Americanos* all this was changed. Little by little he lost his influence, and nothing could exceed the hatred which he felt for the race that he deemed to be responsible for his downfall.

It was odd, in a way, too, for he had married an American girl, the daughter of a sea captain who had visited the coast, and for many years he had held her memory sacred. And, curiously enough, it was because of this enmity, if indirectly, that much of his fortune had been wasted.

Fully resolved that England—even France or Russia, so long as Spain was out of the question—should be given an opportunity to extend a protectorate over his beloved land, he had sent emissaries to Europe and supplied them with moneys—far more than he could afford—to give a series of lavish entertainments at which the wonderful richness and fertility of California could be exploited. At one time it seemed as if his efforts in that direction would meet with success. His plan had met with such favour from the authorities in the City of Mexico that Governor Pico had been instructed by them to issue a grant for several million of acres. But the United States Government was quick to perceive the hidden meaning in the extravagances of these envoys in London, and in the end all that was accomplished was the hastening of the inevitable American occupation.

From that time on it is most difficult to imagine the zeal with which he endorsed the scheme of the native Californians for a republic of their own. He was a leader when the latter made their attack on the Americans in Sonoma County and were repulsed with the loss of several killed. One of these was Ramerrez' only brother, who was the last, with the exception of himself and son, of a proud, old, Spanish family. It was a terrible blow, and increased, if possible, his hatred for the Americans. Later the old man took part in the battle of San Pasquale and the Mesa. In the last engagement he was badly wounded, but even in that condition he announced his intention of fighting on and bitterly denounced his fellow-officers for agreeing to surrender. As a matter of fact, he escaped that ignominy. For, taking advantage of his great knowledge of the country, he contrived to make his way through the American lines with his few followers, and from that time may be said to have taken matters into his own hand.

Old Ramerrez was conscious that his end was merely a matter of hours, if not minutes. Over and over again he had had himself propped up by his attendants with the expectation that his command to bring his son had been obeyed. No one knew better than he how impossible it would be to resist another spasm like that which had seized him a little while after his son had ridden off the rancho early that morning. Yet he relied once more on his iron constitution, and absolutely refused to die until he had laid upon his next of kin what he thoroughly believed to be a stern duty. Deep down in heart, it is true, he was vaguely conscious of a feeling of dread lest his cherished revenge should meet with opposition; but he refused to harbour the thought, believing, not unnaturally, that, after having imposed his will upon others for nearly seventy years, it was extremely unlikely that his dying command should be disobeyed by his son. And it was in the midst of these death-bed reflections that he heard hurried footsteps and knew that his boy had come at last.

When the latter entered the room his face wore an agonised expression, for he feared that he had arrived too late. It was a relief, therefore, to see his father, who had lain still, husbanding his little remaining strength, open his eyes and make a sign, which included the padre as well as the attendants, that he wished to be left alone with his son.

"Art thou here at last, my son?" said the old man the moment they were alone.

"Ay, father, I came as soon as I received your message."

"Come nearer, then, I have much to say to you, and I have not long to live. Have I been a good father to you, my lad?"

The young man knelt beside the couch and kissed his father's hand, while he murmured an assent.

At the touch of his son's lips a chill struck the old man's heart. It tortured him to think how little the boy guessed of the recent history of the man he was bending over with loving concern; how little he divined of the revelation that must presently be made to him. For a moment the dying man felt that, after all, perhaps it were better to renounce his vengeance, for it had been suddenly borne in upon him that the boy might suffer acutely in the life that he intended him to live; but in another moment he had taken himself to task for a weakness that he considered must have been induced by his dying condition, and he sternly banished the thought from his mind.

"My lad," he began, "you promise to carry out my wishes after I am gone?"

"Ay, father, you know that I will. What do you wish me to do?"

The old man pointed to the crucifix.

"You swear it?"

"I swear it."

No sooner had the son uttered the wished-for words than his father fell back on the couch and closed his eyes. The effort and excitement left him as white as a sheet. It seemed to the boy as if his father might be sinking into the last stupor, but after a while he opened his eyes and called for a glass of *aguardiente*.

With difficulty he gulped it down; then he said feebly:

"My boy, the only American that ever was good was your mother. She was an angel. All the rest of these cursed gringos are pigs;" and his voice growing stronger, he repeated: "Ay, pigs, hogs, swine!"

The son made no reply; his father went on:

"What have not these devils done to our country ever since they came here? At first we received them most hospitably; everything they wanted was gladly supplied to them. And what did they do in

return for our kindness? Where now are our extensive ranchos—our large herds of cattle? They have managed to rob us of our lands through clever laws that we of California cannot understand; they have stolen from our people thousands and thousands of cattle! There is no infamy that—"

The young man hastened to interrupt him.

"You must not excite yourself, father," he said with solicitude. "They are unscrupulous—many of them, but all are not so."

"Bah!" ejaculated the old man; "the gringos are all alike. I hate them all, I—" The old man was unable to finish. He gasped for breath. But despite his son's entreaties to be calm, he presently cried out:

"Do you know who you are?" And not waiting for a reply he went on with: "Our name is one of the proudest in Spain—none better! The curse of a long line of ancestors will be upon you if you tamely submit—not make these Americans suffer for their seizure of this, our rightful land—our beautiful California!"

More anxiously than ever now the son regarded his father. His inspection left no doubt in his mind that the end could not be far off. With great earnestness he implored him to lie down; but the dying man shook his head and continued to grow more and more excited.

"Do you know who I am?" he demanded. "No—you think you do, but you don't. There was a time when I had plenty of money. It pleased me greatly to pay all your expenses—to see that you received the best education possible both at home and abroad. Then the gringos came. Little by little these cursed *Americanos* have taken all that I had from me. But as they have sown so shall they reap. I have taken my revenge, and you shall take more!" He paused to get his breath; then in a terrible voice he cried: "Yes, I have robbed—robbed! For the last three years, almost, your father has been a bandit!"

The son sprang to his feet.

"A bandit? You, father, a Ramerrez, a bandit?"

"Ay, a bandit, an outlaw, as you also will be when I am no more, and rob, rob, rob, these *Americanos*. It is my command and—you—have—sworn..."

The son's eyes were rivetted upon his father's face as the old man fell back, completely exhausted, upon his couch of rawhides. With a strange conflict of emotions, the young man remained standing in silence for a few brief seconds that seemed like hours, while the pallor of death crept over the face before him, leaving no doubt that, in the solemnity of the moment his father had spoken nothing but the literal truth. It was a hideous avowal to hear from the dying lips of one whom from earliest childhood he had been taught to revere as the pattern of Spanish honour and nobility. And yet the thought now uppermost in young Ramerrez's mind was that oddly enough he had not been taken by surprise. Never by a single word had any one of his father's followers given him a hint of the truth. So absolute, so feudal was the old man's mastery over his men that not a whisper of his occupation had ever reached his son's ears. Nevertheless, he now told himself that in some curious, instinctive way, he had *known*,—or rather, had refused to know, putting off the hour of open avowal, shutting his eyes to the accumulating facts that day by day had silently spoken of lawlessness and peril. Three years, his father had just said; well, that explained how it was that no suspicions had ever awakened until after he had completed his education and returned home from his travels. But since then a child must have noted that something was wrong: the grim, sinister faces of the men, constantly on guard, as though the old *hacienda* were in a state of siege; the altered disposition of his father, always given to gloomy moods, but lately doubly silent and saturnine, full of strange savagery and smouldering fire. Yes, somewhere in the back of his mind he had known the whole, shameful truth; had known the purpose of those silent, stealthy excursions, and equally silent returns,—and more than once the broken heads and bandaged arms that coincided so oddly with some new tale of a daring hold-up that he was sure to hear of, the next time that he chanced to ride into Monterey. For three years, young Ramerrez had known that sooner or later he would be facing such a moment as this, called upon to make the choice that should make or mar him for life. And now, for the first time he realised why he had never voiced his suspicions, never questioned, never hastened the time of decision,—it was because even now he did not know which way he wished to decide! He knew only that he was torn and racked by terrible emotions, that

on one side was a mighty impulse to disregard the oath he had blindly taken and refuse to do his father's bidding; and on the other, some new and unguessed craving for excitement and danger, some inherited lawlessness in his blood, something akin to the intoxication of the arena, when the thunder of the bull's hoofs rang in his ears. And so, when the old man's lips opened once more, and shaped, almost inaudibly, the solemn words:

"You have sworn,—" the scales were turned and the son bowed his head in silence.

A moment later and the room was filled with men who fell on their knees. On every face, save one, there was an expression of overwhelming grief and despair; but on that one, ashen grey as it was with the agony of approaching death, there was a look of contentment as he made a sign to the padre that he was now ready for him to administer the last rites of his church.

III.

The Polka Saloon!

How the name stirs the blood and rouses the imagination!

No need to be a Forty-Niner to picture it all as if there that night: the great high and square room lighted by candles and the warm, yellow light of kerosene lamps; the fireplace with its huge logs blazing and roaring; the faro tables with the little rings of miners around them; and the long, pine bar behind which a typical barkeeper of the period was busily engaged in passing the bottle to the men clamorous for whisky in which to drink the health of the Girl.

And the spirit of the place! When and where was there ever such a fine fellowship—transforming as it unquestionably did an ordinary saloon into a veritable haven of good cheer for miners weary after a long and often discouraging day in the gulches?

In a word, the Polka was a marvellous tribute to its girl-proprietor's sense of domesticity. Nothing that could insure the comfort for her patrons was omitted. Nothing, it would seem, could occur that would disturb the harmonious aspect of the scene.

But alas! the night was yet young.

Now the moment for which not a few of that good-humoured and musically-inclined company were waiting arrived. Clear above the babel of voices sounded a chord, and the poor old concertina player began singing in a voice that was as wheezy as his instrument:

"Camp town ladies sing this song
Dooda! Dooda!
Camp town race track five miles long
Dooda! Dooda! Day!"

Throughout the solo nothing more nerve-racking or explosive than an occasional hilarious whoop punctuated the melody. For once, at any rate, it seemed likely to go the distance; but no sooner did the chorus, which had been taken up, to a man, by the motley crowd and was rip-roaring along at a great rate, reach the second line than there sounded the reports of a fusillade of gun-shots from the direction of the street. The effect was magical: every voice trailed off into uncertainty and then ceased.

Instantly the atmosphere became charged with tension; a hush fell upon the room, the joyous light of battle in every eye, if nothing else, attesting the approach of the foe; while all present, after listening contemptuously to a series of wild and unearthly yells which announced an immediate arrival, sprang to their feet and concentrated their glances on the entrance of the saloon through which there presently burst a party of lively boys from The Ridge.

A psychological moment followed, during which the occupants of The Polka Saloon glared fiercely at the newcomers, who, needless to say, returned their hostile stares. The chances of war, judging from past performances, far outnumbered those of peace. But as often happens in affairs of this kind when neither side is unprepared, the desire for gun-play gave way to mirthless laughter, and, presently, the hilarious crowd from the rival camp, turning abruptly on their heels, betook themselves en masse into the dance-hall.

For the briefest of periods, there was a look of keen disappointment on the faces of the Cloudy Mountain boys as they gazed upon the receding figures of their sworn enemies; but almost in as little time as it takes to tell it there was a tumultuous lining up at the bar, the flat surface of which soon resounded with the heavy blows dealt it by the fists of the men desirous of accentuating the rhythm when roaring out:

"Gwine to run all night,
Gwine to run all day,
Bet my money on a bob-tail nag,
Somebody bet on the bay!"

Among those standing at the bar, and looking out of bleared eyes at a flashy lithograph tacked upon the wall which pictured a Spanish woman in short skirts and advertised "Espaniola Cigaroos," were two miners: one with curly hair and a pink-and-white complexion; the other, tall, loose-limbed and good-natured looking. They were known respectively as Handsome Charlie and Happy Halliday, and had been arguing in a maudlin fashion over the relative merits of Spanish and American beauties. The moment the song was concluded they banged their glasses significantly on the bar; but since it was an unbroken rule of the house that at the close of the musician's performance he should be rewarded by a drink, which was always passed up to him, they needs must wait. The little barkeeper paid no attention to their demands until he had satisfied the thirst of the old concertina player who, presently, could be seen drawing aside the bear-pelt curtain and passing through the small, square opening of the partition which separated the Polka Saloon from its dance-hall.

"Not goin', old Dooda Day, are you?" The question, almost a bellow, which, needless to say, was unanswered, came from Sonora Slim who, with his great pal Trinidad Joe, was playing faro at a table on one side of the room. Apparently, both were losing steadily to the dealer whose chair, placed up against the pine-boarded wall, was slightly raised above the floor. This last individual was as fat and unctuous looking as his confederate, the Look-out, was thin and sneaky; moreover, he bore the sobriquet of The Sidney Duck and, obviously, was from Australia.

"Say, what did the last eight do?" Sonora now asked, turning to the case-keeper.

"Lose."

"Well, let the tail go with the hide," returned Sonora, resignedly.

"And the ace—how many times did it win?" inquired Trinidad.

"Four times," was the case-keeper's answer.

All this time a full-blooded Indian with long, blue-black hair, very thick and oily, had been watching the game with excited eyes. His dress was part Indian and part American, and he wore all kinds of imitation jewelry including a huge scarf-pin which flashed from his vivid red tie. Furthermore, he possessed a watch,—a large, brassy-looking article,—which he brought out on every possible occasion. When not engaged in helping himself to the dregs that remained in the glasses carelessly left about the room, he was generally to be found squatted down on the floor and playing a solitaire of his own devising. But now he reached over Sonora's shoulder and put some coins on the table in front of the dealer.

"Give Billy Jackrabbit fer two dolla' Mexican chip," he demanded in a guttural voice.

The Sidney Duck did as requested. While he was shuffling the cards for a new deal, the players beat time with their feet to the music that floated in from the dance-hall. The tune seemed to have an unusually exhilarating effect on Happy Halliday, for letting out a series of whoops he staggered off towards the adjoining room with the evident intention of getting his fill of the music, not forgetting to yell back just before he disappeared:

"Root hog or die, boys!"

Happy's boisterous exit caused a peculiar expression to appear immediately on Handsome's face, which might be interpreted as one of envy at his friend's exuberant condition; at all events, he proceeded forthwith to order several drinks, gulping them down in rapid succession.

Meanwhile, at the faro table, the luck was going decidedly against the boys. In fact, so much so, that there was a dangerous note in Sonora's voice when, presently, he blurted out:

"See here, gambolier Sid, you're too lucky!"

"You bet!" approved Trinidad, and then added:

"More chips, Australier!"

But Trinidad's comment, as well as his request, only brought forth the oily smile that The Sidney Duck always smiled when any reference was made to his game. It was his policy to fawn upon all and never permit himself to think that an insult was intended. So he gathered in Trinidad's money and gave him chips in return. For

some seconds the men played on without anything disturbing the game except the loud voice of the caller of the wheel-of-fortune in the dance-hall. But the boys were to hear something more from there besides, "Round goes the wheel!" For, all at once there came to their ears the sounds of an altercation in which it was not difficult to recognise the penetrating voice of Happy Halliday.

"Now, git, you loafer!" he was saying in tones that left no doubt in the minds of his friends that Happy was hot under the collar over something.

A shot followed.

"Missed, by the Lord Harry!" ejaculated Happy, deeply humiliated at his failure to increase the mortuary record of the camp.

The incident, however, passed unnoticed by the faro players; not a man within sound of the shot, for that matter, inquired what the trouble was about; and even Nick, picking up his tray filled with glasses and a bottle, walked straightway into the dance-hall looking as if the matter were not worth a moment's thought.

At Nick's going the Indian's face brightened; it gave him the opportunity for which he had been waiting. Nobly he maintained his reputation as a thief by quietly going behind the bar and lifting from a box four cigars which he stowed away in his pockets. But even that, apparently did not satisfy him, for when he espied the butt of a cigar, flung into the sawdust on the floor by a man who had just come in, he picked it up before squatting down again to resume his card playing.

The newcomer, a man of, say, forty years, came slowly into the room without a word of salutation to anyone. In common with his fellow-miners, he wore a flannel shirt and boots. The latter gave every evidence of age as did his clothes which, nevertheless, were neat. His face wore a mild, gentle look and would have said that he was companionable enough; yet it was impossible not to see that he was not willingly seeking the cheer of the saloon but came there solely because he had no other place to go. In a word, he had every appearance of a man down on his luck.

Men were continually coming in and going out, but no one paid the slightest attention to him, even though a succession of audible sighs escaped his lips. At length he went over to the counter and took

a sheet or two of the paper,—which was kept there for the few who desired to write home,—a quill-pen and ink; and picking up a small wooden box he seated himself upon it before a desk—which had been built from a rude packing-case—and began wearily and laboriously to write.

"The lone star now rises!"

It was the stentorian voice of the caller of the wheel-of-fortune. One would have thought that the sound would have had the effect of a thunder-clap upon the figure at the desk; but he gave no sign whatever of having heard it; nor did he see the suspicious glance which Nick, entering at that moment, shot at Billy Jackrabbit who was stealing noiselessly towards the dance-hall where the whoops were becoming so frequent and evincing such exuberance of spirits that the ubiquitous, if generally unconcerned, Nick felt it incumbent to give an explanation of them.

"Boys from The Ridge cuttin' up a bit," he tendered apologetically, and took up a position at the end of the bar where he could command a view of both rooms.

As a partial acknowledgment that he had heard Nick's communication, Sonora turned round slightly in his seat at the faro table and shot a glance towards the dance-hall. Contempt showed on his rugged features when he turned round again and addressed the stocky, little man sitting at his elbow.

"Well, I don't dance with men for partners! When I shassay, Trin, I want a feminine piece of flesh an' blood"—he sneered, and then went on to amplify—"with garters on."

"You bet!" agreed his faithful, if laconic pal, on feeling the other's playful dig in his ribs.

The subject of men dancing together was a never-ceasing topic of conversation between these two cronies. But whatever the attitude of others Sonora knew that Trinidad would never fail him when it came to nice discriminations of this sort. His reference to an article of feminine apparel, however, was responsible for his recalling the fact that he had not as yet received his daily assurance from the presiding genius of the bar that he stood well in the estimation of the only lady in the camp. Therefore, leaving the table, he went over to Nick and whispered:

"Has the Girl said anythin' about me to-day, Nick?"

Now the role of confidential adviser to the boys was not a new one to the barkeeper, nor was anyone in the camp more familiar than he with their good qualities as well as their failings. Every morning before going to work in the placers it was their custom to stop in at The Polka for their first drink—which was, generally, "on the house." Invariably, Nick received them in his shirt-sleeves,—for that matter he was the proud possessor of the sole "biled shirt" in the camp,—and what with his red flannel undershirt that extended far below the line of his cuffs, his brilliantly-coloured waistcoat and tie, and his hair combed down very low in a cow-lick over his forehead, he was indeed an odd little figure of a man as he listened patiently to the boys' grievances and doled out sympathy to them. On the other hand, absolutely devoted to the fair proprietress of the saloon,—though solely in the character of a good comrade,—he never ceased trying to advance her interests; and since one and all of her customers believed themselves to be in love with her, one of his most successful methods was to flatter each one in turn into thinking that he had made a tremendous impression upon her. It was not a difficult thing to do inasmuch as long custom and repetition had made him an adept at highly-coloured lying.

"Well, you got the first chance," asseverated Nick, dropping his voice to a whisper.

Sonora grinned from ear to ear; he expanded his broad chest and held his head proudly; and waving his hand in lordly fashion he sung out:

"Cigars for all hands and drinks, too, Nick!"

The genial prevaricator could scarcely restrain himself from laughing outright as he watched the other return to his place at the faro table; and when, in due course, he served the concoctions and passed around the high-priced cigars, there was a smile on his face which said as plainly as if spoken that Sonora was not the only person present that had reason to be pleased with himself.

Then occurred one of those terpsichorean performances which never failed to shock old Sonora's sense of the fitness of things. For the next moment two Ridge boys, dancing together, waltzed through the opening between the two rooms and, letting out ear-piercing

whoops with every rotation, whirled round and round the room until they brought up against the bar where they, breathlessly, called for drinks.

An angry lull fell upon the room; the card game stopped. However, before anyone seated there could give vent to his resentment at this boisterous intrusion of the men from the rival camp, the smooth, oily and inviting voice of the unprincipled Sidney Duck, scenting easy prey because of their inebriated condition, called out in its cockney accent:

"'Ello, boys—'ow's things at The Ridge?"

"Wipes this camp off the earth!" returned a voice that was provocative in the extreme—a reply that instantly brought every man at the faro table to his feet. For a time, at least, it seemed as if the boys from The Ridge would get the trouble they were looking for.

A murmur of angry amazement arose, while Sonora, his watery blue eyes glinting, followed up his explosive, "What!" with a suggestive movement towards his hip. But quick as he was Nick was still quicker and had The Ridge boy, as well as Sonora, covered before their hands had even reached their guns.

"You...!" the little barkeeper's sentence was bristled out and contained along with the expletives some comparatively mild words which gave the would-be combatants to understand that any such foolishness would not be tolerated in The Polka unless he himself "'lowed it to be ne'ssary."

Not unnaturally The Ridge boys failed to see anything offensive in language that had a gun behind it; and realising the futility of any further attempt to get away with a successful disturbance they wisely yielded to superior quickness at the draw. With a whoop of resignation they rushed back to the dance-hall where the voice of the caller was exhorting the gents—whose partners were mostly big, husky, hairy-faced men clumsily enacting parts generally assigned to members of the gentler sex—to swing:

"With the right-hand gent, first partner swing with the left-hand gent, first partner swing with the right-hand gent; first partner swing with the left-hand gent, and the partner in the centre, and gents all around!"

Back at the faro table now,—the incident having passed quickly into oblivion,—Sonora called to the dealer for "a slug's worth of chips"—a request that was promptly acceded to. But they had played only a few minutes when a thin but somewhat sweet tenor voice was heard singing:

"Wait for the waggon,
Wait for the waggon,
Wait for the waggon,
And we'll all take a ride.
Wait for the waggon—"

"Here he is, gentlemen, just back from his triumphs of The Ridge!" broke in Nick, whose province it was to act as master of ceremonies; and coming forward as the singer emerged from the dance-hall he introduced him to the assembled company in the most approved music-hall manner:

"Allow me to present to you, Jake Wallace the Camp favour-ite!" he said with an exaggeratedly low bow.

"How-dy, Jake! Hello, Jake, old man! How be you, Jake!" were some of the greetings that were hurled at the Minstrel who, robed in a long linen duster, his face half-blacked, and banjo in hand, acknowledged the words of welcome with a broad grin as he stood bowing in the centre of the room.

That Jake Wallace was a typical camp minstrel from the top of his dusty stove-pipe hat to the sole of his flapping negro shoes, one could see with half an eye as he made his way to a small platform—a musician's stand—at one end of the bar; nor could there be any question about his being a prudent one, for the musician did not seat himself until he had carefully examined the sheet-iron shield inside the railing, which was attached in such a way that it could be sprung up by working a spring in the floor and render him fairly safe from a chance shot during a fracas.

"My first selection, friends, will be 'The Little—'," announced the Minstrel with a smile as he begun to tune his instrument.

"Aw, give us 'Old Dog Tray,'" cut in Sonora, impatiently from his seat at the card table.

Jake bowed his ready acquiescence to the request and kept right on tuning up.

"I say, Nick, have you saw the Girl?" asked Trinidad in a low voice, taking advantage of the interval to stroll over to the bar.

Mysteriously, Nick's eyes wandered about the room to see if anyone was listening; at length, with marvellous insincerity, he said:

"You've got the first chance, Trin; I gave 'er your message."

Trinidad Joe fairly beamed upon him.

"Whisky for everybody, Nick!" he ordered bumptuously; and as before the little barkeeper's face wore an expression of pleasure not a whit less than that of the man whom, presently, he followed to the faro table with a bottle and four glasses.

As soon as Trinidad had seated himself the Minstrel struck a chord and announced impressively:

"'Old Dog Tray,' gents, 'or Echoes from Home'!" He cleared his throat, and the next instant in quavering tones he warbled:

"How of-ten do I pic-ture
The old folks down at home,
And of-ten wonder if they think of me,
Would an-gel mother know me,
If back there I did roam,
Would old dog Tray re-member me."

At the first few words of his song the man at the desk who, up to this time, had been wholly oblivious to what was taking place, arose from his seat, put the ink-bottle back on the bar, opened a cigar-box there and took from it a stamp, which he put on his letter. This he carried to a mail-box attached to the door; then, returning, he threw himself dejectedly down in a chair and put his head in his hands, where it remained throughout the song.

At the conclusion of his solo, the Minstrel's emotions were seemingly deeply stirred by his own melodious voice and he gasped audibly; whereupon, Nick came to his relief with a stiff drink which, apparently, went to the right spot, for presently the singer's voice rang out vigorously: "Now, boys!"

No second invitation was needed, and the chorus was taken up by all, the singers beating time with their feet and chips.

ALL.
"Oh, mother, an-gel mother, are you waitin'
there beside the lit-tle cottage on the lea—"

JAKE.

"On the lea—"

ALL.

"How of-ten would she bless me
in all them days so fair—
Would old dog Tray re-member me—"

SONORA.

"Re-member me."

All the while the miners had been singing, the sad and morose-looking individual had been steadily growing more and more disconsolate; and when Sonora rumbled out the last deep note in his big, bass voice, he heaved a great sob and broke down completely.

In surprised consternation everyone turned in the direction from whence had come the sound. But it was Sonora who, affected both by the pathos of the song and the sight of the pathetic figure before them, quietly went over and laid a hand upon the other's arm.

"Why, Larkins—Jim—what's the trouble—what's the matter?" he asked, a thousand thoughts fluttering within his breast. "I wouldn't feel so bad."

With a desperate effort Larkins, his face twitching perceptibly, the lines about his eyes deepening, struggled to control himself. At last, after taking in the astonished faces about him, he plunged into his tale of woe.

"Say, boys, I'm homesick—I'm broke—and what's more, I don't care who knows it." He paused, his fingers opening and closing spasmodically, and for a moment it seemed as if he could not continue—a moment of silence in which the Minstrel began to pick gently on his banjo the air of Old Dog Tray.

"I want to go home!" suddenly burst from the unfortunate man's lips. "I'm tired o' drillin' rocks; I want to be in the fields again; I want to see the grain growin'; I want the dirt in the furrows at home; I want old Pensylvanny; I want my folks; I'm done, boys, I'm done, I'm done ...!" And with these words he buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, mother, an-gel mother, are you waitin'—"

sang the Minstrel, dolefully.

Men looked at one another and were distressingly affected; The Polka had never witnessed a more painful episode. Throwing a coin at the Minstrel, Sonora stopped him with an impatient gesture; the latter nodded understandingly at the same time that Nick, apparently indifferent to Larkin's collapse, began to dance a jig behind the bar. A look of scowling reproach instantly appeared on Sonora's face. It was uncalled-for since, far from being heartless and indifferent to the man's misfortunes, the little barkeeper had taken this means to distract the miners' attention from the pitiful sight.

"Boys, Jim Larkins 'lows he's goin' back East," announced Sonora. "Chip in every mother's son o' you."

Immediately every man at the faro table demanded cash from The Sidney Duck; a moment later they, as well as the men who were not playing cards, threw their money into the hat which Sonora passed around. It was indeed a well-filled hat that Sonora held out to the weeping man.

"Here you are, Jim," he said simply.

The sudden transition from poverty to comparative affluence was too much for Larkins! Looking through tear-dimmed eyes at Sonora he struggled for words with which to express his gratitude, but they refused to come; and at last with a sob he turned away. At the door, however, he stopped and choked out: "Thank you, boys, thank you."

The next moment he was gone.

At once a wave of relief swept over the room. Indeed, the incident was forgotten before the unfortunate man had gone ten paces from The Polka, for then it was that Trinidad suddenly rose in his seat, lunged across the table for The Sidney Duck's card-box, and cried out angrily:

"You're cheatin'! That ain't a square deal! You're a cheat!"

In a moment the place was in an uproar. Every man at the table sprung to his feet; chairs were kicked over; chips flew in every direction; guns came from every belt; and so occupied were the men in watching The Sidney Duck that no one perceived the Lookout sneak out through the door save Nick, who was returning from the dance-hall with a tray of empty glasses. But whether or not he was aware that the Australian's confederate was bent upon running away he made no attempt to stop him, for in common with every man

present, including Sonora and Trinidad, who had seized the gambler and brought him out in front of his card-table, Nick's eyes were fastened upon another man whom none had seen enter, but whose remarkable personality, now as often, made itself felt even though he spoke not a word.

"Lift his hand!" cried Sonora, looking as if for sanction at the newcomer, who stood in the centre of the room, calmly smoking a huge cigar.

Forcing up The Sidney Duck's arms, Trinidad threw upon the table a deck of cards which he had found concealed about the other's person, bursting out with:

"There! Look at that, the infernal, good-for-nothin' cheat!"

"String 'im up!" suggested Sonora, and as before he shot a questioning look at the man, who was regarding the scene with bored interest.

"You bet!" shouted Trinidad, pulling at the Australian's arm.

"For 'eaven's sake, don't, don't, don't!" wailed The Sidney Duck, terror-stricken.

The Sheriff of Manzaneta County, for such was the newcomer's office, raised his steely grey eyes inquisitorially to Nick's who, with a hostile stare at the Australian, emitted:

"Chicken lifter!"

"String 'im! String 'im!" insisted Trinidad, at the same time dragging the culprit towards the door.

"No, boys, no!" cried the unfortunate wretch, struggling uselessly to break away from his captors.

At this stage the Sheriff of Manzaneta County took a hand in the proceedings, and drawled out:

"Well, gentlemen—" He stopped short and seemingly became reflective.

Instantly, as was their wont whenever the Sheriff spoke, all eyes fixed themselves upon him. Indeed, it needed but a second glance at this cool, deliberate individual to see how great was his influence upon them. He was tall,—fully six feet one,—thin, and angular; his hair and moustache were black enough to bring out strongly the unhealthy pallor of his face; his eyes were steel grey and were heavily

fringed and arched; his nose straight and his mouth hard, determined, but just, the lips of which were thin and drawn tightly over brilliantly-white teeth; and his soft, pale hands were almost feminine looking except for the unusual length of his fingers. On his head was a black beaver hat with a straight brim; a black broadcloth suit—cut after the "'Frisco" fashion of the day—gave every evidence that its owner paid not a little attention to it. From the bosom of his white, puffed shirt an enormous diamond, held in place by side gold chains, flashed forth; while glittering on his fingers was another stone almost as large. Below his trousers could plainly be seen the highly-polished boots; the heels and instep being higher than those generally in use. In a word, it was impossible not to get the impression that he was scrupulously immaculate and careful about his attire. And his voice—the voice that tells character as nothing else does—was smooth and drawling, though fearlessness and sincerity could easily be detected in it. Such was Mr. Jack Rance, Gambler and Sheriff of Manzaneta County.

"This is a case for you, Jack Rance," suddenly spoke up Sonora.

"Yes," chimed in Trinidad; and then as he gave the Australian a rough shake, he added: "Here's the Sheriff to take charge of you."

But Mr. Jack Rance, the Sheriff of Manzaneta County, was never known to move otherwise than slowly, deliberately. Taking from his pocket a smoothly-creased handkerchief he proceeded to dust languidly first one and then the other of his boots; and not until he had succeeded in flicking the last grain of dust from them did he take up the business in hand.

"Gentlemen, what's wrong with the cyards?" he now began in his peculiar drawling voice.

Sonora pointed to the faro table.

"The Sidney Duck's cheated!" he said—an accusation which was responsible for a renewal of outcries and caused a number of men to pounce upon the faro dealer.

Trinidad ran a significant hand around his collar.

"String 'im! Come on, you—!" once more he cried. But on seeing the Sheriff raise a restraining hand he desisted from pulling the Australian along.

"Wait a minute!" commanded the Sheriff.

The miners with the prisoner in their midst stood stock-still. Now the Sheriff's features lost some of their usual inscrutability and for a moment became hard and stern. Slowly he let his eyes wander comprehensively about the saloon: first, they travelled to a small balcony—reached by a ladder drawn down or up at will—decorated with red calico curtains, garlands of cedar and bittersweet, while the railing was ornamented with a wildcat's skin and a stuffed fawn's head; from the ceiling with its strings of red peppers, onions and apples they fell on a stuffed grizzly bear, which stood at the entrance to the dance-hall, with a little green parasol in its paw and an old silk hat upon its head; from it they shifted to the gaudy bar with its paraphernalia of fancy glasses, show-cases of coloured liquors and its pair of scales for weighing the gold dust; and from that to a keg, the top of which could be withdrawn without engendering the slightest suspicion that it represented other than an ordinary receptacle for liquor. Two notices tacked upon the wall also caught and held his glance, his eyes dwelling most affectionately on the one reading: "A Real Home For The Boys."

That there was such a thing as sentiment in the make-up of the Sheriff of Manzaneta County few people, perhaps, would have believed. Nevertheless, at the thought that this placard inspired, he dismissed whatever inclination he might have had to deal leniently with the culprit, and calmly observed:

"There is no reason, gentlemen, of being in a hurry. I've got something to say about this. I don't forget, although I am the Sheriff of Manzaneta County, that I'm running four games. But it's men like The Sidney Duck here that casts reflections on square-minded, sporting men like myself. And worse—far worse, gentlemen, he casts reflections on The Polka, the establishment of the one decent woman in Cloudy."

"You bet!" affirmed Nick, indignantly.

"Yes, a lady, d'you hear me?" stormed Sonora, addressing the prisoner; then: "You lily-livered skunk!"

"Oh, let's string 'im up!" urged Trinidad.

"Yes, come on, you...!" was Handsome's ejaculation, contriving, at last, to get his hands on the faro dealer.

But again the Sheriff would have none of it.

"Hold on, hold on—" he began and paused to philosophise: "After all, gents, what's death? A kick and you're off;" and then went on: "I've thought of a worse punishment. Give him his coat."

Surprised and perplexed at this order, Handsome, reluctantly, assisted the culprit into his coat.

"Put him over there," the Sheriff now ordered.

Whereupon, obedient to the instructions of that personage, The Sidney Duck was roughly put down into a chair; and while he was firmly held into it, Rance strolled nonchalantly over to the faro table and picked out a card from the deck there. Returning, he quickly plucked a stick-pin from the prisoner's scarf, saying, while he suited his action to his words:

"See, now I place the deuce of spades over his heart as a warning. He can't leave the camp, and he never plays cyards again—see?" And while the men, awed to silence, stood looking at one another, he instructed Handsome to pass the word through the camp.

"Ow, now, don't si that! Don't si that!" bawled out the card sharp.

The sentence met with universal approval. Rance waved an authoritative hand towards the door; and the incident, a few seconds later, passed into its place in the camp records. Albeit, in those seconds, and while the men were engrossed in the agreeable task of ejecting The Sidney Duck, The Polka harboured another guest, no less unwelcome, who made his way unobserved through the saloon to become an unobtrusive spectator of the doings in the dance-hall.

IV.

In the space of six months one can do little or much harm. The young bandit,—for he had kept his oath to his father,—flattered himself that he had done much. In all the mining camps of the Sierras the mere mention of the name of Ramerrez brought forth execrations. Not a stage started out with its precious golden freight without its passengers having misgivings that they would be held up before reaching Sacramento. Messengers armed with shotguns were always to be found at their post beside the drivers; yet, despite all precautions, not a week passed without a report that the stage out of this or that camp, had been attacked and the passengers forced to surrender their money and valuables. Under no circumstances, however, were any of Ramerrez's own countrymen molested. If, by any chance, the road agent made a mistake and stopped a party of native Californians or Mexicans, they were at once permitted to proceed on their way with the bandit-leader's profuse apologies.

But it was altogether different with Americans. The men of that race were compelled to surrender their gold; although so far as he was concerned, their women were exempt from robbery. As a matter of fact, he had few chances to show his chivalry, since few women were living, at that time, in the Sierras. Nevertheless, it happened in rare instances that a stage was held up which contained one or two of them, and they were never known to complain of his treatment. And so far, at least, he had contrived to avoid any serious bloodshed. Two or three messengers, it is true, had been slightly wounded; but that was the most that his worst enemies could charge against him.

As for Ramerrez's own attitude towards the life he was leading, it must be confessed that, the plunge once taken, his days and nights were too full of excitement and adventure to leave him time to brood. Somewhat to his own surprise, he had inherited his father's power of iron domination. Young as he was, not one of his father's seasoned band of cut-throats ever questioned his right or his ability to command. At first, no doubt, they followed him through a rude spirit of loyalty; but after a short time it was because they had found in him all the qualities of a leader of men, one whose plans never miscarried. Fully two-thirds of the present band were vassals, as it were, in his family, while all were of Spanish or Mexican descent. In

truth, Ramerrez himself was the only one among them who had any gringo blood in his veins. And hence not a tale of the outlaw's doings was complete without the narrator insisting upon it that the leader of the band—the road agent himself—closely resembled an American. One and all of his victims agreed that he spoke with an American accent, while the few who had been able to see his features on a certain occasion when the red bandanna, which he wore about his face, had fallen, never failed to maintain that he looked like an American.

As a matter of fact, Ramerrez not only bore the imprint of his mother's race in features and in speech, but the more he made war upon them, the more he realised that it was without any real feeling of hostility. In spite of his early training and in spite of his oath, he could not share his father's bitterness. True, the gringos had wrecked the fortunes of his house; it was due to them that his sole inheritance was an outlaw's name and an outlaw's leadership. And yet, despite it all, there was another fact that he could not forget,—the fact that he himself was one half gringo, one half the same race as that of the unforgotten Girl whom he had met on the road to Sacramento. Indeed, it had been impossible to forget her, for she had stirred some depth in him, the existence of which he had never before suspected. He was haunted by the thought of her attractive face, her blue eyes and merry, contagious laugh. For the hundredth time he recalled his feelings on that glorious day when he had intercepted her on the great highway. And with this memory would come a sudden shame of himself and occupation,—a realisation of the barrier which he had deliberately put between the present and the past. Up to the hour when he had parted from her, and had remained spellbound, seated on his horse at the fork of the roads, watching the vanishing coach up to the last minute, he was still a Spanish gentleman, still worthy in himself,—whatever his father had done,—to offer his love and his devotion to a pure and honest girl. But now he was an outlaw, a road agent going from one robbery to another, likely at any time to stain his hand with the life-blood of a fellow man. And this pretence that he was stealing in a righteous cause, that he was avenging the wrongs that had been done to his countrymen,—why, it was the rankest hypocrisy! He knew in his heart that vengeance and race hatred had nothing whatever to do with it. It was because he loved it

like a game, a game of unforeseen, unguessed danger. The fever of it was in his blood, like strong drink,—and with every day's adventure, the thirst for it grew stronger.

Yet, however personally daring, Ramerrez was the last person in the world to trust to chance for his operations, more than was absolutely necessary. He handled his men with shrewd judgment and strict discipline. Furthermore, never was an attack made that was not the outcome of a carefully matured plan. A prime factor in Ramerrez' success had from the first been the information which he was able to obtain from the Mexicans, not connected with his band, concerning the places that the miners used as temporary depositories for their gold; and it was information of this sort that led Ramerrez and his men to choose a certain Mexican settlement in the mountains as a base of operations: namely, the tempting fact that a large amount of gold was stored nightly in the Polka Saloon, at the neighbouring camp on Cloudy Mountain.

And there was still another reason.

Despite the fact that his heart had been genuinely touched by the many and unusual attractions of the Girl, it is not intended to convey the idea that he was austere or incapable of passion for anyone else. For that was not so. Although, to give the bandit his due, he had remained quite exemplary, when one considers his natural charm as well as the fascination which his adventurous life had for his country-women. Unfortunately, however, in one of his weak moments, he had foolishly permitted himself to become entangled with a Mexican woman—Nina Micheltoreña, by name—whose jealous nature now threatened to prove a serious handicap to him. It was a particularly awkward situation in which he found himself placed, inasmuch as this woman had furnished him with much valuable information. In fact, it was she who had called his attention to the probable spoils to be had in the American camp near by. It can readily be imagined, therefore, that it was not without a premonition of trouble to come that he sought the Mexican settlement with the intention of paying her a hundred-fold for her valuable assistance in the past and then be through with her for good and all.

The Mexican or greaser settlements had little in them that resembled their American neighbours. In the latter there were few women, for the long distance that the American pioneers had to

travel before reaching the gold-fields of California, the hardships that they knew had to be encountered, deterred them from bringing their wives and daughters. But with the Mexicans it was wholly different. The number of women in their camps almost equalled that of the men, and the former could always be seen, whenever the weather permitted, strolling about or sitting in the doorways chatting with their neighbours, while children were everywhere. In fact, everything about the Mexican settlements conveyed the impression that they had come to stay—a decided contrast to the transient appearance of the camps of the Americans.

It was one evening late in the fall that Ramerrez and his band halted just outside of this particular Mexican settlement. And after instructing his men where they should meet him the following day, he sent them off to enjoy themselves for the night with their friends. For, Ramerrez, although exercising restraint over his band, never failed to see to it that they had their pleasures as well as their duties—a trait in his character that had not a little to do with his great influence over his men. And so it happened that he made his way alone up the main street to the hall where a dance was going on.

The scene that met his eyes on entering the long, low room was a gay one. It was a motley crowd gathered there in which the Mexicans, not unnaturally, predominated. Here and there, however, were native Californians, Frenchmen, Germans and a few Americans, the latter conspicuous by the absence of colour in their dress; for with the exception of an occasional coatless man in a red or blue shirt, they wore faded, old, black coats,—frequently frock-coats, at that,—which certainly contrasted unfavourably, at least so far as heightening the gaiety of the scene was concerned, with the green velvet jackets, brilliant waistcoats with gold filigree and silver buttons and red sashes of the Mexicans. That there was not a man present but what was togged out in his best and was armed, it goes without saying, even if the weapons of the Mexicans were in the form of murderous knives concealed somewhere about their persons instead of belts with guns and knives openly displayed, as was the case with the Americans.

At the time of the outlaw's entrance into the dance-hall the fandango was over. But presently the fiddles, accompanied by guitars, struck up a waltz, and almost instantly some twenty or more

men and women took the floor; those not engaged in dancing surrounding the dancers, clapping their hands and shouting their applause. In order to see if the woman he sought was present, it was necessary for Ramerrez to push to the very front of the crowd of lookers-on, where he was not long in observing that nearly all the women present were of striking appearance and danced well; likewise, he noted, that none compared either in looks or grace with Nina Micheltoreña who, he had to acknowledge, even if his feelings for her were dead, was a superb specimen of a woman.

Good blood ran in the veins of Nina Micheltoreña. It is not in the province of this story to tell how it was that a favourite in the best circles of Monterey came to be living in a Mexican camp in the Sierras. Suffice it to say that her fall from grace had been rapid, though her dissolute career had in no way diminished her beauty. Indeed, her features were well-nigh perfect, her skin transparently clear, if dark, and her form was suppleness itself as she danced. And that she was the undisputed belle of the evening was made apparent by the number of men who watched her with eyes that marvelled at her grace when dancing, and surrounded her whenever she stopped, each pleading with her to accept him as a partner.

Almost every colour of the rainbow had a place in her costume for the occasion: The bodice was of light blue silk; the skirt orange; encircling her small waist was a green sash; while her jet-black hair was fastened with a crimson ribbon. Diamonds flashed from the earrings in her ears as well as from the rings on her fingers. All in all, it was scarcely to be wondered at that her charms stirred to the very depths the fierce passion of the desperate characters about her.

That Ramerrez dreaded the interview which he had determined to have with his confederate can easily be understood by anyone who has ever tried to sever his relations with an enamoured woman. In fact the outlaw dreaded it so much that he decided to postpone it as long as he could. And so, after sauntering aimlessly about the room, and coming, unexpectedly, across a woman of his acquaintance, he began to converse with her, supposing, all the time, that Nina Micheltoreña was too occupied with the worshippers at her shrine to perceive that he was in the dance-hall. But it was decidedly a case of the wish being father to the thought: Not a movement had he made since he entered that she was not cognisant of it and, although she

hated to acknowledge it to herself, deep down in her heart she was conscious that he was not as thoroughly under the sway of her dark eyes as she would have wished. Something had happened in the last few weeks that had brought about a change in him, but just what it was she was unable to determine. There were moments when she saw plainly that he was much more occupied with his daring plans than he was with thoughts of her. So far, it was true, there had been no evidences on his part of any hesitation in confiding his schemes to her. Of that she was positive. But, on the other hand, she had undoubtedly lost some of her influence over him. It did not lessen her nervousness to realise that he had been in the hall for some time without making any effort to see her. Besides, the appointment had been of his own making, inasmuch as he had sent word by one of his band that she should meet him to-night in this place. Furthermore, she knew that he had in mind one of the boldest projects he had yet attempted and needed, to insure success, every scrap of knowledge that she possessed. In the meantime, while she waited for him to seek her out, she resolved to show him the extent of her power to fascinate others; and from that moment never had she seemed more attractive and alluring to her admirers, in all of whom she appeared to excite the fiercest of passions. In fact, one word whispered in an ear by those voluptuous lips and marvellously sweet, musical voice, and the recipient would have done her bidding, even had she demanded a man's life as the price of her favour.

It is necessary, however, to single out one man as proving an exception to this sweeping assertion, although this particular person seemed no less devoted than the other men present. He was plainly an American and apparently a stranger to his countrymen as well as to the Mexicans. His hair was white and closely cropped, the eyebrows heavy and very black, the lips nervous and thin but denoting great determination, and the face was tanned to the colour of old leather, sufficiently so as to be noticeable even in a country where all faces were tanned, swarthy, and dark. One would have thought that this big, heavy, but extremely-active man whose clothes, notwithstanding the wear and tear of the road, were plainly cut on "'Frisco patterns," was precisely the person calculated to make an impression upon a woman like Nina Micheltoreña; and, yet, oddly enough, he was the only man in the room whose attentions

seemed distasteful to her. It could not be accounted for on the ground of his nationality, for she danced gladly with others of his race. Nor did it look like caprice on her part. On the contrary, there was an expression on her face that resembled something like fear when she refused to be cajoled into dancing with him. At length, finding her adamant, the man left the room.

But as time went by and still Ramerrez kept aloof, Nina Micheltoreña's excitement began to increase immeasureably. To such a woman the outlaw's neglect could mean but one thing—another woman. And, finally, unable to control herself any longer, she made her way to where the woman with whom Ramerrez had been conversing was standing alone.

"What has the Señor been saying to you?" she demanded, jealousy and ungovernable passion blazing forth from her eyes.

"Nothing of interest to you," replied the other with a shrug of her shoulders.

"It's a lie!" burst from Nina's lips. "I heard him making love to you! I was standing near and heard every tone, every inflection of his voice! I saw how he looked at you!" And so crazed was she by jealousy that her face became distorted and almost ugly, if such a thing were possible, and her great eyes filled with hatred.

The other woman laughed scornfully.

"Make your man stay away from me then—if you can," she retorted.

At that the infuriated Nina drew a knife and cried:

"Swear to me that you'll not see him to-night, or—"

The sentence was never finished. Quick as lightning Ramerrez stepped in and caught Nina's up-raised arm. For one instant her eyes flashed fire at him; another, and submissive to his will, she slipped the knife somewhere in the folds of her dress and the attention that she had succeeded in attracting was diverted elsewhere. Those who had rushed up expecting a tragedy returned, once more, to their dancing.

"I have been looking for you, Nina," he said, taking her to one side. "I want to speak with you."

Nina laughed airily, but only another woman would have been able to detect the danger lurking in that laugh.

"Have you just come in?" she inquired casually. "It is generally not difficult to find me when there is dancing." And then with a significant smile: "But perhaps there were so many men about me that I was completely hidden from the view of the Señor."

Ramerrez bowed politely his belief in the truth of her words; then he said somewhat seriously:

"I see a vacant table over in the corner where we can talk without danger of being overheard. Come!" He led the way, the woman following him, to a rough table of pine at the farther end of the room where, immediately, a bottle and two glasses were placed before them. When they had pledged each other, Ramerrez went on to say, in a low voice, that he had made the appointment in order to deliver to her her share for the information that led to his successful holdup of the stage at a place known as "The Forks," a few miles back; and taking from his pocket a sack of gold he placed it on the table before her.

There was a silence in which Nina made no movement to pick up the gold; whereupon, Ramerrez repeated a little harshly:

"Your share."

Slowly the woman rose, picking up the sack as she did so, and with a request that he await her, she made her way over to the bar where she handed it to the Mexican in charge with a few words of instruction. In another moment she was again seated at the table with him.

"Why did you send for me to meet you here?" she now asked. "Why did you not come to my room—surely you knew that there was danger here?"

Carelessly, Ramerrez let his eyes wander about the room; no one was paying the slightest attention to them and, apparently, there being nothing to fear, he answered:

"From whom?"

For a brief space of time the woman looked at him as if she would ferret out his innermost thoughts; at length, she said with a shrug of the shoulders:

"Few here are to be thoroughly trusted. The woman you were with—she knows you?"

"I never met her but once before," was his laconic rejoinder.

Nina eyed him suspiciously; at last she was satisfied that he spoke the truth, but there was still that cold, abstracted manner of his to be explained. However, cleverly taking her cue from him she inquired in business-like tones:

"And how about The Polka Saloon—the raid on Cloudy Mountain Camp?"

A shade of annoyance crossed Ramerrez' face.

"I have decided to give that up—at least for a time."

Again Nina regarded him curiously; when she spoke there was a suspicious gleam in her eyes, though she said lightly:

"Perhaps you're right—it will not be an easy job."

"Far from it," quickly agreed the man. "But the real reason is, that I have planned to go below for a while."

The woman's eyes narrowed.

"You are going away then?"

"Yes."

"And what about me? Do I go with you?"

Ramerrez laughed uneasily.

"It is impossible. The fact is, it is best that this should be our last meeting." And seeing the change that came over her face he went on in more conciliatory tones: "Now, Nina, be reasonable. It is time that we understood each other. This interview must be final."

"And you came here to tell me this?" blazed the woman, scowling darkly upon him. And for the moment she looked all that she was reputed to be—a dangerous woman!

Receiving no answer, she spoke again.

"But you said that you would love me always?"

The man flushed.

"Did I say that once? What a memory you have!"

"And you never meant it?"

"I suppose so—at the time."

"Then you don't love me any more?"

Ramerrez made no answer.

For some moments Nina sat perfectly still. Her mind was busy trying to determine upon the best course to pursue. At length she

decided to make one more attempt to see whether he was really in earnest. And if not...

"But to-night," she hazarded, leaning far over the table and putting her face close to his, her eyes the while flooded with voluptuousness, "you will come with me to my room?"

Ramerrez shook his head.

"No, Nina, all that is over."

The woman bit her lips with vexation.

"Are you made of stone? What is the matter with you to-night? Is there anything wrong with my beauty? Have you seen anyone handsomer than I am?"

"No..."

"Then why not come? You don't hate?"

"I don't hate you in the least, but I won't go to your room."

"So!"

There was a world of meaning in that one word. For a while she seemed to be reflecting; suddenly with great earnestness she said:

"Once for all, Ramerrez, listen to me. Rather than give you up to any other woman I will give you up to death. Now do you still refuse me?"

"Yes..." answered Ramerrez not unkindly and wholly unmoved by her threat. "We've been good pals, Nina, but it's best for both that we should part."

In the silence that ensued the woman did some hard thinking. That a man could ever tire of her without some other woman coming into his life never once entered into her mind. Something told her, nevertheless, that the woman with whom he had been conversing was not the woman that she sought; and at a loss to discover the person to whom he had transferred his affections, her mind reverted to his avowed purpose of withdrawing from the proposed Cloudy Mountain expedition. The more Nina reflected on that subject the more convinced she became that, for some reason or other, Ramerrez had been deceiving her. It was made all the more clear to her when she recalled that when Ramerrez' messenger had brought his master's message that she was to meet him, she had asked where the band's next rendezvous was to be, and that he, knowing full well

that his countrywoman had ever been cognizant of his master's plans, had freely given the desired information. Like a flash it came to her now that no such meeting-place would have been selected for any undertaking other than a descent upon Cloudy Mountain Camp. Nor was her intuition or reasoning at fault: Ramerrez had not given up his intention of getting the miners' gold that he knew from her to be packed away somewhere in The Polka Saloon; but what she did not suspect, despite his peculiar behaviour, was that he had taken advantage of the proximity of the two camps to sever his relation, business and otherwise, with her. And yet, did he but know it, she was destined to play no small part in his life for the next few weeks!

Nina Micheltoreña had now decided upon her future course of action: She would let him think that his desire to break off all relations with her would not be opposed. Ever a keen judge of men and their ways, she was well aware that any effort to reclaim him to-night would meet with disaster. And so when Ramerrez, surprised at her long silence, looked up, he was met with a smiling face and the words:

"So be it, Ramerrez. But if anything happens, remember you have only yourself to blame."

Ramerrez was astounded at her cool dismissal of the subject. To judge by the expression on his face he had indeed obtained his release far easier than he had deemed it possible. As a matter of fact, her indifference so piqued him that before he was conscious of his words he had asked somewhat lamely:

"You wish me well? We part as friends?"

Nina regarded him with well-simulated surprise, and replied:

"Why, of course—the best of friends. Good luck, *amigo*!" And with that she rose and left him.

And so it was that later that evening after assuring herself that neither Ramerrez nor any of his band remained in the dance-hall, Nina, her face set and pale, exchanged a few whispered words with that same big man towards whom, earlier in the evening, she had shown such animosity.

The effect of these words was magical; the man could not suppress a grunt of intense satisfaction.

"She says I'm to meet her to-morrow night at the Palmetto Restaurant," said Ashby to himself after the woman had lost herself in a crowd of her own countrymen. "She will tell where I can put my hands on this Ramerrez. Bah! It's too good to be true. Nevertheless, I'll be on hand, my lady, for if anyone knows of this fellow's movements I'll wager you do."

At that moment Ashby, the Wells Fargo Agent, was nearer than ever before to the most brilliant capture of all his career.

Late the following afternoon, some five miles from the Mexican settlement, on a small tableland high above a black ravine which was thickly timbered with the giant trees of the Sierras, Ramerrez' band was awaiting the coming of the *Maestro*. It was not to be a long wait and they stood around smoking and talking in low tones. Suddenly, the sound of horses climbing was heard, and soon a horseman came in sight whose appearance had the effect of throwing them instantly into a state of excitement, one and all drawing their guns and making a dash for their horses, which were tied to trees. A moment later, however, another horseman appeared, and laughing boisterously at themselves they slid their guns back into their belts and retied their horses, for the man whom they recognised so quickly, the individual who saved the situation, as it were, was none other than Jose Castro, an ex-*padrona* of the bull-fights and the second in command to Ramerrez. He was a wiry, hard-faced and shifty-eyed Mexican, but was as thoroughly devoted to Ramerrez as he had been to the young leader's father. On the other hand, the man who had caused them to fear that a stranger had surprised them, and that they had been trapped, was Ramerrez or Johnson—the name that he had assumed for the dangerous work he was about to engage in—and they had failed to know him, dressed as he was in the very latest fashion prevailing among the Americans in Sacramento in '49. Nor was it to be wondered at, for on his head was a soft, brown hat—large, but not nearly the proportions of a sombrero; a plain, rough tweed coat and a waistcoat of a darker tan, which showed a blue flannel shirt beneath it; and his legs were encased in boots topped by dark brown leggings. In a word, his get-up resembled closely the type of American referred to disdainfully by the miners of that time as a Sacramento guy; whereas, the night before he had taken great pains to attire himself as gaudily as any of the Mexicans

at the dance, and he had worn a short black jacket of a velvety material that was not unlike corduroy and covered with braid; his breeches were of the same stuff; above his boots were leather gaiters; and around his waist was a red sash.

It was now close to four o'clock in the afternoon and the band began their preparations for the raid. To the rear of the small, open space where they had been waiting was a fairly good-sized cave, in the opening of which they deposited various articles unnecessary for the expedition. It took only a short time to do this, and within half an hour from the time that their leader had so startled them by his strange appearance, the outlaws were ready to take the trail for Cloudy Mountain. One comprehensive glance the pseudo-American—and he certainly looked the part—shot at his picturesque, if rough-looking followers, not a few of whom showed red bandannas under their sombreros or around their necks—and then with a satisfied expression on his face—for he had a leader's pride in his men—he gave the signal and led the way along and down the steep trail from the tableland. And as from time to time he glanced back over his shoulders to where the men were coming along in single file, he could see that in every eye was a glint of exultation at the prospect of booty.

After they had gone about three miles they crossed the black ravine, and from there they began to ascend. Up and up they went, the path very hard on the horses, until finally they came to the top of a pass where it had been arranged that the band should await further instructions, none going on further save the two leaders. Here, saddle-girths and guns were inspected, the last orders given, and with a wave of the hand in response to the muttered wishes of good luck, Johnson,—for as such he will be known from this time on,—followed by Castro, made his way through the forest towards Cloudy Mountain.

For an hour or so Johnson rode along in that direction, checking the speed of his horse every time the sun came into view and showed that there was yet some time before sunset. Presently, he made a sign to Castro to take the lead, for he had never been in this locality before, and was relying on his subordinate to find a spot from which he could reconnoitre the scene of the proposed raid without the slightest danger of meeting any of the miners.

At a very sharp turn of the road to the left Castro struck off through the forest to the right and, within a few minutes, reached a place where the trees had thinned out and were replaced by the few scrubs that grew in a spot almost barren. A minute or so more and the two men, their horses tied, were able to get an uninterrupted view of Cloudy Mountain.

The scene before them was one of grandeur. Day was giving place to night, fall to winter, and yet at this hour all the winds were stilled. In the distance gleamed the snow-capped Sierras, range after range as far as the eye could see to the northwest; in the opposite direction there stood out against the steel-blue of the sky a succession of wooded peaks ever rising higher and higher until culminating in the faraway white mountains of the south; and below, they looked upon a ravine that was brownish-green until the rays of the departing orb touched the leaves with opal tints.

Now the fast-falling sun flung its banner of gorgeous colours across the western sky. Immediately a wonderful light played upon the fleecy cumuli gathered in the upper heavens of the east and changed them from pearl to brilliant scarlet. For a moment, also, the purple hills became wonderful piles of dull gold and copper; a moment more and the magic hand of the King of Day was withdrawn.

In front of them now, dark, gloomy and threatening rose Cloudy Mountain, from which the Mining Camp took its name; and on a plateau near its base the camp itself could plainly be seen. It consisted of a group of miners' cabins set among pines, firs and manzaneta bushes with two larger pine-slab buildings, and scattered around in various places were shafts, whose crude timber-hoists appeared merely as vague outlines in the fast-fading light. The distance to the camp from where they stood was not over three miles as the crow flies, but it appeared much less in the rarefied atmosphere.

As the two bandits stood on the edge of the precipice looking across and beyond the intervening gulch or ravine, here and there a light twinkled out from the cabins and, presently, a much stronger illumination shot forth from one of the larger and more pretentious buildings. Castro was quick to call his master's attention to it.

"There—that place with the light is The Palmetto Hotel!" he exclaimed. "And over there—the one with the larger light is The Polka Saloon!" For even as he spoke the powerful kerosene lamp of The Polka Saloon, flanked by a composition metal reflector, flashed out its light into the gloom enveloping the desolate, ominous-looking mountains.

Johnson regarded this building long and thoughtfully. Then his eyes made out a steep trail which zigzagged from The Polka Saloon up the barren slopes of the mountain until it reached a cabin perched on the very top, the steps and porch of which were held up by poles made of trees. There, also, a light could be seen, but dimly. It was a strange place for anyone to erect a dwelling-place, and he found himself wondering what manner of person dwelt there. Of one thing he was certain: whoever it was the mountains were loved for themselves, for no mere digger of gold would think of erecting a habitation in view of those strange, vast, and silent heights!

And as he meditated thus, he perceived that the far off Sierras were forming a background for a sinuous coil of smoke from the cabin. For some time he watched it curling up into the great arch of sky. It was as if he were hypnotised by it and, in a vague, shadowy way, he had a sense of being connected, somehow, with the little cabin and its recluse. Was this feeling that he had a premonition of danger? Was this a moment of foreboding and distrust of the situation yet to be revealed? For like most venturesome men he always had a moment before every one of his undertakings in which his instinct either urged him forward or held him back.

Suddenly he became conscious that his eyes no longer saw the smoke. He stared hard to glimpse it, but it was gone. And with a supreme effort he wrenched himself free from a sort of paralysis which was stealing away his senses.

Now the light in the cabin disappeared, and since the shades of night, for which he had been waiting, had fallen, he called to the impatient and wondering Castro, and together they went back to the trail.

But even as they crossed the gulch and reached the outskirts of the camp a great white moon rose from behind the Sierras. To Castro, hidden now in the pines, it meant nothing so long as it did not interfere with his purpose. As a matter of fact he was already

listening intently to the bursts of song and shouts of revelry that came every now and then from the nearby saloon. But his master, unaccountably under the spell of the moon's mystery and romance, watched it until it shed its silvery and magic light upon the lone cabin on the top of Cloudy Mountain, which Fate had chosen for the decisive scene of his dramatic life.

V.

Inside The Polka, not a bit more, and not a bit less sardonic—it was this imperturbability which made him so resistless to most people—than he was prior to the banishment of The Sidney Duck, the Sheriff of Manzaneta County waited patiently until the returning puppets of his will had had time to compose themselves. It took them merely the briefest of periods, but it served to increase visibly the long ash at the end of Rance's cigar. At length he shot a hawk-like glance at Sonora and proposed a little game of poker.

"This time, gentlemen—" he said, with a significant pause and accent—"just for social recreation. What do you say?"

"I'm your Injun!" acquiesced Sonora, rubbing his hands together gleefully at the prospect of winning from the Sheriff, whom he liked none too well.

"That's me, too!" concurred Trinidad.

"Chips, then, Nick!" called out the Sheriff, quietly taking a seat at the table; while Sonora, bubbling over with spirits, hitched up his trousers in sailor fashion and executed an impromptu hornpipe, bellowing in his deep, base voice:

"I shipped aboard of a liner, boys—"

"Renzo, boys, renzo," finished Trinidad, falling in place at the table.

At this point the outside door was unexpectedly pushed open, inward, and the Deputy-Sheriff came into their midst.

"Ashby just rode in with his posse," he announced huskily to his superior.

The Sheriff flashed a look of annoyance and inquired of the gaunt, hollow-cheeked, muscular Deputy whose beaver overcoat was

thrown open so that his gun and powder-flask showed plainly in his belt:

"Why, what's he doing here?"

"He's after Ramerrez," answered the Deputy, eyeing him intently.

Rance received this information in silence and went on with his shuffling of the cards; presently, unconcernedly, he remarked:

"Ramerrez—Oh, that's the polite road agent who has been visiting the other camps?"

"Yes; he's just turned into your county," declared the Deputy, meaningly.

"What?" Sonora looked dumbfounded.

The Deputy nodded and proceeded to the bar. And while he drained the contents of his glass, the Minstrel played on his banjo, much to the amusement of the men, who showed their appreciation by laughing heartily, the last bars of, "Pop Goes the Weasel."

"Hello, Sheriff!" greeted Ashby, coming in just as the merriment over the Minstrel's little joke had died away. Ashby's voice—quick, sharp and decisive was that of a man accustomed to ordering men, but his manner was suave, if a trifle gruff. Moreover, he was a man of whom it could be said, paradoxical as it may seem, that he was never known to be drunk nor ever known to be sober. It was plain from his appearance that he had been some time on the road.

Rance rose and politely extended his hand. And, although the greeting between the two men was none too cordial, yet in their look, as they eyed each other, was the respect which men have for others engaged more or less in the same business and in whom they recognise certain qualities which they have in common. In point of age Ashby was, perhaps, the senior. As far as reputation was concerned, both men were accounted nervy and square. Rance introduced him to Sonora and the others, saying:

"Boys, Mr. Ashby of Wells Fargo."

The latter had a pleasant word or two for the men; then, turning to the Deputy, he said:

"And how are you these days?"

"Fit. And yourself?"

"Same here." Turning now to the barkeeper, Ashby, with easy familiarity, added: "Say, Nick, give us a drink."

"Sure!" came promptly from the little barkeeper.

"Everybody'll have the same?" inquired Ashby, turning once more to the men.

"The same!" returned the men in chorus.

Thereupon, Nick briskly slapped down a bottle and four glasses before the Sheriff, and leaving him to do the honours, disappeared into the dance-hall.

"'Well, I trust the Girl who runs The Polka is well?" inquired Ashby, pushing his glass near the bottle.

"Fine as silk," vouched Sonora, adding in the next breath: "But, say, Mr. Ashby, how long you been chasm' up this road agent?"

"Oh, he only took to the road a few months ago," was Ashby's answer. "Wells Fargo have had me and a posse busy ever since. He's a wonder!"

"Must be to evade you," complimented Sonora, much to the discomfort of the Sheriff.

"Yes, I can smell a road agent in the wind," declared Ashby somewhat boastfully. "But, Rance, I expect to get that fellow right here in your county."

The Sheriff looked as if he scouted the idea, and was about to speak, but checked the word on his tongue. Then followed a short silence in which the Deputy, smiling a trifle derisively, went out of the saloon.

"Is this fellow a Spaniard?" questioned the Sheriff, drawling as usual, but at the same time jerking his thumb over his shoulder towards a placard on the wall, which read:

"FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD
FOR THE ROAD AGENT RAMERREZ,
OR INFORMATION
LEADING TO HIS CAPTURE.

(SIGNED) **WELLS FARGO."**

"No—can't prove it. The fact of his leading a crew of greasers and Spaniards signifies nothing. His name is assumed, I suppose."

"They say he robs you like a gentleman," remarked Rance with some show of interest.

"Well, look out for the greasers up the road!" was Ashby's warning as he emptied his glass and put it down before him.

"We don't let them pass through here," shrugged Rance, likewise putting down his glass on the table.

Ashby now picked up the whisky bottle and carried it over to the deserted faro table before which he settled himself comfortably in a chair.

"Well, boys, I've had a long ride—wake me up when The Pony Express goes through!" he called over his shoulder as he put his coat over him.

But no sooner was he comfortably ensconced for a snooze than Nick came bustling in with a kettle of boiling water and several glasses half-filled with whisky and lemon. Stopping before Ashby he said in his best professional manner:

"Re-gards of the Girl—hot whisky straight with lemming extract."

Ashby took up his glass, as did, in turn, the men at the other table. But it was Rance who, with arm uplifted, toasted:

"The Girl, gentlemen, the only Girl in Camp, the Girl I mean to make Mrs. Jack Rance!"

Confident that neither would catch him in the act, Nick winked first at Sonora and then at Trinidad. That the little barkeeper was successful in making the former, at least, believe that he possessed the Girl's affections was manifested by the big miner's next remark.

"That's a joke, Rance. She makes you look like a Chinaman."

Rance sprang to his feet, white with rage.

"You prove that!" he shouted.

"In what particular spot will you have it?" taunted Sonora, as his hand crept for his gun.

Simultaneously, every man in the room made a dash for cover. Nick ducked behind the bar, for, as he told himself when safely settled there, he was too old a bird to get anywhere near the line of fire when two old stagers got to making lead fly about. Nor was Trinidad slow in arriving at the other end of the bar where he caromed against Jake, who had dropped his banjo and was

frantically trying to kick the spring of the iron shield in an endeavour to protect himself—a feat which, at last, he succeeded in performing. But, fortunately, for all concerned, as the two men stood eyeing each other, their hands on their hips ready to draw, Nick, from his position behind the bar, glimpsed through the window the Girl on the point of entering the saloon.

"Here comes the Girl!" he cried excitedly. "Aw, leave your guns alone—take your drinks, quick!"

For a fraction of a second the men looked sheepishly at one another, even Nick appearing a trifle uncomfortable, as he picked up the kettle and went off with it.

"Once more we're friends, eh, boys?" said Rance, with a forced laugh; and then as he lifted his glass high in the air, he gave the toast:

"The Girl!"

"The Girl!" repeated all—all save Ashby, whose snores by this time could be heard throughout the big room—and drained their glasses.

VI.

There was a general movement towards the bar when the fair proprietress of The Polka, who had lingered longer than usual in her little cabin on top of the mountain, breezily entered the place by the main door. In a coarse, blue skirt, and rough, white flannel blouse, cut away and held in place at the throat by a crimson ribbon, the Girl made a pretty picture; it was not difficult to see why the boys of Cloudy Mountain Camp had a feeling which fell little short of adoration for this sun-browned maid, with the spirit of the mountain in her eyes. That each in his own way had given her to understand that he was desperately smitten with her, goes without saying. But, although she accepted their rough homage as a matter of course, such a thought as falling in love with anyone of them had never entered her mind.

As far back, almost, as she could remember, the Girl had lived among them and had ever been a true comrade, sharing their disappointments and thrilling with their successes. Of a nature pure and simple, she was, nevertheless, frank and outspoken. Moreover,

she knew to a dot what was meant when someone—bolder than his mates—stretched out his arms to her. One such exhibition on a man's part she was likely to forgive and forget, but the wrath and scorn that had blazed forth from her blue eyes on such an occasion had been sufficient to prevent a repetition of the offence. In short, unspoiled by their coarse flattery, and, to all appearances, happy and care-free, she attended to the running of The Polka wholly unsmirched by her environment.

But a keen observer would not have failed to detect that the Girl took a little less pleasure in her surroundings than she had taken in them before she had made the trip to Monterey. Downright glad, to use her own expression, as she had been on her return to see the boys of the camp and hear their boisterous shouts of welcome when the stage drew up in front of The Polka, she had to acknowledge that her home-coming was not quite what she expected. It was as if she had suddenly been startled out of a beautiful dream wherein she had been listening to the soft music of her lover's voice and brought face to face with the actualities of life, which, in her case, to say the least, were very real.

For hours after leaving her admirer sitting motionless on his horse on the great highway between Monterey and Sacramento, the Girl had indulged in some pertinent thoughts which, if the truth were known, were anything but complimentary to her behaviour. And, however successful she was later on in persuading herself that he would eventually seek her out, there was no question that at first she felt that the chances of her ever setting eyes on him again were almost negligible. All the more bitterly, therefore, did she regret her folly in not having told him where she lived; particularly so since she assured herself that not only was he the handsomest man that she had ever seen, but that he was the only one who had ever succeeded in chaining her attention. That he had been making love to her with his eyes, if not with words, she knew only too well—a fact that had been anything but displeasing to her. Indeed, far from having felt sorry that she had encouraged him, she, unblushingly, acknowledged to herself that, if she had the thing to do over again, she would encourage him still more.

Was she then a flirt? Not at all, in the common acceptation of the word. All her knowledge of the ways of the world had been derived

from Mother Nature, who had supplied her with a quick and ready wit to turn aside, with a smile, the protestations of the boys; had taught her how to live on intimate terms with them and yet not be intimate; but when it came to playing at love, which every city maid of the same age is an adept at, she was strangely ignorant. Of a truth, then, it was something far broader and deeper that had entered into her heart—love. Not infrequently love comes as suddenly as this to young women who live in small mining camps or out-of-the-way places where the men are practically of a type; it is their unfamiliarity with the class which a stranger represents when he makes his appearance in their midst that is responsible, fully as much as his own personality, for their being attracted to him. It is not impossible, of course, that if the Girl had met him in Cloudy,—say as a miner there,—the result would have been precisely the same. But it is much more likely that the attendant conditions of their meeting aided him in appealing to her imagination, and in touching a chord in her nature which, under other circumstances, would not have responded in as many months as there were minutes on that eventful day.

Little wonder then, that as each succeeding mile travelled by the stage took her further and further away from him, something which, as yet, she did not dare to name, kept tugging at her heartstrings and which she endeavoured to overcome by listening to the stage driver's long-winded reminiscences and anecdotes concerning the country through which they were passing. But, although she made a brave effort to appear interested, it did not take him long to realise that something was on his passenger's mind and, being a wise man, he gradually relapsed into silence, with the result that, before the long journey ended at Cloudy Mountain, she had deceived herself into believing that she was certain to see her admirer again.

But as the days grew into weeks, the weeks into months, and the Girl neither saw nor heard anything of him, it was inevitable that the picture that he had left on her mind should begin to grow dim. Nevertheless, it was surprising what a knack his figure had of appearing before her at various times of the day and night, when she never failed to compare him with the miners in the camp, and, needless to say, unflatteringly to them. There came a time, it is true, when she was sorely tempted to tell one of them something of this

new-found friend of hers; but rightly surmising the effect that her praising of her paragon would have upon the recipient of her confidences, she wisely resolved to lock up his image in her heart.

Of course, there were moments, too, when the Girl regretted that there was no other woman—some friend of her own sex in the camp—to whom she could confide her little romance. But since that boon was denied her, she took to seeking out the most solitary places to dream of him. In such moods she would climb to a high crag, a few feet from her cabin, and with a reminiscent and far-away look in her eyes she would sit for hours gazing at the great canyons and gorges, the broad forests and wooded hillsides, the waterfalls flashing silver in the distance, and, above all, at the wonderously-grand and snow-capped peaks of the main range.

At other times she would take the trail leading from the camp to the country below, and after wandering about aimlessly in the beautiful and mysterious forests, she would select some little glen through which a brook trickled and murmured underneath the ferns into a pool, and seating herself on a clump of velvet moss, the great sugar pines and firs forming a canopy over her head, she would whisper her secret thoughts and wild hopes to the gorgeously-plumed birds and saucy squirrels scampering all about her. The hours spent thus were as oases in her otherwise practical existence, and after a while she would return laden down with great bunches of ferns and wild flowers which, eventually, found a place on the walls of The Polka.

* * * * * *

Glancing at the bar to see that everything was to her satisfaction, the Girl greeted the boys warmly, almost rapturously with:

"Hello, boys! How's everythin'? Gettin' taken care of?"

"Hello, Girl!" sang out Sonora in what he considered was his most fetching manner. He had been the first to reach the coveted position opposite the Girl, although Handsome, who had followed her in, was leaning at the end of the bar nearest to the dance-hall.

"Hello, Sonora!" returned the Girl with an amused smile, for it was impossible with her keen sense of humour not to see Sonora's attempts to make himself irresistible to her. Nor did she fail to

observe that Trinidad, likewise, had spruced himself up a little more than usual, with the same purpose in mind.

"Hello, Girl!" he said, strolling up to her with a ludicrous swagger.

"Hello, Trin!" came from the Girl, smilingly.

There was an awkward pause in which both Sonora and Trinidad floundered about in their minds for something to say; at length, a brilliant inspiration came to the former, and he asked:

"Say, Girl, make me a prairie oyster, will you?"

"All, right, Sonora, I'll fix you right up," returned the Girl, smiling to herself at his effort. But at the moment that she was reaching for a bottle back of the bar, a terrific whoop came from the dance-hall, and ever-watchful lest the boys' fun should get beyond her control, she called to her factotum to quiet things down in the next room, concluding warningly:

"They've had about enough."

When the barkeeper had gone to do her bidding, the Girl picked up an egg, and, poising it over a glass, she went on:

"Say, look 'ere, Sonora, before I crack this 'ere egg, I'd like to state that eggs is four bits apiece. Only two hens left—" She broke off short, and turning upon Handsome, who had been gradually sidling up until his elbows almost touched hers, she repulsed him a trifle impatiently:

"Oh, run away, Handsome!"

A flush of pleasure at Handsome's evident discomfiture spread over Sonora's countenance, and comical, indeed, to the Girl, was the majestic air he took on when he ordered recklessly:

"Oh, crack the egg—I'll stand for it."

But Sonora's fancied advantage over the others was of short duration, for the next instant Nick, stepping quickly forward with a drink, handed it to the Girl with the words:

"Regards of Blonde Harry."

Again Sonora experienced a feeling akin to jealousy at what he termed Blonde Harry's impudence. It almost immediately gave way to a paroxysm of chuckling; for, the Girl, quickly taking the glass from Nick's hand, flung its contents into a nearby receptacle.

"There—tell 'im that it hit the spot!" She laughed.

Nick roared with the others, but on the threshold of the dance-hall he paused, hesitated, and finally came back, and advised in a low tone:

"Throw around a few kind words, Girl—good for the bar."

The Girl surveyed the barkeeper with playful disapproval in her eye. However advantageous might be his method of working up trade, she disdained to follow his advice, and her laughing answer was:

"Oh, you Nick!"

The peal of laughter that rung in Nick's ears as he disappeared through the door, awakened Ashby and brought him instantly to his feet. Despite his size, he was remarkably quick in his movements, and in no time at all he was standing before the bar with a glass, which he had filled from the bottle that had stood in front of him on the table, and was saying:

"Compliments of Wells Fargo."

"Thank you," returned the Girl; and then while she shook the prairie oyster: "You see we live high-shouldered here."

"That's what!" put in Sonora with a broad grin.

"What cigars have you?" asked Ashby, at the conclusion of his round of drinks.

"Regalias, Auroras and Eurekas," reeled off the Girl with her eye upon Billy Jackrabbit, who had quietly come in and was sneaking about in an endeavour to find something worth pilfering.

"Oh, any will do," Ashby told her, with a smile; and while he was helping himself from a box of Regalias, Nick suddenly appeared, calling out excitedly:

"Man jest come in threatenin' to shoot up the furniture!"

"Who is it?" calmly inquired the Girl, returning the cigar-box to its place on the shelf.

"Old man Watson!"

"Leave 'im shoot,—he's good for it!"

"Nick! Nick!" yelled several voices in the dance-hall where old man Watson was surely having the time of his life.

And still the Girl paid not the slightest attention to the shooting or the cries of the men; what did concern her, however, was the fact

that the Indian was drinking up the dregs in the whisky glasses on the faro table.

"Here, you, Billy Jackrabbit! What are you doin' here?" she exclaimed sharply, causing that generally imperturbable redskin to start perceptibly. "Did you marry my squaw yet?"

Billy Jackrabbit's face wore as stolid an expression as ever, when he answered:

"Not so much married squaw—yet."

"Not so much married..." repeated the Girl when the merriment, which his words provoked, had subsided. "Come 'ere, you thievin' redskin!" And when he had slid up to the bar, and she had extracted from his pockets a number of cigars which she knew had been pilfered, she added: "You git up to my cabin an' marry my squaw before I git there." And at another emphatic "Git!" the Indian, much to the amusement of all, started for the Girl's cabin.

"Here—here's your prairie oyster, Sonora," at last said the Girl; and then turning to the Sheriff and speaking to him for the first time, she called out gaily: "Hello, Rance!"

"Hello, Girl!" replied the Gambler without even a glance at her or ceasing to shuffle the cards.

Presently, Sonora pulled out a bag of gold-dust and told the Girl to clear the slate out of it. She was in the act of taking the sack when Nick, rushing into the room and jerking his thumb over his shoulder, said:

"Say, Girl, there's a fellow in there wants to know if we can help out on provisions."

"Sure; what does he want?" returned the Girl with a show of willingness to accommodate him.

"Bread."

"Bread? Does he think we're runnin' a bakery?"

"Then he asked for sardines."

"Sardines? Great Gilead! You tell 'im we have nothin' but straight provisions here. We got pickled oysters, smokin' tobacco an' the best whisky he ever saw," rapped out the Girl, proudly, and turned her attention to the slate.

"You bet!" vouched Trinidad with a nod, as Nick departed on his errand.

Finally, the Girl, having made her calculations, opened the counter drawer and brought forth some silver Mexican dollars, saying:

"Sonora, an' Mr. Ashby, your change!"

Ashby picked up his money, only to throw it instantly back on the bar, and say gallantly:

"Keep the change—buy a ribbon at The Ridge—compliments of Wells Fargo."

"Thank you," smiled the Girl, sweeping the money into the drawer, but her manner showed plainly that it was not an unusual thing for the patrons of The Polka to refuse to accept the change.

Not to be outdone, Sonora quickly arose and went over to the counter where, pointing to his stack of silver dollars, he said:

"Girl, buy two ribbons at The Ridge;" and then with a significant glance towards Ashby, he added: "Fawn's my colour."

And again, as before, the voice that said, "Thank you," was colourless, while her eyes rested upon the ubiquitous Nick, who had entered with an armful of wood and was intent upon making the room warmer.

Rance snorted disapprovingly at Sonora's prodigality. That he considered that both his and Ashby's attentions to the Girl had gone far enough was made apparent by the severe manner in which he envisaged them and drawled out:

"Play cyards?"

But to that gentleman's surprise the men did not move. Instead, Ashby raising a warning finger to the Girl, went on to advise that she should bank with them oftener, concluding with:

"And then if this road agent Ramerrez should drop in, you won't lose so much—"

"The devil you say!" cut in Sonora; while Trinidad broke out into a scornful laugh.

"Oh, go on, Mr. Ashby!" smilingly scoffed the Girl. "I keep the specie in an empty keg now. But I've took to bankin' personally in my stockin'," she confided without the slightest trace of embarrassment.

"But say, we've got an awful pile this month," observed Nick, anxiously, leaving the fireplace and joining the little ring of men about her. "It makes me sort o' nervous—why, Sonora's got ten thousand alone fer safe keepin' in that keg an'—"

"—Ramerrez' band's everywhere," completed Ashby with a start, his quick and trained ear having caught the sound of horses' hoofs.

"But if a road agent did come here, I could offer 'im a drink an' he'd treat me like a perfect lady," contended the Girl, confidently.

"You bet he would, the durned old halibut!" was Sonora's comment, while Nick took occasion to ask the Girl for some tobacco.

"Solace or Honeydew?" she inquired, her hands already on the assortment of tobacco underneath the bar.

"Dew," was Nick's laconic answer.

And then it was that the Girl heard for the first time the sound of the galloping hoofs; startled for the moment, she inquired somewhat uneasily:

"Who's this, I wonder?"

But no sooner were the words spoken than a voice outside in the darkness sung out sharply:

"Hello!"

"Hello!" instantly returned another voice, which the Girl recognised at once as being that of the Deputy.

"Big holdup last night at The Forks!" the first voice was now saying.

"Holdup!" repeated several voices outside in tones of excitement.

"Ramerrez—" went on the first voice, at which ominous word all, including Ashby, began to exchange significant glances as they echoed:

"Ramerrez!"

The name had barely died on their lips, however, than Nick precipitated himself into their midst and announced that The Pony Express had arrived, handing up to the Girl, at the same time, a bundle of letters and one paper.

"You see!" maintained Ashby, stoutly, as he watched her sort the letters; "I was right when I told you..."

"Look sharp! There's a greaser on the trail!" rang out warningly the voice of The Pony Express.

"A greaser!" exclaimed Rance, for the first time showing any interest in the proceedings; and then without looking up and after the manner of a man speaking to a good dog, he told the Deputy, who had followed Nick into the room:

"Find him, Dep."

For some time the Girl occupied herself with cashing in the chips which Nick brought to her—a task which she performed with amazing correctness and speed considering that her knowledge of the science of mathematics had been derived solely from the handling of money at The Polka. Now she went over to Sonora, who sat at a table reading.

"You got the newspaper, I see," she observed. "But you, Trin, I'm sorry you ain't got nothin'," she added, with a sad, little smile.

"So long!" hollered The Pony Express at that moment; whereupon, Ashby rushed over to the door and called after him:

"Pony Express, I want you!" Satisfied that his command had been heard he retraced his footsteps and found Handsome peering eagerly over Sonora's shoulder.

"So, Sonora, you've got a newspaper," Handsome was saying.

"Yes, but the infernal thing's two months old," returned the other disgustedly.

Handsome laughed, and wheeling round was just in time to see the door flung open and a young fellow advance towards Ashby.

The Pony Express was a young man of not more than twenty years of age. He was smooth-faced and unshaven and, needless to say, was light of build, for these riders were selected for their weight as well as for their nerve. He wore a sombrero, a buckskin hunting-shirt, tight trousers tucked into high boots with spurs, all of which were weather-beaten and faded by wind, rain, dust and alkali. A pair of Colt revolvers could be seen in his holsters, and he carried in his hands, which were covered with heavy gloves, a mail pouch—it being the company's orders not to let his *muchilo* of heavy leather out of his hands for a second.

"You drop mail at the greaser settlement?" inquired Ashby in his peremptory and incisive manner.

"Yes, sir," quickly responded the young man; and then volunteered: "It's a tough place."

Ashby scrutinised the newcomer closely before going on with:

"Know a girl there named Nina Micheltoreña?"

But before The Pony Express had time to reply the Girl interposed scornfully:

"Nina Micheltoreña? Why, they all know 'er! She's one o' them Cachuca girls with droopy, Spanish eyes! Oh, ask the boys about 'er!" And with that she started to leave the room, stopping on her way to clap both Trinidad and Sonora playfully on the back. "Yes, ask the boys about 'er, they'll tell you!" And so saying she fled from the room, followed by the men she was poking fun at.

"Hold her letters, you understand?" instructed Ashby who, with the Sheriff, was alone now with The Pony Express.

"Yes, sir," he replied earnestly. A moment later there being no further orders forthcoming he hastily took his leave.

Ashby now turned his attention to Rance.

"Sheriff," said he, "to-night I expect to see this Nina Micheltoreña either here or at The Palmetto."

Rance never raised an eyebrow.

"You do?" he remarked a moment later with studied carelessness. "Well, the boys had better look to their watches. I met that lady once."

Ashby shot him a look of inquiry.

"She's looking to that five thousand reward for Ramerrez," he told him.

Rance's interest was growing by leaps and bounds though he continued to riffle the cards.

"What? She's after that?"

"Sure thing. She knows something..." And having delivered himself of this Ashby strode over to the opposite side of the room where his coat and hat were hanging upon an elk horn. While putting them on he came face to face with the Girl who, having merely glanced in at the dance-hall, was returning to take up her duties behind the bar. "Well, I'll have a look at that greaser up the

road," he said, addressing her, and then went on half-jocularly, half-seriously: "He may have his eye on the find in that stocking."

"You be darned!" was the Girl's parting shot at him as he went out into the night.

There was a long and impressive pause in which, apparently, the Sheriff was making up his mind to speak of matters scarcely incident to the situation that had gone before; while fully conscious that she was to be asked to give him an answer—she whose answer had been given many times—the Girl stood at the bar in an attitude of amused expectancy, and fussing with things there. At length, Rance, glancing shyly over his shoulder to make sure that they were alone, became all at once grave and his voice fell soft and almost caressingly.

"Say, Girl!"

The young woman addressed stole a look at him from under her lashes, all the while smiling a wise, little smile to herself, but not a word did she vouchsafe in reply.

Again Rance called to her over his shoulder:

"I say, Girl!"

The Girl took up a glass and began to polish it. At last she deigned to favour him with "Hm?" which, apparently, he did not hear, for again a silence fell upon them. Finally, unable to bear the suspense any longer, the Sheriff threw down his cards on the table, and facing her he said:

"Say, Girl, will you marry me?"

"Nope," returned the Girl with a saucy toss of the head.

Rance rose and strode over to the bar. Looking fixedly at her with his steely grey eyes he demanded the reason.

"'Cause you got a wife in Noo Orleans—or so the mountain breezes say," was her ready answer.

Rance gave no sign of having heard her. Throwing away the cigar he was smoking he asked in the most nonchalant manner:

"Give me some of them cigars—my kind."

Reaching for a box behind her the Girl placed it before him.

"Them's your kind, Jack."

From an inside pocket of his broadcloth coat Rance took out an elaborate cigar-case, filled it slowly, leaving out one cigar which he

placed between his lips. When he had this one going satisfactorily he rested both elbows on the edge of the bar, and said bluntly:

"I'm stuck on you."

The Girl's lips parted a little mockingly.

"Thank you."

Rance puffed away for a moment or two in silence, and then with sudden determination he went on:

"I'm going to marry you."

"Think so?" questioned the Girl, drawing herself up proudly. And while Rance proceeded to relight his cigar, it having gone out, she plumped both elbows on the bar and looked him straight in the eye, and announced: "They ain't a man here goin' to marry me."

The scene had precisely the appearance of a struggle between two powerful wills. How long they would have remained with elbows almost touching and looking into each other's eyes it is difficult to determine; but an interruption came in the person of the barkeeper, who darted in, calling: "One good cigar!"

Instantly the Girl reached behind her for the box containing the choicest cigars, and handing one to Nick, she said:

"Here's your poison—three bits. Why look at 'em," she went on in the next breath to Rance; "there's Handsome with two wives I know of somewhere East. And—" She broke off short and ended with: "Nick, who's that cigar for?"

"Tommy," he told her.

"Here, give that back!" she cried quickly putting out her hand for it. "Tommy don't know a good cigar when he's smokin' it." And so saying she put the choice cigar back in its place among its fellows and handed him one from another box with the remark: "Same price, Nick."

Nick chuckled and went out.

"An' look at Trin with a widow in Sacramento. An' you—" The Girl broke off short and laughed in his face. "Oh, not one o' you travellin' under your own name!"

"One whisky!" ordered Nick, coming into the room with a rush. Without a word the Girl took down a bottle and poured it out for him while he stood quietly looking on, grinning from ear to ear. For

Rance's weakness was known to him as it was to every other man in Manzaneta County, and he believed that the Sheriff had taken advantage of his absence to press his hopeless suit.

"Here you be!" sang out the Girl, and passed the glass over to him.

"He wants it with water," returned Nick, with a snicker.

With a contemptuous gesture the Girl put the bottle back on the shelf.

"No—no you don't; no fancy drinks here!" she objected.

"But he says he won't take it without water," protested Nick, though there was a twinkle in his eye. "He's a fellow that's jest rode in from The Crossin', so he says."

The Girl folded her arms and declared in a tone of finality:

"He'll take it straight or git."

"But he won't git," contended Nick chuckling. There was an ominous silence. Such behaviour was without a parallel in the annals of Cloudy. For much less than this, as the little barkeeper very well knew, many a man had been disciplined by the Girl. So, with his eyes fixed upon her face, he was already revelling in the situation by way of anticipation, and rejoicing in the coming requital for his own rebuff when the stranger had declined to leave as ordered. It was merely a question of his waiting for the words which would, as he put it, "take the fellow down a peg." They were soon forthcoming.

"You jest send 'im to me," commanded the Girl. "I'll curl his hair for him!"

Nick's face showed that the message was to his liking. It was evident, also, that he meant to lose no time in delivering it. A moment after he disappeared, Rance, who had been toying with a twenty dollar gold piece which he took from his pocket, turned to the Girl and said with great earnestness:

"Girl, I'll give you a thousand dollars on the spot for a kiss," which offer met with no response other than a nervous little laugh and the words:

"Some men invite bein' played."

The gambler shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, what are men made for?" said he, flinging the gold piece down on the bar in payment for the cigar.

"That's true," placidly commented the Girl, making the change.

Rance tried another tack.

"You can't keep on running this place alone; it's getting too big for you; too much money circulating through The Polka. You need a man behind you." All this was said in short, jerky sentences; moreover, when she placed his change in front of him he pushed it back almost angrily.

"Come now, marry me," again he pleaded.

"Nope."

"My wife won't know it."

"Nope."

"Now, see here, there's just one—"

"Nope—take it straight, Jack, nope..." interrupted the Girl. She had made up her mind that he had gone far enough; and firmly grabbing his hand she slipped his change into it.

Without a word the Sheriff dropped the coins into the cuspidor. The Girl saw the action and her eyes flashed with anger. The next moment, however, she looked up at him and said more gently than any time yet:

"No, Jack, I can't marry you. Ah, come along—start your game again—go on, Jack." And so saying she came out from behind the bar and went over to the faro table with: "Whoop la! Mula! Go! Good Lord, look at that faro table!"

But Rance was on the verge of losing control of himself. There was passion in his steely grey eyes when he advanced towards her, but although the Girl saw the look she did not flinch, and met it in a clear, straight glance.

"Look here, Jack Rance," she said, "let's have it out right now. I run The Polka 'cause I like it. My father taught me the business an', well, don't you worry 'bout me—I can look after m'self. I carry my little wepping"—and with that she touched significantly the little pocket of her dress. "I'm independent, I'm happy, The Polka's payin', an' it's bully!" she wound up, laughing. Then, with one of her quick changes of mood, she turned upon him angrily and demanded: "Say, what the devil do you mean by proposin' to me with a wife in Noo Orleans? Now, this is a respectable saloon, an' I don't want no more of it."

A look of gloom came into Rance's eyes.

"I didn't say anything—" he began.

"Push me that Queen," interrupted the Girl, sharply, gathering up the cards at the faro table, and pointing to one that was just beyond her reach. But when Rance handed it to her and was moving silently away, she added: "Ah, no offence, Jack, but I got other idees o' married life from what you have."

"Aw, nonsense!" came from the Sheriff in a voice that was not free from irritation.

The Girl glanced up at him quickly. Her mind was not the abode of hardened convictions, but was tender to sentiment, and something in his manner at once softening her, she said:

"Nonsense? I dunno 'bout that. You see—" and her eyes took on a far away look—"I had a home once an' I ain't forgot it—a home up over our little saloon down in Soledad. I ain't forgot my father an' my mother an' what a happy kepple they were. Lord, how they loved each other—it was beautiful!"

Despite his seemingly callous exterior, there was a soft spot in the gambler's heart. Every word that the Girl uttered had its effect on him. Now his hands, which had been clenched, opened out and a new light came into his eyes. Suddenly, however, it was replaced by one of anger, for the door, at that moment, was hesitatingly pushed open, and The Sidney Duck stood with his hand on the knob, snivelling:

"Oh, Miss, I—"

The Girl fairly flew over to him.

"Say, I've heard about you! You git!" she cried; and when she was certain that he was gone she came back and took a seat at the table where she continued, in the same reminiscent vein as before: "I can see mother now fussin' over father an' pettin' 'im, an' father dealin' faro—Ah, he was square! An' me a kid, as little as a kitten, under the table sneakin' chips for candy. Talk 'bout married life—that was a little heaven! Why, mother tho't so much o' that man, she was so much heart an' soul with 'im that she learned to be the best case-keeper you ever saw. Many a sleeper she caught! You see, when she played, she was playin' for the ol' man." She stopped as if overcome with emotion, and then added with great feeling: "I guess

everybody's got some remembrance o' their mother tucked away. I always see mine at the faro table with her foot snuggled up to Dad's, an' the light o' lovin' in her eyes. Ah, she was a lady...!" Impulsively she rose and walked over to the bar.

"No," she went on, when behind it once more, "I couldn't share that table an' The Polka with any man—unless there was a heap o' carin' back of it. No, I couldn't, Jack, I couldn't..."

By this time the Sheriff's anger had completely vanished; dejection was plainly written on every line of his face.

"Well, I guess the boys were right; I am a Chinaman," he drawled out.

At once the Girl was all sympathy.

"Oh, no you're not, Jack!" she protested, speaking as tenderly as she dared without encouraging him.

Rance was quick to detect the change in her voice. Now he leaned over the end of the bar and said in tones that still held hope:

"Once when I rode in here it was nothing but Jack, Jack, Jack Rance. By the Eternal, I nearly got you then!"

"Did you?" The Girl was her saucy self again.

Rance ignored her manner, and went on:

"Then you went on that trip to Sacramento and Monterey and you were different."

In spite of herself the Girl started, which Rance's quick eye did not fail to note.

"Who's the man?" he blazed.

For answer the Girl burst out into a peal of laughter. It was forced, and the man knew it.

"I suppose he's one o' them high-toned, Sacramento shrimps!" he burst out gruffly; then he added meaningly: "Do you think he'd have you?"

At those words a wondering look shone in the Girl's eyes, and she asked in all seriousness:

"What's the matter with me? Is there anythin' 'bout me a high-toned gent would object to?" And then as the full force of the insult was borne in upon her she stepped out from behind the bar,

and demanded: "Look here, Jack Rance, ain't I always been a perfect lady?"

Rance laughed discordantly.

"Oh, heaven knows your character's all right!" And so saying he seated himself again at the table.

The girl flared up still more at this; she retorted:

"Well, that ain't your fault, Jack Rance!" But the words were hardly out of her mouth than she regretted having spoken them. She waited a moment, and then as he did not speak she murmured an "Adios, Jack," and took up her position behind the bar where, if Rance had been looking, he would have seen her start on hearing a voice in the next room and fix her eyes in a sort of fascinated wonder, on a man who, after parting the pelt curtain, came into the saloon with just a suggestion of swagger in his bearing.

VII.

"Where's the man who wanted to curl my hair?"

Incisive and harsh, with scarcely a trace of the musical tones she recollected so well, as was Johnson's voice, it deceived the Girl not an instant. Even before she was able to get a glimpse of his face it did not fail to tell her that the handsome *caballero*, with whom she had ridden on that never-to-be-forgotten day on the Monterey road, was standing before her. That his attire now, as might be expected, was wholly different from what it had been then, it never occurred to her to note; for, to tell the truth, she was vainly struggling to suppress the joy that she felt at seeing him again, and before she was aware of it there slipped through her lips:

"Why, howdy do, stranger!"

At the sound of her voice Johnson wheeled round in glad surprise and amazement; but the quick look of recognition that he flashed upon her wholly escaped the Sheriff whose attitude was indicative of keen resentment at this intrusion, and whose eyes were taking in the newcomer from head to foot.

"We're not much on strangers here," he blurted out at last.

Johnson turned on his heel and faced the speaker. An angry retort rose to his lips, but he checked it. Although, perhaps, not fully

appreciating his action, he was, nevertheless, not unaware that, from the point of view of the Polka, his refusal to take his whisky straight might be regarded as nothing less than an insult. And now that it was too late he was inclined, however much he resented an attempt to interfere in a matter which he believed concerned himself solely, to regret the provocation and challenging words of his entrance if only because of a realisation that a quarrel would be likely to upset his plans. On the other hand, with every fraction of a second that passed he was conscious of becoming more and more desirous of humbling the man standing before him and scrutinising him so insolently; moreover, he felt intuitively that the eyes of the Girl were on him as well as on the other principal to this silent but no less ominous conflict going on, and such being the case it was obviously impossible for him to withdraw from the position he had taken. As a sort of compromise, therefore, he said, tentatively:

"I'm the man who wanted water in his whisky."

"You!" exclaimed the Girl; and then added reprovingly: "Oh, Nick, this gentleman takes his whisky as he likes it!"

And this from the Girl! The little barkeeper had all the appearance of a man who thought the world was coming to an end. He did not accept the Girl's ultimatum until he had drawn down his face into an expression of mock solemnity and ejaculated half-aloud:

"Moses, what's come over 'er!"

Johnson took a few steps nearer the Girl and bowed low.

"In the presence of a lady I will take nothing," he said impressively. "But pardon me, you seem to be almost at home here."

The girl leaned her elbows on the bar and her chin in her hands, and answered with a tantalising little laugh:

"Who—me?"

After a loud guffaw Nick took it upon himself to explain matters; turning to Johnson he said:

"Why, she's the Girl who runs The Polka!"

Johnson's face wore a look of puzzled consternation; he saw no reason for levity.

"You...?"

"Yep," nodded the Girl with a merry twinkle in her eyes.

Johnson's face fell.

"She runs The Polka," he murmured to himself. Of all places to have chosen—this! So the thing he had dreaded had happened!

For odd as it unquestionably seemed to him that she should turn up as the proprietress of a saloon after months of searching high and low for her, it was not this reflection that was uppermost in his mind; on the contrary, it was the deeply humiliating thought that he had come upon her when about to ply his vocation. Regret came swiftly that he had not thought to inquire who was the owner of The Polka Saloon. Bitterly he cursed himself for his dense stupidity. And yet, it was doubtful whether any of his band could have informed him. All that they knew of the place was that the miners of Cloudy Mountain Camp were said to keep a large amount of placer gold there; all that he had done was to acquaint himself with the best means of getting it. But his ruminations were soon dissipated by Rance, who had come so close that their feet almost touched, and was speaking in a voice that showed the quarrelsome frame of mind that he was in.

"You're from The Crossing, the barkeeper said—" he began, and then added pointedly: "I don't remember you."

Johnson slowly turned from the Girl to the speaker and calmly corrected:

"You're mistaken; I said I rode over from The Crossing." And turning his back on the man he faced the Girl with: "So, you run The Polka?"

"I'm the Girl—the girl that runs The Polka," she said, and to his astonishment seemed to glory in her occupation.

Presently, much to their delight, an opportunity came to them to exchange a word or two with each other without interruption. For, Rance, as if revolving some plan of action in his mind, had turned on his heel and walked off a little way. A moment more, however, and he was back again and more malevolently aggressive than ever.

"No strangers are allowed in this camp," he said, glowering at Johnson; and then, his remark having passed unheeded by the other, he sneered: "Perhaps you're off the road; men often get mixed up when they're visiting Nina Micheltoreña on the back trail."

"Oh, Rance!" protested the Girl.

But Johnson, though angered, let the insinuation pass unnoticed, and went on to say that he had stopped in to rest his horse and, perhaps, if invited, try his luck at a game of cards. And with this intimation he crossed over to the poker table where he picked up the deck that Rance had been using.

Rance hesitated, and finally followed up the stranger until he brought up face to face with him.

"You want a game, eh?" he drawled, coolly impudent. "I haven't heard your name, young man."

"Name," echoed the Girl with a cynical laugh. "Oh, names out here—"

"My name's Johnson—" spoke up the man, throwing down the cards on the table.

"Is what?" laughed the Girl, saucily, and, apparently, trying to relieve the strained situation by her bantering tone.

"—Of Sacramento," he finished easily.

"Of Sacramento," repeated the Girl in the same jesting manner as before; then, quickly coming out from behind the bar, she went over to him and put out her hand, saying:

"I admire to know you, Mr. Johnson o' Sacramento."

Johnson bowed low over her hand.

"Thank you," he said simply.

"Say, Girl, I—" began Rance, fuming at her behaviour.

"Oh, sit down, Rance!" The interruption came from the Girl as she pushed him lightly out of her way; then, perching herself up on one end of the faro table, at which Johnson had taken a seat, she ventured:

"Say, Mr. Johnson, do you know what I think o' you?"

Johnson eyed her uncertainly, while Rance's eyes blazed as she blurted out:

"Well, I think you staked out a claim in a etiquette book." And then before Johnson could answer her, she went on to say: "So you think you can play poker?"

"That's my conviction," Johnson told her, smilingly.

"Out o' every fifty men who think they can play poker one ain't mistaken," was the Girl's caustic observation. The next instant,

however, she jumped down from the table and was back at her post, where, fearful lest he should think her wanting in hospitality, she proposed: "Try a cigar, Mr. Johnson?"

"Thank you," he said, rising, and following her to the bar.

"Best in the house—my compliments."

"You're very kind," said Johnson, taking the candle that she had lighted for him; then, when his cigar was going, and in a voice that was intended for her alone, he went on: "So you remember me?"

"If you remember me," returned the Girl, likewise in a low tone.

"What the devil are they talking about anyway?" muttered Rance to himself as he stole a glance at them over his shoulder, though he kept on shuffling the cards.

"I met you on the road to Monterey," said Johnson with a smile.

"Yes, comin' an' goin'," smiled back the Girl. "You passed me a bunch o' wild syringa over the wheel; you also asked me to go a-berryin'—" and here she paused long enough to glance up at him coquettishly before adding: "But I didn't see it, Mr. Johnson."

"I noticed that," observed Johnson, laughing.

"An' when you went away you said—" The Girl broke off abruptly and replaced the candle on the bar; then with a shy, embarrassed look on her face she ended with: "Oh, I dunno."

"Yes, you do, yes, you do," maintained Johnson. "I said I'll think of you all the time—well, I've thought of you ever since."

There was a moment of embarrassment. Then:

"Somehow I kind o' tho't you might drop in," she said with averted eyes. "But as you didn't—" She paused and summoned to her face a look which she believed would adequately reflect a knowledge of the proprieties. "O' course," she tittered out, "it wa'n't my place to remember you—first."

"But I didn't know where you lived—you never told me, you know," contended the road agent, which contention so satisfied the Girl—for she remembered only too well that she had not told him—that she determined to show him further evidences of her regard.

Say, I got a special bottle here—best in the house. Will you...?"

"Why—"

The girl did not wait for him to finish his sentence, but quickly placed a bottle and glass before him.

"My compliments," she whispered, smiling.

"You're very kind—thanks," returned the road agent, and proceeded to pour out a drink.

Meanwhile, little of what was taking place had been lost on Jack Rance. As the whispered conversation continued, he grew more and more jealous, and at the moment that Johnson was on the point of putting the glass to his lips, Rance, rising quickly, went over to him and deliberately knocked the glass out of his hand.

With a crash it fell to the floor.

"Look here, Mr. Johnson, your ways are offensive to me!" he cried; "damned offensive! My name is Rance—Jack Rance. Your business here—your business?" And without waiting for the other's reply he called out huskily: "Boys! Boys! Come in here!"

At this sudden and unexpected summons in the Sheriff's well-known voice there was a rush from the dance-hall; in an instant the good-natured, roistering crowd, nosing a fight, crowded to the bar, where the two men stood glaring at each other in suppressed excitement.

"Boys," declared the Sheriff, his eye never leaving Johnson's face, "there's a man here who won't explain his business. He won't tell—"

"Won't he?" cut in Sonora, blusteringly. "Well, we'll see—we'll make 'im!"

There was a howl of execration from the bar. It moved the Girl to instant action. Quick as thought she turned and strode to where the cries were the most menacing—towards the boys who knew her best and ever obeyed her unquestioningly.

"Wait a minute!" she cried, holding up her hand authoritatively. "I know the gent!"

The men exchanged incredulous glances; from all sides came the explosive cries:

"What's that? You know him?"

"Yes," she affirmed dramatically; and turning now to Rance with a swift change of manner, she confessed: "I didn't tell you—but I know 'im."

The Sheriff started as if struck.

"The Sacramento shrimp by all that is holy!" he muttered between his teeth as the truth slowly dawned upon him.

"Yes, boys, this is Mr. Johnson o' Sacramento," announced the Girl with a simple and unconscious dignity that did not fail to impress all present. "I vouch to Cloudy for Mr. Johnson!"

Consternation!

And then the situation vaguely dawning upon them there ensued an outburst of cheering compared to which the previous howl of execration was silence.

Johnson smiled pleasantly at the Girl in acknowledgment of her confirmation of him, then shot a half-curious, half-amused look at the crowd surrounding him and regarding him with a new interest. Apparently what he saw was to his liking, for his manner was most friendly when bowing politely, he said:

"How are you, boys?"

At once the miners returned his salutation in true western fashion: every man in the place, save Rance, taking off his hat and sweeping it before him in an arc as they cried out in chorus:

"Hello, Johnson!"

"Boys, Rance ain't a-runnin' The Polka yet!" observed Sonora with a mocking smile on his lips, and gloating over the opportunity to give the Sheriff a dig.

The men shouted their approval of this jibe. Indeed, they might have gone just a little too far with their badgering of the Sheriff, considering the mood that he was in; so, perhaps, it was fortunate that Nick should break in upon them at this time with:

"Gents, the boys from The Ridge invites you to dance with them."

No great amount of enthusiasm was evinced at this. Nevertheless, it was a distinct declaration of peace; and, taking advantage of it, Johnson advanced toward the Girl, bowed low, and asked with elaborate formality:

"May I have the honour of a waltz?"

Flabbergasted and awed to silence by what they termed Johnson's "style," Happy and Handsome stood staring helplessly at one another; at length Happy broke out with:

"Say, Handsome, ain't he got a purty action? An' ornamental sort o' cuss, ain't he? But say, kind o' presumin' like, ain't it, for a fellow breathin' the obscurity o' The Crossin' to learn gents like us how to ketch the ladies pronto?"

"Which same," allowed Handsome, "shorely's a most painful, not to say humiliatin' state o' things." And then to the Girl he whispered: "It's up to you—make a holy show of 'im."

The Girl laughed.

"Me waltz? Me?" she cried, answering Johnson at last. "Oh, I can't waltz but I can polky."

Once more Johnson bent his tall figure to the ground, and said:

"Then may I have the pleasure of the next polka?"

By this time Sonora had recovered from his astonishment. After giving vent to a grunt expressive of his contempt, he blurted out:

"That fellow's too flip!"

But the idea had taken hold of the Girl, though she temporised shyly:

"Oh, I dunno! Makes me feel kind o' foolish, you know, kind o' retirin' like a elk in summer."

Johnson smiled in spite of himself.

"Elks are retiring," was his comment as he again advanced and offered his arm in an impressive and ceremonious manner.

"Well, I don't like everybody's hand on the back o' my waist," said the Girl, running her hands up and down her dress skirt. "But, somehow—" She stopped, and fixing her eyes recklessly on Rance, made a movement as if about to accept; but another look at Johnson's proffered arm so embarrassed her that she sent a look of appeal to the rough fellows, who stood watching her with grinning faces.

"Oh, Lord, must I?" she asked; then, hanging back no longer, she suddenly flung herself into his arms with the cry: "Oh, come along!"

Promptly Johnson put his arm around the Girl's waist, and breaking into a polka he swung her off to the dance-hall where their appearance was greeted with a succession of wild whoops from the men there, as well as from the hilarious boys, who had rushed pell-mell after them.

Left to himself and in a rage Rance began to pace the floor.

"Cleaned out—cleaned out for fair by a high-toned, fine-haired dog named Johnson! Well, I'll be—" The sentence was never finished, his attention being caught and held by something which Nick was carrying in from the dance-hall.

"What's that?" he demanded brusquely.

Nick's eyes were twinkling when he answered:

"Johnson's saddle."

Rance could control himself no longer; with a sweep of his long arm he knocked the saddle out of the other's hand, saying:

"Nick, I've a great notion to walk out of this door and never step my foot in here again."

Nick did not answer at once. While he did not especially care for Rance he did not propose to let his patronage, which was not inconsiderable, go elsewhere without making an effort to hold it. Therefore, he thought a moment before picking up the saddle and placing it in the corner of the room.

"Aw, what you givin' us, Rance! She's only a-kiddin' 'im," at last he said consolingly.

The Sheriff was about to question this when a loud cry from outside arrested him.

"What's that?" he asked with his eyes upon the door.

"Why that's—that's Ashby's voice," the barkeeper informed him; and going to the door, followed by Rance, as well as the men who, on hearing the cry, had rushed in from the dance-hall, he opened it, and they heard again the voice that they all recognised now as that of the Wells Fargo Agent.

"Come on!" he was saying gruffly.

"What the deuce is up?" inquired Trinidad simultaneously with the Deputy's cry of "Bring him in!" And almost instantly the Deputy, followed by Ashby and others, entered, dragging along with him the unfortunate Jose Castro. The rough handling that he had received had not improved his appearance. His clothing, half Mexican, the rest of odds and ends, had been torn in several places. He looked oily, greasy and unwashed, while the eyes that looked around in affright had lost none of their habitual trickiness and sullenness.

And precisely as Castro appeared wholly different than when last seen in the company of his master, so, too, was Ashby metamorphosed. His hat was on the back of his head; his coat looked as if he had been engaged in some kind of a struggle; his hair was ruffled and long locks straggled down over his forehead; while his face wore a brutal, savage, pitiless, nasty look.

By this time all the regular habitués of the saloon had come in and were crowding around the greaser with scowling, angry faces.

"The greaser on the trail!" gurgled Ashby in his glass, having left his prisoner for a moment to fortify himself with a drink of whisky.

Whereupon, the Sheriff advanced and, with rough hands, jerked the prisoner's head brutally.

"Here you," he said, "give us a look at your face."

But the Sheriff had never seen him before. And in obedience to his commands to "Tie him up!" the Deputy and Billy Jackrabbit took a lariat from the wall and proceeded to bind their prisoner fast. When this was done Ashby called to Nick to serve him another drink, adding:

"Come on, boys!"

Instantly there was an exclamatory lining up at the bar, only Sonora, apparently, seeming disinclined to accept, which Ashby was quick to note. Turning to him quickly, he inquired:

"Say, my friend, don't you drink?"

But no insult had been intended by Sonora's omission; it was merely most inconsiderate on his part of the feelings of others; and, therefore, there was a note of apology in the voice that presently said:

"Oh, yes, Mr. Ashby, I'm with you all right."

During this conversation the eyes of the greaser had been wandering all over the room. But as the men moved away from him to take their drinks he started violently and an expression of dismay crossed his features. "Ramerrez' saddle!" he muttered to himself. "*The Maestro*—he is taken!"

Just then there came a particularly loud burst of approval from the spectators of the dancing going on in the adjoining room, and instinctively the men at the bar half-turned towards the noise. The prisoner's eyes followed their gaze and a fiendish grin replaced the

look of dismay on his face. "No, he is there dancing with a girl," he said under his breath. A moment later Nick let down the bearskin curtain, shutting off completely the Mexican's view of the dance-hall.

"Come, now, tell us what your name is?" The voice was Ashby's who, together with the others, now surrounded the prisoner. "Speak up—who are you?"

"My name ees Jose Castro;" and then he added with a show of pride: "*Ex-padrona* of the bull-fights."

"But the bull-fights are at Monterey! Why do you come to this place?"

All eyes instantly turned from the prisoner to Rance, who had asked the question while seated at the table, and from him they returned to the prisoner, most of the men giving vent to exclamations of anger in tones that made the greaser squirm, while Trinidad expressed the prevailing admiration of the Sheriff's poser by crying out:

"That's the talk—you bet! Why do you come here?"

Castro's face wore an air of candour as he replied:

"To tell the Señor Sheriff I know where ees Ramerrez."

Rance turned on the prisoner a grim look.

"You lie!" he vociferated, at the same time raising his hand to check the angry mutterings of the men that boded ill for the greaser.

"Nay," denied Castro, strenuously, "pleanty Mexican *vaquero*—my friend Peralta, Weelejos all weeth Ramerrez—so I know where ees."

Rance advanced and shot a finger in his face.

"You're one of his men yourself!" he cried hotly. But if he had hoped by his accusation to take the man off his guard, it was eminently unsuccessful, for the look on the greaser's face was innocence itself when he declared:

"No, no, Señor Sheriff."

Rance reflected a moment; suddenly, then, he took another tack.

"You see that man there?" he queried, pointing to the Wells Fargo Agent. "That is Ashby. He is the man that pays out that reward you've heard of." Then after a pause to let his words sink in, he demanded gruffly: "Where is Ramerrez' camp?"

At once the prisoner became voluble.

"Come with me one mile, Señor," he said, "and by the soul of my mother, the blessed Maria Saltaja, we weel put a knife into hees back."

"One mile, eh?" repeated Rance, coolly.

The miners looked incredulous.

"If I tho't—" began Sonora, but Rance rudely cut in with:

"Where is this trail?"

"Up the Madrona Canyada," was the greaser's instant reply.

At this juncture a Ridge boy, who had pushed aside the bear-skin curtain and was gazing with mouth wide open at the proceedings, suddenly cried out:

"Why, hello, boys! What's the—" He got no further. In a twinkling and with cries of "Shut up! Git!" the men made for the intruder and bodily threw him out of the room. When quiet was restored Rance motioned to the prisoner to proceed.

"Ramerrez can be taken—too well taken," declared the Mexican, gaining confidence as he went on, "if many men come with me—in forty minutes there—back."

Rance turned to Ashby and asked him what he thought about it.

"I don't know what to think," was the Wells Fargo Agent's reply. "But it certainly is curious. This is the second warning—intimation that we have had that he is somewhere in this vicinity."

"And this Nina Micheltoreña—you say she is coming here to-night?"

Ashby nodded assent.

"All the same, Rance," he maintained, "I wouldn't go. Better drop in to The Palmetto later."

"What? Risk losin' 'im?" exclaimed Sonora, who had been listening intently to their conversation.

"We'll take the chance, boys, in spite of Ashby's advice," Rance said decisively. It was with not a little surprise that he heard the shouts with which his words were approved by all save the Wells Fargo Agent.

Now the miners made a rush for their coats, hats and saddles, while from all sides came the cries of, "Come on, boys! Careful—there! Ready—Sheriff!"

Gladly, cheerfully, Nick, too, did what he could to get the men started by setting up the drinks for all hands, though he remarked as he did so:

"It's goin' to snow, boys; I don't like the sniff in the air."

But even the probability of encountering a storm—which in that altitude was something decidedly to be reckoned with—did not deter the men from proceeding to make ready for the road agent's capture. In an incredibly short space of time they had loaded up and got their horses together, and from the harmony in their ranks while carrying out orders, it was evident that not a man there doubted the success of their undertaking.

"We'll git this road agent!" sung out Trinidad, going out through the door.

"Right you are, pard!" agreed Sonora; but at the door he called back to the greaser: "Come on, you oily, garlic-eatin', red-peppery, dog-trottin', sunbaked son of a skunk!"

"Come on, you...!" came simultaneously from the Deputy, now untying the rope which bound the prisoner.

The greaser's teeth were chattering; he begged:

"One dreenk—I freeze..."

Turning to Nick the Deputy told him to give the man a drink, adding as he left the room:

"Watch him—keep your eye on him a moment for me, will you?"

Nick nodded; and then regarding the Mexican with a contemptuous look, he asked:

"What'll you have?"

The Mexican rose to his feet and began hesitatingly:

"Geeve me—" He paused; and then, starting with the thought that had come to him, he shot a glance at the dance-hall and called out loudly, rolling his r's even more pronouncedly than is the custom with his race: "Aguardiente! Aguardiente!"

"Sit down!" ordered Nick, vaguely conscious that there was something in the greaser's voice that was not there before.

The greaser obeyed, but not until he knew for a certainty that his voice had been heard by his master.

"So you did bring in my saddle, eh, Nick?" asked the road agent, coming quickly, but unconcernedly into the room and standing behind his man.

Up to this time, Nick's eyes had not left the prisoner, but with the appearance on the scene of Johnson, he felt that his responsibility ceased in a measure. He turned and gave his attention to matters pertaining to the bar. As a consequence, he did not see the look of recognition that passed between the two men, nor did he hear the whispered dialogue in Spanish that followed.

"*Maestro! Ramerrez!*" came in whispered tones from Castro.

"Speak quickly—go on," came likewise in whispered tones from the road agent.

"I let them take me according to your bidding," went on Castro.

"Careful, Jose, careful," warned his master while stooping to pick up his saddle, which he afterwards laid on the faro table. It was while he was thus engaged that Nick came over to the prisoner with a glass of liquor, which he handed to him gruffly with:

"Here!"

At that moment several voices from the dance-hail called somewhat impatiently: "Nick, Nick!"

"Oh, The Ridge boys are goin'!" he said, and seeming intuitively to know what was wanted he made for the bar. But before acceding to their wishes, he turned to Johnson, took out his gun and offered it to him with the words: "Say, watch this greaser for a moment, will you?"

"Certainly," responded Johnson, quickly, declining the other's pistol by touching his own holster significantly. "Tell the Girl you pressed me into service," he concluded with a smile.

"Sure." But on the point of going, the little barkeeper turned to him and confided: "Say, the Girl's taken an awful fancy to you."

"No?" deprecated the road agent.

"Yes," affirmed Nick. "Drop in often—great bar!"

Johnson smiled an assent as the other went out of the room leaving master and man together.

"Now, then, Jose, go on," he said, when they were alone.

"*Bueno!* Our men await the signal in the bushes close by. I will lead the Sheriff far off—then I will slip away. You quietly rob the place and fly—it is death for you to linger—Ashby is here."

"Ashby!" The road agent started in alarm.

"Ashby—" reiterated Castro and stopped on seeing that Nick had returned to see that all was well.

"All right, Nick, everything's all right," Johnson reassured him.

The outlaw's position remained unchanged until Nick had withdrawn. From where he stood he now saw for the first time the preparations that were being made for his capture: the red torchlights and white candle-lighted lanterns which were reflected through the windows; and a moment more he heard the shouts of the miners calling to one another. Of a sudden he was aroused to a consciousness, at least, of their danger by Castro's warning:

"By to-morrow's twilight you must be safe in your rancho."

The road agent shook his head determinedly.

"No, we raid on."

Castro was visibly excited.

"There are a hundred men on your track."

Johnson smiled.

"Oh, one minute's start of the devil does me, Jose."

"Ah, but I fear the woman—Nina Micheltoreña—I fear her terribly. She is close at hand—knowing all, angry with you, and jealous—and still loving you."

"Loving me? Oh, no, Jose! Nina, like you, loves the spoils, not me. No, I raid on..."

A silence fell upon the two men, which was broken by Sonora calling out:

"Bring along the greaser, Dep!"

"All right!" answered the loud voice of the Deputy.

"You hear—we start," whispered Castro to his master. "Give the signal." And notwithstanding, the miners were coming through the door for him and stood waiting, torches in hand, he contrived to finish: "Antonio awaits for it. Only the woman and her servant will stay behind here."

"Adios!" whispered the master.

"Adios!" returned his man simultaneously with the approach of the Deputy towards them.

It was then that the Girl's gay, happy voice floated in on them from the dance-hall; she cried out:

"Good-night, boys, good-night! Remember me to The Ridge!"

"You bet we will! So long! Whoop! Whooppee!" chorussed the men, while the Deputy, grabbing the Mexican by the collar, ordered him to, "Come on!"

The situation was not without its humorous side to the road agent; he could not resist following the crowd to the door where he stood and watched his would-be captors silently mount; listened to the Sheriff give the word, which was immediately followed by the sound of horses grunting as they sprang forward into the darkness in a desperate effort to escape the maddening pain of the descending quirts and cruel spurs. It was a scene to set the blood racing through the veins, viewed in any light; and not until the yells of the men had grown indistinct, and all that could be heard was the ever-decreasing sound of rushing hoofs, did the outlaw turn back into the saloon over which there hung a silence which, by contrast, he found strangely depressing.

VIII.

There was a subtle change, an obvious lack of warmth in Johnson's manner, which the Girl was quick to feel upon returning to the now practically deserted saloon.

"Don't it feel funny here—kind o' creepy?" She gave the words a peculiar emphasis, which made Johnson flash a quick, inquisitorial look at her; and then, no comment being forthcoming, she went on to explain: "I s'pose though that's 'cause I don't remember seein' the bar so empty before."

A somewhat awkward silence followed, which at length was broken by the Girl, who ordered:

"Lights out now! Put out the candle here, too, Nick!" But while the little barkeeper proceeded to carry out her instructions she turned to

Johnson with an eager, frank expression on her face, and said: "Oh, you ain't goin', are you?"

"No—not yet—no—" stammered Johnson, half-surprisedly, half-wonderingly.

The Girl's face wore a pleased look as she answered:

"Oh, I'm so glad o' that!"

Another embarrassing silence followed. At last Nick made a movement towards the window, saying:

"I'm goin' to put the shutters up."

"So early? What?" The Girl looked her surprise.

"Well, you see, the boys are out huntin' Ramerrez, and there's too much money here..." said Nick in a low tone.

The Girl laughed lightly.

"Oh, all right—cash in—but don't put the head on the keg—I ain't cashed in m'self yet."

Rolling the keg to one side of the room, Nick beckoned to the Girl to come close to him, which she did; and pointing to Johnson, who was strolling about the room, humming softly to himself, he whispered:

"Say, Girl, know anythin' about—about him?"

But very significant as was Nick's pantomime, which included the keg and Johnson, it succeeded only in bringing forth a laugh from the Girl, and the words:

"Oh, sure!"

Nevertheless, the faithful guardian of the Girl's interests sent a startled glance of inquiry about the room, and again asked:

"All right, eh?"

The Girl ignored the implication contained in the other's glance, and answered "Yep," in such a tone of finality that Nick, reassured at last, began to put things ship-shape for the night. This took but a moment or two, however, and then he quietly disappeared.

"Well, Mr. Johnson, it seems to be us a-keepin' house here to-night, don't it?" said the Girl, alone now with the road agent.

Her observation might easily have been interpreted as purposely introductory to an intimate scene, notwithstanding that it was made in a thoroughly matter-of-fact tone and without the slightest trace of

coquetry. But Johnson did not make the mistake of misconstruing her words, puzzled though he was to find a clue to them. His curiosity about her was intense, and it showed plainly in the voice that said presently:

"Isn't it strange how things come about? Strange that I should have looked everywhere for you and in the end find you here—at The Polka."

Johnson's emphasis on his last words sent a bright red rushing over her, colouring her neck, her ears and her broad, white forehead.

"Anythin' wrong with The Polka?"

Johnson was conscious of an indiscreet remark; nevertheless he ventured:

"Well, it's hardly the place for a young woman like you."

The Girl made no reply to this but busied herself with the closing-up of the saloon. Johnson interpreted her silence as a difference of opinion. Nevertheless, he repeated with emphasis:

"It is decidedly no place for you."

"How so?"

"Well, it's rather unprotected, and—"

"Oh, pshaw!" interrupted the Girl somewhat irritably. "I tol' Ashby only to-night that I bet if a rud agent come in here I could offer 'im a drink an' he'd treat me like a perfect lady." She stopped and turned upon him impulsively with: "Say, that reminds me, won't you take somethin'?"

Before answering, Johnson shot her a quick look of inquiry to see whether there was not a hidden meaning in her words. Of course there was not, the remark being impelled by a sudden consciousness that he might consider her inhospitable. Nevertheless, her going behind the bar and picking up a bottle came somewhat as a relief to him.

"No, thank you," at last he said; and then as he leaned heavily on the bar: "But I would very much like to ask you a question."

Instantly, to his great surprise, the Girl was eyeing him with mingled reproach and coquetry. So he was going to do it! Was it possible that he thought so lightly of her, she wondered. With all her

heart she wished that he would not make the same mistake that others had.

"I know what it is—every stranger asks it—but I didn't think you would. You want to know if I am decent? Well, I am, you bet!" she returned, a defiant note creeping into her voice as she uttered the concluding words.

"Oh, Girl, I'm not blind!" His eyes quailed before the look that flamed in hers. "And that was not the question."

Instinctively something told the Girl that the man spoke the truth, but notwithstanding which, she permitted her eyes to express disbelief and "Dear me suz!" fell from her lips with an odd little laugh. On the other hand, Johnson declined to treat the subject other than seriously. He had no desire, of course, to enlarge upon the unconventionality of her attitude, but he felt that his feelings towards her, even if they were only friendly, justified him in giving her a warning. Moreover, he refused to admit to himself that this was a mere chance meeting. He had a consciousness, vague, but nevertheless real that, at last, after all his searching, Fate had brought him face to face with the one woman in all the world for him. Unknown to himself, therefore, there was a sort of jealous proprietorship in his manner towards her as he now said:

"What I meant was this: I am sorry to find you here almost at the mercy of the passer-by, where a man may come, may drink, may rob you if he will—" and here a flush of shame spread over his features in spite of himself—"and where, I daresay, more than one has laid claim to a kiss."

The Girl turned upon him in good-natured contempt.

"There's a good many people claimin' things they never git. I've got my first kiss to give."

Once more a brief silence fell upon them in which the Girl busied herself with her cash box. She was not unaware that his eyes were upon her, but she was by no means sure that he believed her words. Nor could she tell herself, unfortunately for her peace of mind, that it made no difference to her.

"Have you been here long?" suddenly he asked.

"Yep."

"Lived in The Polka?"

"Nope."

"Where do you live?"

"Cabin up the mountain a little ways."

"Cabin up the mountain a little ways," echoed Johnson, reflectively. The next instant the little figure before him had faded from his sight and instead there appeared a vision of the little hut on the top of Cloudy Mountain. Only a few hours back he had stood on the precipice which looked towards it, and had felt a vague, indefinable something, had heard a voice speak to him out of the vastness which he now believed to have been her spirit calling to him.

"You're worth something better than this," after a while he murmured with the tenderness of real love in his voice.

"What's better'n this?" questioned the Girl with a toss of her pretty blonde head. "I ain't a-boastin' but if keepin' this saloon don't give me sort of a position 'round here I dunno what does."

But the next moment there had flashed through her mind a new thought concerning him. She came out from behind the bar and confronted him with the question:

"Look 'ere, you ain't one o' them exhorters from the Missionaries' Camp, are you?"

The road agent smiled.

"My profession has its faults," he acknowledged, "but I am not an exhorter."

But still the Girl was nonplussed, and eyed him steadily for a moment or two.

"You know I can't figger out jest exactly what you are?" she admitted smilingly.

"Well, try..." he suggested, slightly colouring under her persistent gaze.

"Well, you ain't one o' us."

"No?"

"Oh, I can tell—I can spot my man every time. I tell you, keepin' saloon's a great educator." And so saying she plumped herself down in a chair and went on very seriously now: "I dunno but what it's a

good way to bring up girls—they git to know things. Now," and here she looked at him long and earnestly, "I'd trust you."

Johnson was conscious of a guilty feeling, though he said as he took a seat beside her:

"You would trust me?"

The Girl nodded an assent and observed in a tone that was intended to be thoroughly conclusive:

"Notice I danced with you to-night?"

"Yes," was his brief reply, though the next moment he wondered that he had not found something more to say.

"I seen from the first that you were the real article."

"I beg your pardon," he said absently, still lost in thought.

"Why, that was a compliment I handed out to you," returned the Girl with a pained look on her face.

"Oh!" he ejaculated with a faint little smile.

Now the Girl, who had drawn up her chair close to his, leaned over and said in a low, confidential voice:

"Your kind don't prevail much here. I can tell—I got what you call a quick eye."

As might be expected Johnson flushed guiltily at this remark. No different, for that matter, would have acted many a man whose conscience was far clearer.

"Oh, I'm afraid that men like me prevail—prevail, as you say,—almost everywhere," he said, laying such stress on the words that it would seem almost impossible for anyone not to see that they were shot through with self-depreciation.

The Girl gave him a playful dig with her elbow.

"Go on! What are you givin' me! O' course they don't...!" She laughed outright; but the next instant checking herself, went on with absolute ingenuousness: "Before I went on that trip to Monterey I tho't Rance here was the genuine thing in a gent, but the minute I kind o' glanced over you on the road I—I seen he wasn't." She stopped, a realisation having suddenly been borne in upon her that perhaps she was laying her heart too bare to him. To cover up her embarrassment, therefore, she took refuge, as before, in hospitality, and rushing over to the bar she called to Nick to come and serve Mr.

Johnson with a drink, only to dismiss him the moment he put his head through the door with: "Never mind, I'll help Mr. Johnson m'self." Turning to her visitor again, she said: "Have your whisky with water, won't you?"

"But I don't—" began Johnson in protest.

"Say," interrupted the Girl, falling back into her favourite position of resting both elbows on the bar, her face in her hands, "I've got you figgered out. You're awful good or awful bad." A remark which seemed to amuse the man, for he laughed heartily.

"Now, what do you mean by that?" presently he asked.

"Well, I mean so good that you're a teetotaller, or so bad that you're tired o' life an' whisky."

Johnson shook his head.

"On the contrary, although I'm not good, I've lived and I've liked life pretty well. It's been bully!"

Surprised and delighted with his enthusiasm, the Girl raised her eyes to his, which look he mistook—not unnaturally after all that had been said—for one of encouragement. A moment more and the restraint that he had exercised over himself had vanished completely.

"So have you liked it, Girl," he went on, trying vainly to get possession of her hand, "only you haven't lived, you haven't lived—not with your nature. You see I've got a quick eye, too."

To Johnson's amazement she flushed and averted her face. Following the direction of her eyes he saw Nick standing in the door with a broad grin on his face.

"You git, Nick! What do you mean by...?" cried out the Girl in a tone that left no doubt in the minds of her hearers that she was annoyed, if not angry, at the intrusion.

Nick disappeared into the dance-hall as though shot out of a gun; whereupon, the Girl turned to Johnson with:

"I haven't lived? That's good!"

Johnson's next words were insinuating, but his voice was cold in comparison with the fervent tones of a moment previous.

"Oh, you know!" was what he said, seating himself at the poker table.

"No, I don't," contradicted the Girl, taking a seat opposite him.

"Yes, you do," he insisted.

"Well, say it's an even chance I do an' an even chance I don't," she parried.

Once more the passion in the man was stirring.

"I mean," he explained in a voice that barely reached her, "life for all it's worth, to the uttermost, to the last drop in the cup, so that it atones for what's gone before, or may come after."

The Girl's face wore a puzzled look as she answered:

"No, I don't believe I know what you mean by them words. Is it a—" She cut her sentence short, and springing up, cried out: "Oh, Lord—Oh, excuse me, I sat on my gun!"

Johnson looked at her, genuine amusement depicted on his face.

"Look here," said the Girl, suddenly perching herself upon the table, "I'm goin' to make you an offer."

"An offer?" Johnson fairly snatched the words out of her mouth. "You're going to make me an offer?"

"It's this," declared the Girl with a pleased look on her face. "If ever you need to be staked—"

Johnson eyed her uncomprehendingly.

"Which o' course you don't," she hastened to add. "Name your price. It's yours jest for the style I git from you an' the deportment."

"Deportment? Me?" A half-grin formed over Johnson's face as he asked the question; then he said: "Well, I never heard before that my society was so desirable. Apart from the financial aspect of this matter, I—"

"Say," broke in the Girl, gazing at him in helpless admiration, "ain't that great? Ain't that great? Oh, you got to let me stand treat!"

"No, really I would prefer not to take anything," responded Johnson, putting a restraining hand on her as she was about to leap from the table.

At that moment Nick's hurried footsteps reached their ears. Turning, the Girl, with a swift gesture, waved him back. There was a brief silence, then Johnson spoke:

"Say, Girl, you're like finding some new kind of flower."

A slight laugh of confusion was his answer. The next moment, however, she went on, speaking very slowly and seriously: "Well, we're kind o' rough up here, but we're reachin' out."

Johnson noted immediately the change in her voice. There was no mistaking the genuineness of her emotion, nor the wistful look in her eyes. It was plain that she yearned for someone who would teach her the ways of the outside world; and when the man looked at the Girl with the lamp-light softening her features, he felt her sincerity and was pleased by her confidence.

"Now, I take it," continued the Girl with a vague, dreamy look on her face, "that's what we're all put on this earth for—everyone of us—is to rise ourselves up in the world—to reach out."

"That's true, that's true," returned Johnson with gentle and perfect sympathy. "I venture to say that there isn't a man who hasn't thought seriously about that. I have. If only one knew how to reach out for something one hardly dares even hope for. Why, it's like trying to catch the star shining just ahead."

The Girl could not restrain her enthusiasm.

"That's the cheese! You've struck it!"

At this juncture Nick appeared and refused to be ordered away. At length, the Girl inquired somewhat impatiently:

"Well, what is it, Nick?"

"I've been tryin' to say," announced the barkeeper, whose face wore an expression of uneasiness as he pointed to the window, "that I have seen an ugly-lookin' greaser hanging around outside."

"A greaser!" exclaimed the Girl, uneasily. "Let me look." And with that she made a movement towards the window, but was held back by Johnson's detaining hand. All too well did he know that the Mexican was one of his men waiting impatiently for the signal. So, with an air of concern, for he did not intend that the Girl should run any risk, however remote, he said authoritatively:

"Don't go!"

"Why not?" demanded the Girl.

Johnson sat strangely silent.

"I'll bolt the windows!" cried Nick. Hardly had he disappeared into the dance-hall when a low whistle came to their ears.

"The signal—they're waiting," said Johnson under his breath, and shot a quick look of inquiry at the Girl to see whether she had heard the sound. A look told him that she had, and was uneasy over it.

"Don't that sound horrid?" said the Girl, reaching the bar in a state of perturbation. "Say, I'm awful glad you're here. Nick's so nervous. He knows what a lot o' money I got. Why, there's a little fortune in that keg."

Johnson started; then rising slowly he went over to the keg and examined it with interest.

"In there?" he asked, with difficulty concealing his excitement.

"Yes; the boys sleep around it nights," she went on to confide.

Johnson looked at her curiously.

"But when they're gone—isn't that rather a careless place to leave it?"

Quietly the Girl came from behind the bar and went over and stood beside the keg; when she spoke her eyes flashed dangerously.

"They'd have to kill me before they got it," she said, with cool deliberation.

"Oh, I see—it's your money."

"No, it's the boys'."

A look of relief crossed Johnson's features.

"Oh, that's different," he contended; and then brightening up somewhat, he went on: "Now, I wouldn't risk my life for that."

"Oh, yes, you would, yes, you would," declared the Girl with feeling. A moment later she was down on her knees putting bag after bag of the precious gold-dust and coins into the keg. When they were all in she closed the lid, and putting her foot down hard to make it secure, she repeated: "Oh, yes, you would, if you seen how hard they got it. When I think of it, I nearly cry."

Johnson had listened absorbedly, and was strangely affected by her words. In her rapidly-filling eyes, in the wave of colour that surged in her cheeks, in the voice that shook despite her efforts to control it, he read how intense was her interest in the welfare of the miners. How the men must adore her!

Unconsciously the Girl arose, and said:

"There's somethin' awful pretty in the way the boys hold out before they strike it, somethin' awful pretty in the face o' rocks, an' clay an' alkali. Oh, Lord, what a life it is anyway! They eat dirt, they sleep in dirt, they breathe dirt 'til their backs are bent, their hands twisted an' warped. They're all wind-swept an' blear-eyed I tell you, an' some o' them jest lie down in their sweat beside the sluices, an' they don't never rise up again. I've seen 'em there!" She paused reminiscently; then, pointing to the keg, she went on haltingly: "I got some money there of Ol' Brownie's. He was lyin' out in the sun on a pile o' clay two weeks ago, an' I guess the only clean thing about him was his soul, an' he was quittin', quittin', quittin', right there on the clay, an' quittin' hard. Oh, so hard!" Once more she stopped and covered her face with her hands as if to shut out the horror of it all. Presently she had herself under control and resumed: "Yes, he died—died jest like a dog. You wanted to shoot 'im to help 'im along quicker. Before he went he sez to me: 'Girl, give it to my ol' woman.' That was all he said, an' he went. She'll git it, all right."

With every word that the Girl uttered, the iron had entered deeper into Johnson's soul. Up to the present time he had tried to regard his profession, if he looked at it at all, from the point of view which he inherited from his father. It was not, in all truthfulness, what he would have chosen; it was something that, at times, he lamented; but, nevertheless, he had practised it and had despoiled the miners with but few moments of remorse. But now, he was beginning to look upon things differently. In a brief space of time a woman had impelled him to see his actions in their true light; new ambitions and desires awakened, and he looked downward as if it were impossible to meet her honest eye.

"An' that's what aches you," the Girl was now saying. "There ain't one o' them men workin' for themselves alone—the Lord never put it into no man's heart to make a beast or a pack-horse o' himself, except for some woman or some child." She halted a moment, and throwing up her hands impulsively, she cried: "Ain't it wonderful—ain't it wonderful that instinct? Ain't it wonderful what a man'll do when it comes to a woman—ain't it wonderful?" Once more she waited as if expecting him to corroborate her words; but he remained strangely silent. A moment later when he raised his troubled eyes, he saw that hers were dry and twinkling.

"Well, the boys use me as a—a sort of lady bank," presently she said; and then added with another quick change of expression, and in a voice that showed great determination: "You bet I'll drop down dead before anyone'll get a dollar o' theirs outer The Polka!"

Impulsively the road agent's hand went out to her, and with it went a mental resolution that so far as he was concerned no hard-working miner of Cloudy Mountain need fear for his gold!

"That's right," was what he said. "I'm with you—I'd like to see anyone get that." He dropped her hand and laid his on the keg; then with a voice charged with much feeling, he added: "Girl, I wish to Heaven I could talk more with you, but I can't. By daybreak I must be a long ways off. I'm sorry—I should have liked to have called at your cabin."

The Girl shot him a furtive glance.

"Must you be a-movin' so soon?" she asked.

"Yes; I'm only waiting till the posse gets back and you're safe." And even as he spoke his trained ear caught the sound of horses hoofs. "Why, they're coming now!" he exclaimed with suppressed excitement, and his eyes immediately fastened themselves on his saddle.

The Girl looked her disappointment when she said:

"I'm awfully sorry you've got to go. I was goin' to say—" She stopped, and began to roll the keg back to its place. Now she took the lantern from the bar and placed it on the keg; then turning to him once more she went on in a voice that was distinctly persuasive: "If you didn't have to go so soon, I would like to have you come up to the cabin to-night an' we would talk o' reachin' out up there. You see, the boys will be back here—we close The Polka at one—any time after..."

Hesitatingly, helplessly, Johnson stared at the Girl before him. His acceptance, he realised only too well, meant a pleasant hour or two for him, of which there were only too few in the mad career that he was following, and he wanted to take advantage of it; on the other hand, his better judgment told him that already he should be on his way.

"Why, I—I should ride on now." He began and then stopped, the next moment, however, he threw down his hat on the table in resignation and announced: "I'll come."

"Oh, good!" cried the Girl, making no attempt to conceal her delight. "You can use this," she went on, handing him the lantern. "It's the straight trail up; you can't miss it. But I say, don't expect too much o' me—I've only had thirty-two dollars' worth o' education." Despite her struggle to control herself, her voice broke and her eyes filled with tears. "P'r'aps if I'd had more," she kept on, regretfully, "why, you can't tell what I might have been. Say, that's a terrible tho't, ain't it? What we might a been—an' I know it when I look at you."

Johnson was deeply touched at the Girl's distress, and his voice broke, too, as he said:

"Yes, what we might have been is a terrible thought, and I know it, Girl, when I look at you—when I look at you."

"You bet!" ejaculated the Girl. And then to Johnson's consternation she broke down completely, burying her face in her hands and sobbing out:

"Oh, 'tain't no use, I'm rotten, I'm ignorant, I don't know nothin' an' I never knowed it 'till to-night! The boys always tol' me I knowed so much, but they're such damn liars!"

In an instant Johnson was beside her, patting her hand caressingly; she felt the sympathy in his touch and was quick to respond to it.

"Don't you care, Girl, you're all right," he told her, choking back with difficulty the tears in his own voice. "Your heart's all right, that's the main thing. And as for your looks? Well, to me you've got the face of an angel—the face—" He broke off abruptly and ended with: "Oh, but I must be going now!"

A moment more and he stood framed in the doorway, his saddle in one hand and the Girl's lantern in the other, torn by two emotions which grappled with each other in his bosom. "Johnson, what the devil's the matter with you?" he muttered half-aloud; then suddenly pulling himself together he stumbled rather than walked out of The Polka into the night.

Motionless and trying to check her sobs, the Girl remained where he had left her; but a few minutes later, when Nick entered, all trace of her tears had disappeared.

"Nick," said she, all smiles now, "run over to The Palmetto restaurant an' tell 'em to send me up two charlotte rusks an' a lemming turnover—a good, big, fat one—jest as quick as they can—right up to the cabin for supper."

"He says I have the face of an angel," is what the Girl repeated over and over again to herself when perched up again on the poker table after the wondering barkeeper had departed on her errand, and for a brief space of time her countenance reflected the joy that Johnson's parting words had imprinted on her heart. But in the Girl's character there was an element too prosaic, and too practical, to permit her thoughts to dwell long in a region lifted far above the earth. It was inevitable, therefore, that the notion should presently strike her as supremely comic and, quickly leaping to the floor, she let out the one word which, however adequately it may have expressed her conflicting emotions, is never by any chance to be found in the vocabulary of angels in good standing.

IX.

Notwithstanding that The Palmetto was the most pretentious building in Cloudy, and was the only rooming and eating house that outwardly asserted its right to be called an hotel, its saloon contrasted unfavourably with its rival, The Polka. There was not the individuality of the Girl there to charm away the impress of coarseness settled upon it by the loafers, the habitual drunkards and the riffraff of the camp, who were not tolerated elsewhere. In short, it did not have that certain indefinable something which gave to The Polka Saloon an almost homelike appearance, but was a drab, squalid, soulless place with nothing to recommend it but its size.

In a small parlour pungent at all times with the odour of liquor,—but used only on rare occasions, most of The Palmetto's patrons preferring the even more stifling atmosphere of the bar-room,—the Wells Fargo Agent had been watching and waiting ever since he had left The Polka Saloon. On a table in front of him was a bottle, for it was a part of Ashby's scheme of things to solace thus all such weary hours.

Although a shrewd judge of women of the Nina Micheltoreña type and by no means unmindful of their mercurial temperament, Ashby,

nevertheless, had felt that she would keep her appointment with him. In the Mexican Camp he had read the wild jealousy in her eyes, and had assumed, not unnaturally, that there had been scarcely time for anything to occur which would cause a revulsion of feeling on her part. But as the moments went by, and still she did not put in an appearance, an expression of keen disappointment showed itself on his face and, with mechanical regularity, he carried out the liquid programme, shutting his eyes after each drink for moments at a time yet, apparently, in perfect control of his mind when he opened them again; and it was in one of these moments that he heard a step outside which he correctly surmised to be that of the Sheriff.

Without a word Rance walked into the room and over to the table and helped himself to a drink from the bottle there, which action the Wells Fargo Agent rightly interpreted as meaning that the posse had failed to catch their quarry. At first a glint of satisfaction shone in Ashby's eyes: not that he disliked Rance, but rather that he resented his egotistical manner and evident desire to overawe all who came in contact with him; and it required, therefore, no little effort on his part to banish this look from his face and make up his mind not to mention the subject in any manner.

For some time, therefore, the two officers sat opposite to each other inhaling the stale odour of tobacco and spirits peculiar to this room, with little or no ventilation. It was enough to sicken anyone, but both men, accustomed to such places in the pursuit of their calling, apparently thought nothing of it, the Sheriff seemingly absorbed in contemplating the long ash at the end of his cigar, but, in reality, turning over in his mind whether he should leave the room or not. At length, he inaugurated a little contest of opinion.

"This woman isn't coming, that's certain," he declared, impatiently.

"I rather think she will; she promised not to fail me," was the other's quiet answer; and he added: "In ten minutes you'll see her."

It was a rash remark and expressive of a confidence that he by no means felt. As a matter of fact, it was induced solely by the cynical smile which he perceived on the Sheriff's face.

"You, evidently, take no account of the fact that the lady may have changed her mind," observed Rance, lighting a fresh cigar. "The Nina Micheltoreñas are fully as privileged as others of their sex."

As he drained his glass Ashby gave the speaker a sharp glance; another side of Rance's character had cropped out. Moreover, Ashby's quick intuition told him that the other's failure to catch the outlaw was not troubling him nearly as much as was the blow which his conceit had probably received at the hands of the Girl. It was, therefore, in an indulgent tone that he said:

"No, Rance, not this one nor this time. You mark my words, the woman is through with Ramerrez. At least, she is so jealous that she thinks she is. She'll turn up here, never fear; she means business."

The shoulders of Mr. Jack Rance strongly suggested a shrug, but the man himself said nothing. They were anything but sympathetic companions, these two officers, and in the silence that ensued Rance formulated mentally more than one disparaging remark about the big man sitting opposite to him. It is possible, of course, that the Sheriff's rebuff by the Girl, together with the wild goose chase which he had recently taken against his better judgment, had something to do with this bitterness; but it was none the less true that he found himself wondering how Ashby had succeeded in acquiring his great reputation. Among the things that he held against him was his everlasting propensity to boast of his achievements, to say nothing of the pedestal upon which the boys insisted upon placing him. Was this Wells Fargo's most famous agent? Was this the man whose warnings were given such credence that they stirred even the largest of the gold camps into a sense of insecurity? And at this Rance indulged again in a fit of mental merriment at the other's expense.

But, although he would have denied it in toto, the truth of the matter was that the Sheriff was jealous of Ashby. Witty, generous, and a high liver, the latter was generally regarded as a man who fascinated women; moreover, he was known to be a favourite—and here the shoe pinched—with the Girl. True, the demands of his profession were such as to prevent his staying long in any camp. Nevertheless, it seemed to Rance that he contrived frequently to turn up at The Polka when the boys were at the diggings.

After Ashby's observation the conversation by mutual, if unspoken, consent, was switched into other channels. But it may be

truthfully said that Rance did not wholly recover his mental equilibrium until a door was heard to open noiselessly and some whispered words in Spanish fell upon their ears.

Now the Sheriff, as well as Ashby, had the detective instinct fully developed; moreover, both men knew a few words of that language and had an extreme curiosity to hear the conversation going on between a man and a woman, who were standing just outside in a sort of hallway. As a result, therefore, both officers sprang to the door with the hope—if indeed it was Nina Micheltoreña as they surmised—that they might catch a word or two which would give them a clue to what was likely to take place at the coming interview. It came sooner than they expected.

"... Ramerrez—Five thousand dollars!" reached their ears in a soft, Spanish voice.

Ashby needed nothing more than this. In an instant, much to the Sheriff's astonishment, and moving marvellously quick for a man of his heavy build, he was out of the room, leaving Rance to face a woman with a black mantilla thrown over her head who, presently, entered by another door.

Nina Micheltoreña, for it was she, did not favour him with as much as an icy look. Nor did the Sheriff give any sign of knowing her; a wise proceeding as it turned out, for a quick turn of the head and a subtle movement of the woman's shoulders told him that she was in anything but a quiet state of mind. One glance towards the door behind him, however, and the reason of her anger was all too plain: A Mexican was vainly struggling in the clutches of Ashby.

"Why are you dragging him in?" Far from quailing before him as did her confederate, she confronted Ashby with eyes that flashed fire. "He came with me—"

Ashby cut her short.

"We don't allow greasers in this camp and—" he began in a throaty voice.

"But he is waiting to take me back!" she objected, and then added: "I wish him to wait for me outside, and unless you allow him to I'll go at once." And with these words she made a movement towards the door.

Ashby laid one restraining hand upon her, while with the other he held on to the Mexican. Of a sudden there had dawned upon him the conviction that for once in his life he had made a grievous mistake. He had thought, by the detention of her confederate, to have two strings to his bow, but one glance at the sneeringly censorious expression on the Sheriff's face convinced him that no information would be forthcoming from the woman while in her present rebellious mood.

"All right, my lady," he said, for the time being yielding to her will, "have your way." And turning now to the Mexican, he added none too gently:

"Here you, get out!"

Whereupon the Mexican slunk out of the room.

"There's no use of your getting into a rage," went on Ashby, turning to the woman in a slightly conciliatory manner. "I calculated that the greaser would be in on the job, too."

All through this scene Rance had been sitting back in his chair chewing his cigar in contemptuous silence, while his face wore a look of languid insolence, a fact which, apparently, did not disturb the woman in the least, for she ignored him completely.

"It was well for you, Señor Ashby, that you let him go. I tell you frankly that in another moment I should have gone." And now throwing back her mantilla she took out a cigarette from a dainty, little case and lit it and coolly blew a cloud of smoke in Rance's face, saying: "It depends on how you treat me—you, Mr. Jack Rance, as well as Señor Ashby—whether we come to terms or not. Perhaps I had better go away anyway," she concluded with a shrug of admirably simulated indifference.

This time Ashby sat perfectly still. It was not difficult to perceive that her anger was decreasing with every word that she uttered; nor did he fail to note how fluently she spoke English, a slight Spanish accent giving added charm to her wonderfully soft and musical voice. How gloriously beautiful, he told himself, she looked as she stood there, voluptuous, compelling, alluring, the expression that had been almost diabolical, gradually fading from her face. Was it possible, he asked himself, that all this loveliness was soiled forever? He felt that there was something pitiful in the fact that the woman

standing before him represented negotiable property which could be purchased by any passer-by who had a few more nuggets in his possession than his neighbour; and, perhaps, because of his knowledge of the piteous history of this former belle of Monterey he put a little more consideration into the voice that said:

"All right, Nina, we'll get down to business. What have you to say to us?"

By this time Nina's passionate anger had burned itself out. In anticipation, perhaps, of what she was about to do, she looked straight ahead of her into space. It was not because she was assailed by some transient emotion to forswear her treacherous desire for vengeance; she had no illusion of that kind. Too vividly she recalled the road agent's indifferent manner at their last interview for any feeling to dwell in her heart other than hatred. It was that she was summoning to appear a vision scarcely less attractive, however pregnant with tragedy, than that of seeing herself avenged: a gay, extravagant career in Mexico or Spain which the reward would procure for her. That was what she was seeing, and with a pious wish for its confirmation she began to make herself a fresh cigarette, rolling it dexterously with her white, delicate fingers, and not until her task was accomplished and her full, red lips were sending forth tiny clouds of smoke did she announce:

"Ramerrez was in Cloudy Mountain to-night."

But however much of a surprise this assertion was to both men, neither gave vent to an exclamation. Instead Rance regarded his elegantly booted feet; Ashby looked hard at the woman as if he would read the truth in her eyes; while as for Nina, she continued to puff away at her little cigarette after the manner of one that has appealed not in vain to the magic power which can paint out the past and fill the blank with the most beautiful of dreams.

The Wells Fargo man was the first to make any comment; he asked:

"You know this?" And then as she surveyed them through a scented cloud and bowed her head, he added: "How do you know it?"

"That I shall not tell you," replied the woman, firmly.

Ashby made an impatient movement towards her with the question:

"Where was he?"

"Oh, come, Ashby!" put in Rance, speaking for the first time. "She's putting up a game on us."

In a flash Nina wheeled around and with eyes that blazed advanced to the table where the Sheriff was sitting. Indeed, there was something so tigerish about the woman that the Sheriff, in alarm, quickly pushed back his chair.

"I am not lying, Jack Rance." There was an evil glitter in her eye as she watched a sarcastic smile playing around his lips. "Oh, yes, I know you—you are the Sheriff," and so saying a peal of contemptuous merriment burst from her, "and Ramerrez was in the camp not less than two hours ago."

Ashby could hardly restrain his excitement.

"And you saw him?" came from him.

"Yes," was her answer.

Both men sprang to their feet; it was impossible to doubt any longer that she spoke the truth.

"What's his game?" demanded Rance.

The woman answered his question with a question.

"How about the reward, Señor Ashby?"

"You needn't worry about that—I'll see that you get what's coming to you," replied the Wells Fargo Agent already getting into his coat.

"But how are we to know?" inquired Rance, likewise getting ready to leave. "Is he an American or a Mexican?"

"To-night he's an American, that is, he's dressed and looks like one. But the reward—you swear you're playing fair?"

"On my honour," Ashby assured her.

The woman's face stood clear—cruelly clear in the light of the kerosene lamp above her head. About her mouth and eyes there was a repellent expression. Her mind, still working vividly, was reviewing the past; and a bitter memory prompted the words which were said however with a smile that was still seductive:

"Try to recall, Señor Ashby, what strangers were in The Polka to-night?"

At these ominous words the men started and regarded each other questioningly. Their keen and trained intelligences were greatly

distressed at being so utterly in the dark. For an instant, it is true, the thought of the greaser that Ashby had brought in rose uppermost in their minds, but only to be dismissed quickly when they recalled the woman's words concerning the way that the road agent was dressed. A moment more, however, and a strange thought had fastened itself on one of their active minds—a thought which, although persisting in forcing itself upon the Sheriff's consideration, was in the end rejected as wholly improbable. But who was it then? In his intensity Rance let his cigar go out.

"Ah!" at last he cried. "Johnson, by the eternal!"

"Johnson?" echoed Ashby, wholly at sea and surprised at the look of corroboration in Nina's eyes.

"Yes, Johnson," went on Rance, insistently. Why had he not seen at once that it was Johnson who was the road agent! There could be no mistake! "You weren't there," he explained hurriedly, "when he came in and began flirting with the Girl and—"

"Ramerrez making love to the Girl?" broke in Ashby. "Ye Gods!"

"The Girl? So that's the woman he's after now!" Nina laughed bitterly. "Well, she's not destined to have him for long, I can tell you!" And with that she reached out for the bottle on the table and poured herself a small glass of whisky and swallowed it. When she turned her lips were tightly shut over her brilliant teeth, a thousand thoughts came rushing into her brain. There was no longer any compunction—she would strike now and deep. Through her efforts alone the man would be captured, and she gloried in the thought.

"Here—here is something that will interest you!" she said; and putting her hand in her bosom drew out a soiled, faded photograph. "There—that will settle him for good and all! Never again will he boast of trifling with Nina Micheltoreña—with me, a Micheltoreña in whose veins runs the best and proudest blood of California!"

Ashby fairly snatched the photograph out of her hand and, after one look at it, passed it over to the Sheriff.

"Good of him, isn't it?" sneered Nina; and then seemingly trying by her very vehemence to impress upon herself the impossibility of his ever being anything but an episode in her life, she added: "I hate him!"

The picture was indeed an excellent one. It represented Ramerrez in the gorgeous dress of a *caballero*—and the outlaw was a fine specimen of that spectacular class of men. But Rance studied the photograph only long enough to be sure that no mistake was possible. With a quick movement he put it away in his pocket and looked long and hard at the figure of the degraded woman standing before him and revelling in her treachery. In that time he forgot that anyone had ever entertained a kind thought about her; he forgot that she once was respected as well as admired; he was conscious only of regarding her with a far deeper disgust and repugnance than he held towards others much her inferior in birth and education. But, presently, his face grew a shade whiter, if that were possible, and he cursed himself for not having thought of the danger to which the Girl might even now be exposed. In less than a minute, therefore, both men stood ready for the work before them. But on the threshold just before going out into the fierce storm that had burst during the last few minutes, he paused and called back:

"You Mexican devil! If any harm comes to the Girl, I'll strangle you with my own hands!" And not waiting to hear the woman's mocking laughter he passed out, followed by Ashby, into the storm.

X.

In the still black night and with no guide other than the dimly-lighted lantern which she carried, the Girl had started for home—a bit of shelter in the middle of a great silence, a little fortress in the wilderness, as it were, with its barred doors and windows—on the top of Cloudy Mountain. To be sure, it was not the first time that she had followed the trail alone: Day and night, night and day, for as long, almost, as she could remember, she had been doing it; indeed, she had watched the alders, oaks and dwarf pines, that bordered the trail, grow year by year as she herself had grown, until now the whispering of the mountain's night winds spoke a language as familiar as her own; but never before had she climbed up into the clean, wide, free sweep of this unbounded horizon, the very air untainted and limitless as the sky itself, with so keen and uncloying a pleasure. But there was a new significance attached to her home-coming to-night: was she not to entertain there her first real visitor?

At the threshold of her cabin the Girl, her cheeks aglow and eyes as bright, almost, as the red cape that enveloped her lithe, girlish figure, paused, and swinging her lantern high above her head so that its light was reflected in the room, she endeavoured to imagine what would be the impression that a stranger would receive coming suddenly upon these surroundings.

And well might she have paused, for no eye ever rested upon a more conglomerate ensemble! Yet, withal, there was a certain attractiveness about this log-built, low, square room, half-papered with gaudy paper—the supply, evidently, having fallen short,—that was as unexpected as it was unusual.

Upon the floor, which had a covering of corn sacks, were many beautiful bear and wolf skins, Indian rugs and Navajo blankets; while overhead—screening some old trunks and boxes neatly piled up high in the loft, which was reached by a ladder, generally swung out of the way—hung a faded, woollen blanket; from the opposite corner there fell an old, patchwork, silk quilt. Dainty white curtains in all their crispness were at the windows, and upon the walls were many rare and weird trophies of the chase, not to mention the innumerable pictures that had been taken from "Godey's Lady Book"

and other periodicals of that time. A little book-shelf, that had been fashioned out of a box, was filled with old and well-read books; while the mantel that guarded the fireplace was ornamented with various small articles, conspicuous among which were a clock that beat loud, automatic time with a brassy resonance, a china dog and cat of most gaudy colours, a whisky bottle and two tumblers, and some winter berries in a jar.

There were two pieces of furniture in the room, however, which were placed with an eye to attract attention, and these the Girl prized most highly: one was a homemade rocking-chair that had been made out of a barrel and had been dyed, unsuccessfully, with indigo blue, and had across its back a knitted tidy with a large, upstanding, satin bow; the other was a homemade, pine wardrobe that had been rudely decorated by one of the boys of the camp and in which the Girl kept her dresses, and was piled up high towards the ceiling with souvenirs of her trip to Monterey, including the hat-boxes and wicker basket that had come well nigh to loading down the stage on that memorable journey.

But it was upon her bed and bedroom fixings that the greatest attempt at decoration had been made; partitioning off the room, as it were, and at the same time forming a canopy about the bed, were curtains of cheap, gaudy material, through the partings of which there was to be had a glimpse of a daintily-made-up bed, whose pillows were made conspicuous by the hand-made lace that trimmed their slips, as was the bureau-cover, and upon which, in charming disarray, were various articles generally included in a woman's toilet, not to mention the numberless strings of coloured beads and other bits of feminine adornment. A table standing in the centre of the room was covered with a small, white cloth, while falling in folds from beneath this was a faded, red cotton cover. The table was laid for one, the charlotte "rusks" and "lemming" turn-over—each on a separate plate—which Nick had been commissioned to procure, earlier in the evening, from the Palmetto restaurant, looming up prominently in the centre; and on another plate were some chipped beef and biscuits. A large lamp was suspended from the ceiling in the centre of the room and was quaintly, if not grotesquely, shaded; while other lamps flanked by composition metal reflectors

concentrated light upon the Girl's bureau, the book-shelf and mantel, leaving the remainder of the room in variant shadow.

All in all, what with the fire that was burning cheerily in the grate and the strong odour of steaming coffee, the room had a soft glow and home-like air that was most inviting.

In that brief moment that the Girl stood in the doorway reviewing her possessions, a multitude of expressions drifted across her countenance, a multitude of possibilities thrilled within her bosom. But however much she would have liked to analyse these strange feelings, she resisted the inclination and gave all her attention to the amusing scene that was being enacted before her eyes.

For some time Billy Jackrabbit had been standing by the table looking greedily down upon the charlotte russes there. He was on the point of putting his finger through the centre of one of them when Wowkle—the Indian woman-of-all-work of the cabin, who sat upon the floor before the fire singing a lullaby to the papoose strapped to its cradle on her back—turning suddenly her gaze in his direction, was just in time to prevent him.

"Charlotte rusk—Palmetto rest'rant—not take," were her warning words.

Jackrabbit drew himself up quickly, but he was furious at interference from a source where it was wholly unexpected.

"Hm—me honest," he growled fiercely, flashing her a malignant look.

"Huh?" was Wowkle's monosyllabic observation delivered in a guttural tone.

All of a sudden, Jackrabbit's gaze was arrested by a piece of paper which lay upon the floor and in which had been wrapped the charlotte russes; he went over to it quickly, picked it up, opened it and proceeded to collect on his finger the cream that had adhered to it.

"Huh!" he growled delightedly, holding up his finger for Wowkle's inspection. The next instant, however, he slumped down beside her upon the floor, where both the man and the woman sat in silence gazing into the fire. The man was the first to speak.

"Send me up—Polka. Say, p'haps me marry you—huh?" he said, coming to the point bluntly.

Wowkle's eyes were glued to the fire; she answered dully:

"Me don't know."

There was a silence, and then:

"Me don't know," observed Jackrabbit thoughtfully. A moment later, however, he added: "Me marry you—how much me get give fatha—huh?"

Wowkle raised her narrowing eyes to his and told him with absolute indifference:

"Huh—me don't know."

Jackrabbit's face darkened. He pondered for a long time.

"Me don't know—" suddenly he began and then stopped. They had been silent for some moments, when at last he ventured: "Me give fatha four dolla"—and here he indicated the number with his two hands, the finger with the cream locking those of the other hand—"and one blanket."

Wowkle's eyes dilated.

"Better keep blanket—baby cold," was her ambiguous answer.

Whereupon Jackrabbit emitted a low growl. Presently he handed her his pipe, and while she puffed steadily away he fondled caressingly the string of beads which she wore around her neck.

"You sing for get those?" he asked.

"Me sing," she replied dully, beginning almost instantly in soft, nasal tones:

"My days are as um grass"—

Jackrabbit's face cleared.

"Huh!" he growled in rejoicement.

Immediately Wowkle edged up close to him and together they continued in chorus:

"Or as um faded flo'r,
Um wintry winds sweep o'er um plain,
We pe'ish in um ho'r."

"But Gar," said the man when the song was ended, at the same time taking his pipe away from her, "to-morrow we go missionary—sing like hell—get whisky."

But as Wowkle made no answer, once more a silence fell upon them.

"We pe'ish in um ho'r," suddenly repeated Jackrabbit, half-singing, half-speaking the words, and rising quickly started for the door. At the table, however, he halted and inquired: "All right—go missionary to-morrow—get marry—huh?"

Wowkle hesitated, then rose, and finally started slowly towards him. Half-way over she stopped and reminded him in a most apathetic manner:

"P'haps me not stay marry to you for long."

"Huh—seven monse?" queried Jackrabbit in the same tone.

"Six monse," came laconically from the woman.

In nowise disconcerted by her answer, the Indian now asked:

"You come soon?"

Wowkle thought a moment; then suddenly edging up close to him she promised to come to him after the Girl had had her supper.

"Huh!" fairly roared the Indian, his coal-black eyes glowing as he looked at her.

It was at this juncture that the Girl, after hanging up her lantern on a peg on the outer door, broke in unexpectedly upon the strange pair of lovers.

Dumbfounded, the woman and the man stood gaping at her. Wowkle was the first to regain her composure, and bending over the table she turned up the light.

"Hello, Billy Jackrabbit!" greeted the Girl, breezily. "Fixed it?"

"Me fix," he grunted.

"That's good! Now git!" ordered the Girl in the same happy tone that had characterised her greeting.

Slowly, stealthily, Jackrabbit left the cabin, the two women, though for different reasons, watching him go until the door had closed behind him.

"Now, Wowkle," said the Girl, turning to her with a smile, "it's for two to-night."

Wowkle's eyelashes twinkled up inquisitorially.

"Huh?"

"Yep."

Wowkle's eyes narrowed to pin-points.

"Come anotha? Never before come anotha," was her significant comment.

"Never you mind." The Girl voiced the reprimand without the twitching of an eyelid; and then as she hung up her cape upon the wardrobe, she added: "Pick up the room, Wowkle!"

The big-hipped, full-bosomed woman did not move but stood in all her stolidness gazing at her mistress like one in a dream; whereupon the Girl, exasperated beyond measure at the other's placidity, rushed over to her and shook her so violently that she finally awakened to the importance of her mistress' request.

"He's comin' now, now; he's comin'!" the Girl was saying, when suddenly her eyes were attracted to a pair of stockings hanging upon the wall; quickly she released her hold on the woman and with a hop, skip and a jump they were down and hid away in her bureau drawer.

"My roses—what did you do with them, Wowkle?" she asked a trifle impatiently as she fumbled in the drawer.

"Ugh!" grunted Wowkle, and pointed to a corner of the bureau top.

"Good!" cried the Girl, delightedly, as she spied them. The next instant she was busily engaged in arranging them in her hair, pausing only to take a pistol out of her pocket, which she laid on the edge of the bureau. "No offence, Wowkle," she went on thoughtfully, a moment later, "but I want you to put your best foot forward when you're waitin' on table to-night. This here company o' mine's a man o' idees. Oh, he knows everythin'! Sort of a damme style."

Wowkle gave no sign of having heard her mistress' words, but kept right on tidying the room. Now she went over to the cupboard and took down two cups, which she placed on the fireplace base. It was while she was in the act of laying down the last one that the Girl broke in suddenly upon her thoughts with:

"Say, Wowkle, did Billy Jackrabbit really propose to you?"

"Yep—get marry," spoke up Jackrabbit's promised wife without looking up.

For some moments the Girl continued to fumble among her possessions in the bureau drawer; at last she brought forth an orange-coloured satin ribbon, which she placed in the Indian woman's hands with her prettiest smile, saying:

"Here, Wowkle, you can have that to fix up for the weddin'."

Wowkle's eyes glowed with appreciation.

"Huh!" she ejaculated, and proceeded to wind the ribbon about the beads around her neck.

Turning once more to the bureau, the Girl took out a small parcel done up in tissue paper and began to unwrap it.

"I'm goin' to put on them, if I can git 'em on," she said, displaying a pair of white satin slippers. The next instant she had plumped herself down upon the floor and was trying to encase her feet in a pair of slippers which were much too small for them. "Remember what fun I made o' you when you took up with Billy Jackrabbit?" suddenly she asked with a happy little smile. "What for? sez I. Well, p'r'aps you was right. P'r'aps it's nice to have someone you really care for—who belongs to you. P'r'aps they ain't so much in the saloon business for a woman after all, and you don't know what livin' really is until—" She stopped abruptly and threw upon the floor the slipper that refused to give to her foot. "Oh, Wowkle," she went on, taking up the other slipper, "it's nice to have someone you can talk to, someone you can turn your heart inside out to."

At last she had succeeded in getting into one slipper and, rising, tried to stand in it; but it hurt her so frightfully that she immediately sank down upon the floor and proceeded to pat and rub and coddle her foot to ease the pain. It was while she was thus engaged that a knock came upon her cabin door.

"Oh, Lord, here he is!" she cried, panic-stricken, and began to drag herself hurriedly across the room with the intention of concealing herself behind the curtain at the foot of the bed; while Wowkle, with unusual celerity, made for the fire-place, where she stood with her back to the door, gazing into the fire.

The Girl had only gotten half-way across the room, however, when a voice assailed her ears.

"Miss, Miss, kin I—" came in low, subdued tones.

"What? The Sidney Duck?" she cried, turning and seeing his head poked through the window.

"Beg pardon, Miss; I know men ain't lowed up here nohow," humbly apologised that individual; "but, but—"

Vexed and flustered, the Girl turned upon him a trifle irritably with:

"Git! Git, I tell you!"

"But I'm in grite trouble, Miss," began The Sidney Duck, tearfully. "The boys are back—they missed that road agent Ramerrez and now they're taking it out of me. If—if you'd only speak a word for me, Miss."

"No—" began the Girl, and stopped. The next instant she ordered Wowkle to shut the window.

"Oh, don't be 'ard on me, Miss," whimpered the man.

The Girl flashed him a scornful look.

"Now, look here, Sidney Duck, there's one kind o' man I can't stand, an' that's a cheat an' a thief, an' you're it," said the Girl, laying great stress upon her words. "You're no better'n that road agent Ramerrez, an'—"

"But, Miss—" interrupted the man.

"Miss nothin'!" snapped back the Girl, tugging away at the slippers; in desperation once more she ordered:

"Wowkle, close the winder! Close the winder!"

The Sidney Duck glowered at her. He had expected her intercession on his behalf and could not understand this new attitude of hers toward him.

"Public 'ouse jide!" he retorted furiously, and slammed the window.

"Ugh!" snarled Wowkle, resentfully, her eyes full of fire.

Now at any other time, The Sidney Duck would have been made to pay dearly for his words, but either the Girl did not hear him, or if she did she was too engrossed to heed them; at any rate, the remark passed unnoticed.

"I got it on!" presently exclaimed the Girl in great joy. Nevertheless, it was not without several ouches and moans that, finally, she stood upon her feet. "Say, Wowkle, how do you think he'll like 'em? How do they look? They feel awful!" she rattled on with a pained look on her face.

But whatever would have been the Indian woman's observation on the subject of tight shoes in general and those of her mistress in

particular, she was not permitted to make it, for the Girl, now hobbling over towards the bureau, went on to announce with sudden determination:

"Say, Wowkle, I'm a-goin' the whole hog! Yes, I'm a-goin' the whole hog," she repeated a moment later, as she drew forth various bits of finery from a chest of drawers, with which she proceeded to adorn herself before the mirror. Taking out first a lace shawl of bold design, she drew it over her shoulders with the grace and ease of one who makes it an everyday affair rather than an occasional undertaking; then she took from a sweet-grass basket a vividly-embroidered handkerchief and saturated it with cologne, impregnating the whole room with its strong odour; finally she brought forth a pair of long, white gloves and began to stretch them on. "Does it look like an effort, Wowkle?" she asked, trying to get her hands into them.

"Ugh!" was the Indian woman's comment at the very moment that a knock came upon the door. "Two plates," she added with a groan, and started for the cupboard.

Meanwhile the Girl continued with her primping and preening, her hands flying back and forth like an automaton from her waist-line to her stockings. Suddenly another knock, this time more vigorous, more insistent, came upon the rough boards of the cabin door, which, finally, was answered by the Girl herself.

XI.

"Hello!" sang out Johnson, genially, as he entered the Girl's cabin.

At once the Girl's audacity and spirit deserted her, and hanging her head she answered meekly, bashfully:

"Hello!"

The man's eyes swept the Girl's figure; he looked puzzled, and asked:

"Are you—you going out?"

The Girl was plainly embarrassed; she stammered in reply:

"Yes—no—I don't know—Oh, come on in!"

"Thank you," said Johnson in his best manner, and put down his lantern on the table. Turning now with a look of admiration in his

eyes, at the same time trying to embrace her, he went on: "Oh, Girl, I'm so glad you let me come..."

His glance, his tone, his familiarity sent the colour flying to the Girl's cheeks; she flared up instantly, her blue eyes snapping with resentment:

"You stop where you are, Mr. Johnson."

"Ugh!" came from Wowkle, at that moment closing the door which Johnson had left ajar.

At the sound of the woman's voice Johnson wheeled round quickly. And then, to his great surprise, he saw that the Girl was not alone as he had expected to find her.

"I beg your pardon; I did not see anyone when I came in," he said in humble apology, his eyes the while upon Wowkle who, having blown out the candle and removed the lantern from the table to the floor, was directing her footsteps towards the cupboard, into which she presently disappeared, closing the door behind her. "But seeing you standing there," went on Johnson in explanation, "and looking into your lovely eyes, well, the temptation to take you in my arms was so great that I, well, I took—"

"You must be in the habit o' takin' things, Mr. Johnson," broke in the Girl. "I seen you on the road to Monterey, goin' an' comin', an' passed a few words with you; I seen you once since, but that don't give you no excuse to begin this sort o' game." The Girl's tone was one of reproach rather than of annoyance, and for the moment the young man was left with a sense of having committed an indiscretion. Silently, sheepishly, he moved away, while she quietly went over to the fire.

"Besides, you might have prospected a bit first anyway," presently she went on, watching the tips of her slender white fingers held out transparent towards the fire.

Just at that moment a log dropped, turning up its glowing underside. Wheeling round with a smile, Johnson said:

"I see how wrong I was."

And then, seeing that the Girl made no move in his direction, he asked, still smiling:

"May I take off my coat?"

The Girl remained silent, which silence he interpreted as an assent, and went on to make himself at home.

"Thank you," he said simply. "What a bully little place you have here! It's awfully snug!" he continued delightedly, as his eyes wandered about the room. "And to think that I've found you again when I—Oh, the luck of it!"

He went over to her and held out his hands, a broad, yet kindly smile lighting up his strong features, making him appear handsomer, even, than he really was, to the Girl taking in the olive-coloured skin glowing with healthful pallor.

"Friends?" he asked.

Nevertheless the girl did not give him her hand, but quickly drew it away; she answered his question with a question:

"Are you sorry?"

"No, I'm not sorry."

To this she made no reply but quietly, disappointedly returned to the fireplace, where she stood in contemplative silence, waiting for his next words.

But he did not speak; he contented himself with gazing at the tender girlishness of her, the blue-black eyes, and flesh that was so bright and pure that he knew it to be soft and firm, making him yearn for her.

Involuntarily she turned towards him, and she saw that in his face which caused her eyes to drop and her breath to come more quickly.

"That damme style just catches a woman!" she ejaculated with a little tremour in her voice.

Then her mood underwent a sudden change in marked contrast to that of the moment before. "Look here, Mr. Johnson," she said, "down at the saloon to-night you said you always got what you wanted. O' course I've got to admire you for that. I reckon women always do admire men for gettin' what they want. But if huggin' me's included, jest count it out."

For a breathing space there was a dead silence.

"That was a lovely day, Girl, on the road to Monterey, wasn't it?" of a sudden Johnson observed dreamily.

The Girl's eyes opened upon him wonderingly.

"Was it?"

"Well, wasn't it?"

The Girl thought it was and she laughed.

"Say, take a chair and set down for a while, won't you?" was her next remark, she herself taking a chair at the table.

"Thanks," he said, coming slowly towards her while his eyes wandered about the room for a chair.

"Say, look 'ere!" she shot out, scrutinising him closely; "I ben thinkin' you didn't come to the saloon to see me to-night. What brought you?"

"It was Fate," he told her, leaning over the table and looking down upon her admiringly.

She pondered his answer for a moment, then blurted out:

"You're a bluff! It may have been Fate, but I tho't you looked kind o' funny when Rance asked you if you hadn't missed the trail an' wa'n't on the road to see Nina Micheltoreña—she that lives in the greaser settlement an' has the name o' shelterin' thieves."

At the mention of thieves, Johnson paled frightfully and the knife which he had been toying with dropped to the floor.

"Was it Fate or the back trail?" again queried the Girl.

"It was Fate," calmly reiterated the man, and looked her fairly in the eye.

The cloud disappeared from the Girl's face.

"Serve the coffee, Wowkle!" she called almost instantly. And then it was that she saw that no chair had been placed at the table for him. She sprang to her feet, exclaiming: "Oh, Lordy, you ain't got no chair yet to—"

"Careful, please, careful," quickly warned Johnson, as she rounded the corner of the table upon which his guns lay.

But fear was not one of the Girl's emotions. At the display of guns that met her gaze she merely shrugged and inquired placidly:

"Oh, how many guns do you carry?"

Not unnaturally she waited for his answer before starting in quest of a chair for him; but instead Johnson quietly went over to the chair near the door where his coat lay, hung it up on the peg with his hat, and returning now with a chair, he answered:

"Oh, several when travelling through the country."

"Well, set down," said the Girl bluntly, and hurried to his side to adjust his chair. But she did not return to her place at the table; instead, she took the barrel rocker near the fireplace and began to rock nervously to and fro. In silence Johnson sat studying her, looking her through and through, as it were.

"It must be strange living all alone way up here in the mountains," he remarked, breaking the spell of silence. "Isn't it lonely?"

"Lonely? Mountains lonely?" The Girl's laugh rang out clearly. "Besides," she went on, her eyes fairly dancing with excitement, "I got a little pinto an' I'm all over the country on 'im. Finest little horse you ever saw! If I want to I can ride right down into the summer at the foothills with miles o' Injun pinks jest a-laffin' an' tiger lilies as mad as blazes. There's a river there, too—the Injuns call it a water-road—an' I can git on that an' drift an' drift an' smell the wild syringa on the banks. An if I git tired o' that I can turn my horse up-grade an' gallop right into the winter an' the lonely pines an' firs a-whisperin' an' a-sighin'. Lonely? Mountains lonely, did you say? Oh, my mountains, my beautiful peaks, my Sierras! God's in the air here, sure! You can see Him layin' peaceful hands on the mountain tops. He seems so near you want to let your soul go right on up."

Johnson was touched at the depth of meaning in her words; he nodded his head in appreciation.

"I see, when you die you won't have far to go," he quietly observed.

Minutes passed before either spoke. Then all at once the Girl rose and took the chair facing his, the table between them as at first.

"Wowkle, serve the coffee!" again she called.

Immediately, Wowkle emerged from the cupboard, took the coffee-pot from the fire and filled the cups that had been kept warm on the fireplace base, and after placing a cup beside each plate she squatted down before the fire in watchful silence.

"But when it's very cold up here, cold, and it snows?" queried Johnson, his admiration for the plucky, quaint little figure before him growing by leaps and bounds.

"Oh, the boys come up an' digs me out o' my front door like—like—" She paused, her sunny laugh rippling out at the recollection of it all, and Johnson noted the two delightful dimples in

her rounded cheeks. Indeed, she had never appeared prettier to him than when displaying her two rows of perfect, dazzling teeth, which was the case every time that she laughed.

"—like a little rabbit, eh?" he supplemented, joining in the laugh.

She nodded eagerly.

"I get digged out near every day when the mine's shet down an' Academy opens," went on the Girl in the same happy strain, her big blue eyes dancing with merriment.

Johnson looked at her wonderingly; he questioned:

"Academy? Here? Why, who teaches in your Academy?"

"Me—I'm her—I'm teacher," she told him with not a little show of pride.

With difficulty Johnson suppressed a smile; nevertheless he observed soberly:

"Oh, so you're the teacher?"

"Yep—I learn m'self an' the boys at the same time," she hastened to explain, and dropped a heaping teaspoon of coarse brown sugar into his cup. "But o' course Academy's suspended when ther's a blizzard on 'cause no girl could git down the mountain then."

"Is it so very severe here when there's a blizzard on?" Johnson was saying, when there came to his ears a strange sound—the sound of the wind rising in the canyon below.

The Girl looked at him in blank astonishment—a look that might easily have been interpreted as saying, "Where do you hail from?" She answered:

"Is it...? Oh, Lordy, they come in a minute! All of a sudden you don't know where you are—it's awful!"

"Not many women—" digressed the man, glancing apprehensively towards the door, but she cut him short swiftly with the ejaculation:

"Bosh!" And picking up a plate she raised it high in the air the better to show off its contents. "Charlotte rusks an' lemming turnover!" she announced, searching his face for some sign of joy, her own face lighting up perceptibly.

"Well, this is a treat!" cried out Johnson between sips of coffee.

"Have one?"

"You bet!" he returned with unmistakable pleasure in his voice.

The Girl served him with one of each, and when he thanked her she beamed with happiness.

"Let me send you some little souvenir of to-night"—he said, a little while later, his admiring eyes settled on her hair of burnished gold which glistened when the light fell upon it—"something that you'd just love to read in your course of teaching at the Academy." He paused to search his mind for something suitable to suggest to her; at length he questioned: "Now, what have you been reading lately?"

The Girl's face broke into smiles as she answered:

"Oh, it's an awful funny book about a kepple. He was a classic an' his name was Dent."

Johnson knitted his brows and thought a moment. "He was a classic, you say, and his name was—Oh, yes, I know—Dante," he declared, with difficulty controlling the laughter that well-nigh convulsed him. "And you found Dante funny, did you?"

"Funny? I roared!" acknowledged the Girl with a frankness that was so genuine that Johnson could not help but admire her all the more. "You see, he loved a lady—" resumed the Girl, toying idly with her spoon.

"—Beatrice," supplemented Johnson, pronouncing the name with the Italian accent which, by the way, was not lost on the Girl.

"How?" she asked quickly, with eyes wide open.

Johnson ignored the question. Anxious to hear her interpretation of the story, he requested her to continue.

"He loved a lady—" began the Girl, and broke off short. And going over to the book-shelf she took down a volume and began to finger the leaves absently. Presently she came back, and fixing her eyes upon him, she went on: "It made me think of it, what you said down to the saloon to-night about livin' so you didn't care what come after. Well, he made up his min', this Dent—Dantes—that one hour o' happiness with her was worth the whole da—" She checked the word on her tongue, and concluded: "outfit that come after. He was willin' to sell out his chances for sixty minutes with 'er. Well, I jest put the book down an' hollered." And once more she broke into a hearty laugh.

"Of course you did," agreed Johnson, joining in the laugh. "All the same," he presently added, "you knew he was right."

"I didn't!" she contradicted with spirit, and slowly went back to the book-shelf with the book.

"You did."

"Didn't!"

"You did."

"Didn't! Didn't!"

"I don't—"

"You do, you do," insisted the Girl, plumping down into the chair which she had vacated at the table.

"Do you mean to say—" Johnson got no further, for the Girl, with a naïveté that made her positively bewitching to the man before her, went on as if there had been no interruption:

"That a feller could so wind h'ms'lf up as to say, 'Jest give me one hour o' your sassiety; time ain't nothin', nothin' ain't nothin' only to be a da—darn fool over you!' Ain't it funny to feel like that?" And then, before Johnson could frame an answer:

"Yet, I s'pose there are people that love into the grave an' into death an' after." The Girl's voice lowered, stopped. Then, looking straight ahead of her, her eyes glistening, she broke out with:

"Golly, it jest lifts you right up by your bootstraps to think of it, don't it?"

Johnson was not smiling now, but sat gazing intently at her through half-veiled lids.

"It does have that effect," he answered, the wonder of it all creeping into his voice.

"Yet, p'r'aps he was ahead o' the game. P'r'aps—" She did not finish the sentence, but broke out with fresh enthusiasm: "Oh, say, I jest love this conversation with you! I love to hear you talk! You give me idees!"

Johnson's heart was too full for utterance; he could only think of his own happiness. The next instant the Girl called to Wowkle to bring the candle, while she, still eager and animated, her eyes bright, her lips curving in a smile, took up a cigar and handed it to him, saying:

"One o' your real Havanas!"

"But I"—began Johnson, protestingly.

Nevertheless the Girl lit a match for him from the candle which Wowkle held up to her, and, while the latter returned the candle to the mantel, Johnson lighted his cigar from the burning match between her fingers.

"Oh, Girl, how I'd love to know you!" he suddenly cried with the fire of love in his eyes.

"But you do know me," was her answer, as she watched the smoke from his cigar curl upwards toward the ceiling.

"Not well enough," he sighed.

For a brief second only she was silent. Whether she read his thoughts it would be difficult to say; but there came a moment soon when she could not mistake them.

"What's your drift, anyway?" she asked, looking him full in the face.

"To know you as Dante knew the lady—'One hour for me, one hour worth the world,'" he told her, all the while watching and loving her beauty.

At the thought she trembled a little, though she answered with characteristic bluntness:

"He didn't git it, Mr. Johnson."

"All the same there are women we could die for," insisted Johnson, dreamily.

The Girl was in the act of carrying her cup to her mouth but put it down on the table. Leaning forward, she inquired somewhat sneeringly:

"Mr. Johnson, how many times have you died?" Johnson did not have to think twice before answering. With wide, truthful eyes he said:

"That day on the road to Monterey I said just that one woman for me. I wanted to kiss you then," he added, taking her hand in his. And, strange to say, she was not angry, not unwilling, but sweetly tender and modest as she let it lay there.

"But, Mr. Johnson, some men think so much o' kisses that they don't want a second kiss from the same girl," spoke up the Girl after a moment's reflection.

"Doesn't that depend on whether they love her or not? Now all loves are not alike," reasoned the man in all truthfulness.

"No, but they all have the same aim—to git 'er if they can," contended the Girl, gently withdrawing her hand.

Silence filled the room.

"Ah, I see you don't know what love is," at length sighed Johnson, watching the colour come and go from her face.

The Girl hesitated, then answered in a confused, uneven voice:

"Nope. Mother used to say, 'It's a tickling sensation at the heart that you can't scratch,' an' we'll let it go at that."

"Oh, Girl, you're bully!" laughed the man, rising, and making an attempt to embrace her. But all of a sudden he stopped and stood with a bewildered look upon his face: a fierce gale was sweeping the mountain. It filtered in through the crevices of the walls and doors; the lights flickered; the curtains swayed; and the cabin itself rocked uncertainly until it seemed as if it would be uprooted. It was all over in a minute. In fact, the wind had died away almost simultaneously with the Girl's loud cry of "Wowkle, hist the winder!"

It is not to be wondered at, however, that Johnson looked apprehensively about him with every fresh impulse of the gale. The Girl's description of the storms on the mountain was fresh in his mind, and there was also good and sufficient reason why he should not be caught in a blizzard on the top of Cloudy Mountain! Nevertheless, as before, the calm look which he saw on the Girl's face reassured him. Advancing once more towards her, he stretched out his arms as if to gather her in them.

"Look out, you'll muss my roses!" she cried, waving him back and dodging Wowkle who, having cleared the table, was now making her last trip to the cupboard.

"Well, hadn't you better take them off then?" suggested Johnson, still following her up.

"Give a man an inch an' he'll be at Sank Hosey before you know it!" she flung at him over her shoulder, and made straightway for the bureau.

But although Johnson desisted, he kept his eyes upon her as she took the roses from her hair, losing none of the picture that she

made with the light beating and playing upon her glimmering eyes, her rosy cheeks and her parted lips.

"Is there—is there anyone else?" he inquired falteringly, half-fearful lest there was.

"A man always says, 'who was the first one?' but the girl says, 'who'll be the next one?'" she returned, as she carefully laid the roses in her bureau drawer.

"But the time comes when there never will be a next one."

"No?"

"No."

"I'd hate to stake my pile on that," observed the Girl, drily. She blew up each glove as it came off and likewise carefully laid them away in the bureau drawer.

By this time Wowkle's soft tread had ceased, her duties for the night were over, and she stood at the table waiting to be dismissed.

"Wowkle, git to your wigwam!" suddenly ordered her mistress, watching her until she disappeared into the cupboard; but she did not see the Indian woman's lips draw back in a half-grin as she closed the door behind her.

"Oh, you're sending her away! Must I go, too?" asked Johnson, dismally.

"No—not jest yet; you can stay a—a hour or two longer," the Girl informed him with a smile; and turning once more to the bureau she busied herself there for a few minutes longer.

Johnson's joy knew no bounds; he burst out delightedly:

"Why, I'm like Dante! I want the world in that hour, because, you see, I'm afraid the door of this little paradise might be shut to me after—Let's say this is my one hour—the hour that gave me—that kiss I want."

"Go long! You go to grass!" returned the Girl with a nervous little laugh.

Johnson made one more effort and won out; that is, he succeeded, at last, in getting her in his grasp.

"Listen," said the determined lover, pleading for a kiss as he would have pleaded for his very life.

It was at this juncture that Wowkle, silently, stealthily, emerged from the cupboard and made her way over to the door. Her feet were heavily moccasined and she was blanketed in a stout blanket of gay colouring.

"Ugh—some snow!" she muttered, as a gust of wind beat against her face and drove great snow-flakes into the room, fairly taking her breath away. But her words fell on deaf ears. For, oblivious to the storm that was now raging outside, the youthful pair of lovers continued to concentrate their thoughts upon the storm that was raging within their own breasts, the Girl keeping up the struggle with herself, while the man urged her on as only he knew how.

"Why, if I let you take one you'd take two," denied the Girl, half-yielding by her very words, if she but knew it.

"No, I wouldn't—I swear I wouldn't," promised the man with great earnestness.

"Ugh—very bad!" was the Indian woman's muffled ejaculation as she peered out into the night. But she had promised her lover to come to him when supper was over, and she would not break faith with him even if it were at the peril of her life. The next moment she went out, as did the red light in the Girl's lantern hanging on a peg of the outer door.

"Oh, please, please," said the Girl, half-protestingly, half-willingly.

But the man was no longer to be denied; he kept on urging:

"One kiss, only one."

Here was an appeal which could no longer be resisted, and though half-frightened by the tone of his voice and the look in his eye, the Girl let herself be taken into his arms as she murmured:

"'Tain't no use, I lay down my hands to you."

And so it was that, unconscious of the great havoc that was being wrought by the storm, unconscious of the danger that momentarily threatened their lives, they remained locked in each other's arms. The Girl made no attempt to silence him now or withdraw her hands from his. Why should she? Had he not come to Cloudy Mountain to woo her? Was she not awaiting his coming? To her it seemed but natural that the conventions should be as nothing in the face of love. His voice, low and musical, charged with passion, thrilled through her.

"I love you," said the man, with a note of possession that frightened her while it filled her with strange, sweet joy. For months she had dreamed of him and loved him; no wonder that she looked upon him as her hero and yielded herself entirely to her fate.

She lifted her eyes and he saw the love in them. She freed her hands from his grasp, and then gave them back to him in a little gesture of surrender.

"Yes, you're mine, an' I'm yours," she said with trembling lips.

"I have lived but for this from the moment that I first saw you," he told her, softly.

"Me, too—seein' that I've prayed for it day an' night," she acknowledged, her eyes seeking his.

"Our destinies have brought us together; whatever happens now I am content," he said, pressing his lips once more to hers. A little while later he added: "My darkest hour will be lightened by the memory of you, to-night."

XII.

The clock, striking the hour of two, filled in a lull that might otherwise have seemed to require conversation. For some minutes, Johnson, raised to a higher level of exaltation, even, than was the Girl, had been secretly rejoicing in the Fate that had brought them together.

"It's wonderful that I should have found her at last and won her love," he soliloquised. "We must be Fortune's children—she and I."

The minutes ticked away and still they were silent. Then, of a sudden, with infinite tenderness in his voice, Johnson asked:

"What is your name, Girl—your real name?"

"Min—Minnie; my father's name was Smith," she told him, her eyes cast down under delicately tremulous lids.

"Oh, Minnie Sm—"

"But 'twa'n't his right name," quickly corrected the Girl, and unconsciously both rose to their feet. "His right name was Falconer."

"Minnie Falconer—well, that is a pretty name," commented Johnson; and raising her hand to his lips he pressed them against it.

"I ain't sure that's what he said it was—I ain't sure o' anythin' only jest you," she said coyly, burying her face in his neck.

"You may well be sure of me since I've loved—" Johnson's sentence was cut short, a wave of remorse sweeping over him. "Turn your head away, Girl, and don't listen to me," he went on, gently putting her away from him. "I'm not worthy of you. Don't listen but just say no, no, no, no."

The Girl, puzzled, was even more so when Johnson began to pace the floor.

"Oh, I know—I ain't good enough for you !" she cried with a little tremour in her voice. "But I'll try hard, hard... If you see anythin' better in me, why don't you bring it out, 'cause I've loved you ever since I saw you first, 'cause I knowed that you—that you were the right man."

"The right man," repeated Johnson, dismally, for his conscience was beginning to smite him hard.

"Don't laugh!"

"I'm not laughing," as indeed he was not.

"O' course every girl kind o' looks ahead," went on the Girl in explanation.

"Yes, I suppose," he observed seriously.

"An' figgers about bein'—well, Oh, you know—about bein' settled. An' when the right man comes, why, she knows 'im, you bet! Jest as we both knowed each other standin' on the road to Monterey. I said that day, he's good, he's gran' an' he can have me."

"I could have you," murmured Johnson, meditatively.

The Girl nodded eagerly.

There was a long silence in which Johnson was trying to make up his mind to tear himself away from her,—the one woman whom he loved in the world,—for it had been slowly borne in upon him that he was not a fit mate for this pure young girl. Nor was his unhappiness lessened when he recalled how she had struggled against yielding to him. At last, difficult though it was, he took his courage in both hands, and said:

"Girl, I have looked into your heart and my own and now I realise what this means for us both—for you, Girl—and knowing that, it seems hard to say good-bye as I should, must and will..."

At those clear words spoken by lips which failed so utterly to hide his misery, the Girl's face turned pale.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Johnson coloured, hesitated, and finally with a swift glance at the clock, he briefly explained:

"I mean it's hard to go and leave you here. The clock reminded me that long before this I should have been on my way. I shouldn't have come up here at all. God bless you, dear," and here their eyes came together and seemed unable to part,—"I love you as I never thought I could..."

But at Johnson's queer look she hastened to inquire:

"But it ain't for long you're goin'?"

For long! Then she had not understood that he meant to go for all time. How tell her the truth? While he pondered over the situation there came to him with great suddenness the thought that, perhaps, after all, Life never intended that she should be given to him only to be taken away almost as suddenly; and seized with a desire to hold on to her at any cost, he sprang forward as if to take her in his arms, but before he reached her, he stopped short.

"Such happiness is not for me," he muttered under his breath; and then aloud he added: "No, no, I've got to go now while I have the courage, I mean." He broke off as suddenly as he had begun, and taking her face in his hands he kissed her good-bye.

Now, accustomed as was the Girl to the strange comings and goings of the men at the camp, it did not occur to her to question him further when he told her that he should have been away before now. Moreover, she trusted and loved him. And so it was without the slightest feeling of misgiving that she watched her lover quickly take down his coat and hat from the peg on the wall and start for the door. On the other hand, it must have required not a little courage on the man's part to have torn himself away from this lovely, if unconventional, creature, just as he was beginning to love truly and appreciate her. But, then, Johnson was a man of no mean determination!

Not daring to trust himself to words, Johnson paused to look back over his shoulder at the Girl before plunging forth into the night. But on opening the door all the multitudinous wild noises of the forests reached his ears: Sounds of whispering and rocking storm-tossed pines, sounds of the wind making the rounds of the deep canyon below them, sounds that would have made the blood run cold of a man more daring, even, than himself. Like one petrified he stood blinded, almost, by the great drifts of snow that were being driven into the room, while the cabin rocked and shook and the roof cracked and snapped, the lights flickered, smoked, or sent their tongues of fire upward towards the ceiling, the curtains swayed like pendants in the air, and while baskets, boxes, and other small furnishings of the cabin were blown in every direction.

But it was the Girl's quick presence of mind that saved them from being buried, literally, under the snow. In an instant she had rushed past him and closed both the outer and inner doors of the cabin; then, going over to the window, she tried to look through the heavily frosted panes; but the falling of the sleet and snow, striking the window like fine shot, made it impossible for her to see more than a few inches away.

"Why, it's the first time I knew that it—" She cut her sentence short and ended with: "That's the way we git it up here! Look! Look!"

Whereupon, Johnson went over to the window and put his face close to hers on the frosted panes; a great sea of white snow met his gaze!

"This means—" he said, turning away from the window and meeting her glance—"surely it doesn't mean that I can't leave Cloudy to-night?"

"It means you can't get off the mountain to-night," calmly answered the Girl.

"Good Lord!" fell from the man's lips.

"You can't leave this room to-night," went on the Girl, decidedly. "Why, you couldn't find your way three feet from this door—you a stranger! You don't know the trail anyway unless you can see it."

"But I can't stay here?" incredulously.

"Why not? Why, that's all right! The boys'll come up an' dig us out to-morrow or day after. There's plenty o' wood an' you can have my

bed." And with no more ado than that, the Girl went over to the bed to remove the covers and make it ready for his occupancy.

"I wouldn't think of taking that," protested the man, stoutly, while his face clouded over.

The Girl felt a thrill at the note of regard in his voice and hastened to explain:

"I never use it cold nights; I always roll up in my rug in front of the fire." All of a sudden she broke out into a merry little laugh. "Jest think of it stormin' all this time an' we didn't know it!"

But Johnson was not in a laughing mood. Indeed, he looked very grave and serious when presently he said:

"But people coming up here and finding me might—"

The Girl looked up at him in blank amazement.

"Might what?" And then, while she waited for his answer, two shots in close succession rang out in the night with great distinctness.

There was no mistaking the nearness of the sound. Instantly scenting trouble and alert at the possibility of danger, Johnson inquired:

"What's that? What's that?"

"Wait! Wait!" came back from the Girl, unconsciously in the same tone, while she strained her ears for other sounds. She did not have long to wait, however, before other shots followed, the last ones coming from further away, so it seemed, and at greater intervals.

"They've got a road agent—it's the posse—p'r'aps they've got Ramerrez or one o' his band!" suddenly declared the Girl, at the same time rushing over to the window for some verification of her words. But, as before, the wind was beating with great force against the frosted panes, and only a vast stretch of snow met her gaze. Turning away from the window she now came towards him with: "You see, whoever it is, they're snowed in—they can't get away."

Johnson knitted his brows and muttered something under his breath which the Girl did not catch.

Again a shot was fired.

"Another thief crep' into camp," coldly observed the Girl almost simultaneously with the report.

Johnson winced.

"Poor devil!" he muttered. "But of course, as you say, he's only a thief."

In reply to which the Girl uttered words to the effect that she was glad he had been caught.

"Well, you're right," said Johnson, thoughtfully, after a short silence; then determinedly and in short jerky sentences, he went on: "I've been thinking that I must go—tear myself away. I have very important business at dawn—imperative business..."

The Girl, who now stood by the table folding up the white cloth cover, watched him out of the corner of her eye, take down his coat from the peg on the wall.

"Ever sample one o' our mountain blizzards?" she asked as he slipped on his coat. "In five minutes you wouldn't know where you was. Your important business would land you at the bottom of a canyon 'bout twenty feet from here."

Johnson cleared his throat as if to speak but said nothing; whereupon the Girl continued:

"You say you believe in Fate. Well, Fate has caught up with you—you got to stay here."

Johnson was strangely silent. He was wondering how his coming there to-night had really come about. But he could find no solution to the problem unless it was in response to that perverse instinct which prompts us all at times to do the very thing which in our hearts we know to be wrong. The Girl, meanwhile, after a final creasing of the neatly-folded cover, started for the cupboard, stopping on the way to pick up various articles which the wind had strewn about the room. Flinging them quickly into the cupboard she now went over to the window and once more attempted to peer out into the night. But as before, it was of no avail. With a shrug she straightened the curtains at the windows and started for the door. Her action seemed to quicken his decision, for, presently, with a gesture of resignation, he threw down his hat and coat on the table and said as if speaking to himself:

"Well, it is Fate—my Fate that has always made the thing I shouldn't do so easy." And then, turning to the Girl, he added:

"Come, Girl, as you say, if I can't go, I can't. But I know as I stand here that I'll never give you up."

The Girl looked puzzled.

"Why, what do you mean?"

"I mean," began Johnson, pacing the floor slowly. Now he stopped by a chair and pointed as though to the falling snow. "Suppose we say that's an omen—that the old trail is blotted out and there is a fresh road. Would you take it with me a stranger, who says: From this day I mean to be all you'd have me. Would you take it with me far away from here and forever?"

It did not take the Girl long to frame an answer. Taking Johnson's hand she said with great feeling:

"Well, show me the girl that would want to go to Heaven alone! I'll sell out the saloon—I'll go anywhere with you, you bet!"

Johnson bent low over her hand and kissed it. The Girl's straightforward answer had filled his heart to overflowing with joy.

"You know what that means, don't you?" a moment later he asked.

Sudden joy leapt to her blue eyes.

"Oh, yes," she told him with a world of understanding in her voice. There was a silence; then she went on reminiscently: "There's a little Spanish Mission church—I pass it 'most every day. I can look in an' see the light burnin' before the Virgin an' see the saints standin' round with glassy eyes an' faded satin slippers. An' I often tho't what they'd think if I was to walk right in to be made—well, some man's wife. It makes your blood like pin-points thinkin' about it. There's somethin' kind o' holy about love, ain't they?"

Johnson nodded. He had never regarded love in that light before, much less known it. For many moments he stood motionless, a new problem of right and wrong throbbing in his bosom.

At last, it being settled that Johnson was to pass the night in the Girl's cabin, she went over to the bed and, once more, began to make it ready for his occupancy. Meanwhile, Johnson, seated in the barrel rocker before the fire, watched her with a new interest. The Girl had not gone very far with her duties, however, when she suddenly came over to him, plumping herself down on the floor at his feet.

"Say, did you ever ask any other woman to marry you?" she asked as she leaned far back in his arms.

"No," was the man's truthful answer.

"Oh, how glad I am! Take me—ah, take me I don't care where as long as it is with you!" cried the Girl in an ecstasy of delight.

"So help me, God, I'm going to...!" promised Johnson, his voice strained, tense. "You're worth something better than me, Girl," he added, a moment later, "but they say love works miracles every hour, that it weakens the strong and strengthens the weak. With all my soul I love you, with all my soul I—" The man let his voice die out, leaving his sentence unfinished. Suddenly he called: "Why, Min-Minnie!"

"I wasn't really asleep," spoke up the Girl, blinking sleepily. "I'm jest so happy an' let down, that's all." The next moment, however, she was forced to acknowledge that she was awfully sleepy and would have to say good-night.

"All right," said Johnson, rising, and kissed her good-night.

"That's your bed over there," she told him, pointing in the direction of the curtains.

"But hadn't you better take the bed and let me sleep over here?"

"Not much!"

"You're sure you would be more comfortable by the fire—sure, now?"

"Yes, you bet!"

And so it was that Johnson decided to pass the night in the Girl's canopied bed while she herself, rolled up in a blanket rug before the fire, slept on the floor.

"This beats a bed any time," remarked the Girl, spreading out the rug smoothly; and then, reaching up for the old patchwork, silk quilt that hung from the loft, she added: "There's one thing—you don't have to make it up in the mornin'."

"You're splendid, Girl!" laughed Johnson. Presently, he saw her quietly closet herself in the cupboard, only to emerge a few minutes later dressed for the night. Over her white cambric gown with its coarse lace trimming showing at the throat, she wore a red woollen blanket robe held in at the waist by a heavy, twisted, red cord which, to the man who got a glimpse of her as she crossed the room, made her prettier, even, than she had seemed at any time yet.

Quietly, now, the Girl began to put her house in order. All the lights, save the quaintly-shaded lamp that was suspended over the table, were extinguished; that one, after many unsuccessful attempts, was turned down so as to give the right minimum of light which would not interfere with her lover's sleep. Then she went over to the door to make sure that it was bolted. Outside the wind howled and shrieked and moaned; but inside the cabin it had never seemed more cosey and secure and peaceful to her.

"Now you can talk to me from your bunk an' I'll talk to you from mine," she said in a sleepy, lazy voice.

Except for a prodigious yawn which came from the Girl there was an ominous quiet hanging over the place that chilled the man. Sudden sounds startled him, and he found it impossible to make any progress with his preparations for the night. He was about to make some remark, however, when to his well-attuned ears there came the sound of approaching footsteps. In an instant he was standing in the parting made by the curtains, his face eager, animated, tense.

"What's that?" he whispered.

"That's snow slidin'," the Girl informed him without the slightest trace of anxiety in her voice.

"God bless you, Girl," he murmured, and retreated back of the curtains. It was only an instant before he was back again with: "Why, there is something out there—sounded like people calling," he again whispered.

"That's only the wind," she said, adding as she drew her robe tightly about her: "Gettin' cold, ain't it?"

But, notwithstanding her assurances, Johnson did not feel secure, and it was with many misgivings that he now directed his footsteps towards the bed behind the curtains.

"Good-night!" he said uneasily.

"Good-night!" unconsciously returned the Girl in the same tone.

Taking off her slippers the Girl now put on a pair of moccasins and quietly went over to her bed, where she knelt down and made a silent prayer.

"Good-night!" presently came from a little voice in the rug.

"Good-night!" answered the man now settled in the centre of the much-befrilled bed.

There was a silence; then the little voice in the rug called out:

"Say, what's your name?"

"Dick," whispered the man behind the curtains.

"So long, Dick!" drowsily.

"So long, Girl!" dreamily.

There was a brief silence; then, of a sudden, the Girl bolted upright in bed, and asked:

"Say, Dick, are you sure you don't know that Nina Micheltoreña?"

"Sure," prevaricated the man, not without some compunction.

Whereupon the Girl fell back on her pillows and called out contentedly a final "Good-night!"

XIII.

There was no mistaking then—no need to contrast her feeling of anxiety of a few moments ago lest some other woman had preceded her in his affections, with her indifference on former occasions when her admirers had proved faithless, to make the Girl realise that she was experiencing love and was dominated by a passion for this man.

So that, with no reason whatever in her mind to question the sincerity of Johnson's love for her, it would seem as if nothing were wanting to make the Girl perfectly happy; that there could be no room in her heart for any feeling other than elation. And yet, curiously enough, the Girl could not doze off to sleep. Some mysterious force—a vague foreboding of something about to happen—impelled her to open her eyes again and again.

It was an odd and wholly new sensation, this conjuring up of distressing spectres, for no girl was given less to that sort of thing; all the same, it was with difficulty that she checked an impulse to cry out to her lover—whom she believed to be asleep—and make him dissipate, by renewed assurances, the mysterious barrier which she felt was hemming her in.

As for Johnson, the moment that his head had touched the pillows, he fell to thinking of the awkward situation in which he was placed, the many complications in which his heart had involved him and, finally, he found himself wondering whether the woman whom he loved so dearly was also lying sleepless in her rug on the floor.

And so it was not surprising that he should spring up the moment that he heard cries from outside.

"Who's that knockin', I wonder?"

Although her voice showed no signs of distress or annoyance, the question coming from her in a calm tone, the Girl was upon her feet almost before she knew it. In a trice she removed all evidences that she had been lying upon the floor, flinging the pillows and silk coverlet to the wardrobe top.

In that same moment Johnson was standing in the parting of the curtains, his hand raised warningly. In another moment he was over to the door where, after taking his pistols from his overcoat pockets, he stood in a cool, determined attitude, fingering his weapons.

"But some one's ben callin'," the Girl was saying, at the very moment when above the loud roaring of the wind another knock was heard on the cabin door. "Who can it be?" she asked as if to herself, and calmly went over to the table, where she took up the candle and lit it.

Springing to her side, Johnson whispered tensely:

"Don't answer—you can't let anyone in—they wouldn't understand."

The Girl eyed him quizzically.

"Understand what?" And before he had time to explain, much less to check her, she was standing at the window, candle in hand, peering out into the night.

"Why, it's the posse!" she cried, wheeling round suddenly. "How did they ever risk it in this storm?"

At these words a crushed expression appeared on Johnson's countenance; an uncanny sense of insecurity seized him. Once more the loud, insistent pounding was repeated, and as before, the outlaw, his hands on his guns, commanded her not to answer.

"But what on earth do the boys want?" inquired the Girl, seemingly oblivious to what he was saying. Indeed, so much so that as the voice of Nick rose high above the other sounds of the night, calling,

"Min-Minnie-Girl, let us in!" she hurriedly brushed past him and yelled through the door:

"What do you want?"

Again Johnson's hand went up imperatively.

"Don't let him come in!" he whispered.

But even then she heard not his warning, but silently, tremulously listened to Sonora, who shouted through the door: "Say, Girl, you all right?" And not until her answering voice had called back her assurance that she was safe did she turn to the man at her side and whisper in a voice that showed plainly her agitation and fear:

"Jack Rance is there! If he was to see you here—he's that jealous I'd be afraid—" She checked her words and quickly put her ear close to the door, the voices outside having become louder and more distinct. Presently she spun round on her heel and announced excitedly: "Ashby's there, too!" And again she put her ear to the door.

"Ashby!" The exclamation fell from Johnson's lips before he was aware of it. It was impossible to deceive himself any longer—the posse had tracked him!

"We want to come in, Girl!" suddenly rang out from the well-known voice of Nick.

"But you can't come in!" shouted back the Girl above the noise of the storm; then, taking advantage of a particularly loud howl of the blast, she turned to Johnson and inquired: "What will I say? What reason will I give?"

Serious as was Johnson's predicament, he could not suppress a smile. In a surprisedly calm voice he told her to say that she had gone to bed.

The Girl's eyes flooded with admiration.

"Why, o' course—that's it," she said, and turned back to the door and called through it: "I've gone to bed, Nick! I'm in bed now!"

The barkeeper's answer was lost in another loud howl of the blast. Soon afterwards, however, the Girl made out that Nick was endeavouring to convey to her a warning of some kind.

"You say you've come to warn me?" she cried.

"Yes, Ramerrez...!"

"What? Say that again?"

"Ramerrez is on the trail—"

"Ramerrez's on the trail!" repeated the Girl in tones of alarm; and not waiting to hear further she motioned to Johnson to conceal himself behind the curtains of the bed, muttering the while:

"I got to let 'em in—I can't keep 'em out there on such a night..." He had barely reached his place of concealment when the Girl slid back the bolts and bade the boys to come in.

Headed by Rance, the men quickly filed in and deposited their lanterns on the floor. It was evident that they had found the storm most severe, for their boots were soaked through and their heavy buffalo overcoats, caps and ear-muffs were covered with snow, which all, save Rance, proceeded to remove by shaking their shoulders and stamping their feet. The latter, however, calmly took off his gloves, pulled out a beautifully-creased handkerchief from his pocket, and began slowly to flick off the snow from his elegant mink overcoat before hanging it carefully upon a peg on the wall. After that he went over to the table and warmed his hands over the lighted candle there. Meanwhile, Sonora, his nose, as well as his hands which with difficulty he removed from his heavy fur mittens, showing red and swollen from the effects of the biting cold, had gone over to the fire, where he ejaculated:

"Ouf, I'm cold! Glad you're safe, Girl!"

"Yes, Girl, The Polka's had a narrow squeak," observed Nick, stamping his feet which, as well as his legs, were wrapped with pieces of blankets for added warmth.

Unconsciously, at his words, the Girl's eyes travelled to the bed; then, drawing her robe snugly about her, and seating herself, she asked with suppressed excitement:

"Why, Nick, what's the matter? What's—"

Rance took it upon himself to do the answering. Sauntering over to the Girl, he drawled out:

"It takes you a long time to get up, seems to me. You haven't so much on, either," he went on, piercing her with his eyes.

Smilingly and not in the least disconcerted by the Sheriff's remark, the Girl picked up a rug from the floor and wound it about her knees.

"Well?" she interrogated.

"Well, we was sure that you was in trouble," put in Sonora. "My breath jest stopped."

"Me? Me in trouble, Sonora?" A little laugh that was half-gay, half-derisive, accompanied her words.

"See here, that man Ramerrez—" followed up Rance with a grim look.

"—feller you was dancin' with," interposed Sonora, but checked himself instantly lest he wound the Girl's feelings.

Whereupon, Rance, with no such compunctions, became the spokesman, a grimace of pleasure spreading over his countenance as he thought of the unpleasant surprise he was about to impart. Stretching out his stiffened fingers over the blaze, he said in his most brutal tones:

"Your polkying friend is none other than Ramerrez."

The Girl's eyes opened wide, but they did not look at the Sheriff. They looked straight before her.

"I warned you, girl," spoke up Ashby, "that you should bank with us oftener."

The Girl gave no sign of having heard him. Her slender figure seemed to have shrunken perceptibly as she stared stupidly, uncomprehendingly, into space.

"We say that Johnson was—" repeated Rance, impatiently.

"—what?" fell from the Girl's lips, her face pale and set.

"Are you deaf?" demanded Rance; and then, emphasising every word, he rasped out: "The fellow you've been polkying with is the man that has been asking people to hold up their hands."

"Oh, go on—you can't hand me out that!" Nevertheless the Girl looked wildly about the room.

Angrily Rance strode over to her and sneered bitingly:

"You don't believe it yet, eh?"

"No, I don't believe it yet!" rapped out the Girl, laying great stress upon the last word. "I know he isn't."

"Well, he *is* Ramerrez, and he *did* come to The Polka to rob it," retorted the Sheriff.

All at once the note of resentment in the Girl's voice became positive; she flared back at him, though she flushed in spite of herself.

"But he didn't rob it!"

"That's what gits me," fretted Sonora. "He didn't."

"I should think it would git you," snapped back the Girl, both in her look and voice rebuking him for his words.

It was left to Ashby to spring another surprise.

"We've got his horse," he said pointedly.

"An' I never knowed one o' these men to separate from his horse," commented Sonora, still smarting under the Girl's reprimand.

"Right you are! And now that we've got his horse and this storm is on, we've got him," said Rance, triumphantly. "But the last seen of Johnson," he went on with a hasty movement towards the Girl and eyeing her critically, "he was heading this way. You seen anything of him?"

The Girl struggled hard to appear composed.

"Heading this way?" she inquired, reddening.

"So Nick said," declared Sonora, looking towards that individual for proof of his words.

But Nick had caught the Girl's lightning glance imposing silence upon him; in some embarrassment he stammered out:

"That is, he was—Sid said he saw 'im take the trail, too."

"But the trail ends here," pointed out Rance, at the same time looking hard at the Girl. "And if she hasn't seen him, where was he going?"

At this juncture Nick espied a cigar butt on the floor; unseen by the others, he hurriedly picked it up and threw it in the fire.

"One o' our dollar Havanas! Good Lord, he's here!" he muttered to himself.

"Rance is right. Where was he goin'?" was the question with which he was confronted by Sonora when about to return to the others.

"Well, I tho't I seen him," evaded Nick with considerable uneasiness. "I couldn't swear to it. You see it was dark, an'—Moses but the Sidney Duck's a liar!"

At length, Ashby decided that the man had in all probability been snowed under, ending confidently with:

"Something scared him off and he lit out without his horse." Which remark brought temporary relief to the Girl, for Nick, watching her, saw the colour return to her face.

Unconsciously, during this discussion, the Girl had risen to her feet, but only to fall back in her chair again almost as suddenly, a sign of nervousness which did not escape the sharp eye of the Sheriff.

"How do you know the man's a road agent?" A shade almost of contempt was in the Girl's question.

Sonora breathed on his badly nipped fingers before answering:

"Well, two greasers jest now were pretty positive before they quit."

Instantly the Girl's head went up in the air.

"Greasers!" she ejaculated scornfully, while her eyes unfalteringly met Rance's steady gaze.

"But the woman knew him," was the Sheriff's vindictive thrust.

The Girl started; her face went white.

"The woman—the woman d'you say?"

"Why, yes, it was a woman that first tol' them that Ramerrez was in the camp to rob The Polka," Sonora informed her, though his tone showed plainly his surprise at being compelled to repeat a thing which, he wrongly believed, she already knew.

"We saw her at The Palmetto," leered Rance.

"And we missed the reward," frowned Ashby; at which Rance quickly turned upon the speaker with:

"But Ramerrez is trapped."

There was a moment's startled pause in which the Girl struggled with her passions; at last, she ventured:

"Who's this woman?"

The Sheriff laughed discordantly.

"Why, the woman of the back trail," he sneered.

"Nina Micheltoreña! Then she does know 'im—it's true—it goes through me!" unwittingly burst from the Girl's lips.

The Sheriff, evidently, found the Situation amusing, for he laughed outright.

"He's the sort of a man who polkas with you first and then cuts your throat," was his next stab.

The Girl turned upon him with eyes flashing and retorted:

"Well, it's my throat, ain't it?"

"Well I'll be!—" The Sheriff's sentence was left unfinished, for Nick, quickly pulling him to one side, whispered:

"Say, Rance, the Girl's cut up because she vouched for 'im. Don't rub it in."

Notwithstanding, Rance, to the Girl's query of "How did this Nina Micheltoreña know it?" took a keen delight in telling her:

"She's his girl."

"His girl?" repeated the Girl, mechanically.

"Yes. She gave us his picture," went on Rance; and taking the photograph out of his pocket, he added maliciously, "with love written on the back of it."

A glance at the photograph, which she fairly snatched out of his hands, convinced the Girl of the truthfulness of his assertion. With a movement of pain she threw it upon the floor, crying out bitterly:

"Nina Micheltoreña! Nina Micheltoreña!" Turning to Ashby with an abrupt change of manner she said contritely: "I'm sorry, Mr. Ashby, I vouched for 'im."

The Wells Fargo Agent softened at the note in the Girl's voice; he was about to utter some comforting words to her when suddenly she spoke again.

"I s'pose they had one o' them little lovers' quarrels an' that made 'er tell you, eh?" She laughed a forced little laugh, though her heart was beating strangely as she kept on: "He's the kind o' man who sort o' polkas with every girl he meets." And at this she began to laugh almost hysterically.

Rance, who resented her apologising to anyone but himself, stood scowling at her.

"What are you laughing at?" he questioned.

"Oh, nothin', Jack, nothin'," half-cried, half-laughed the Girl. "Only it's kind o' funny how things come out, ain't it? Took in! Nina

Micheltoreña! Nice company he keeps—one o' them Cachuca girls with eyelashes at half-mast!"

Once more, she broke out into a fit of laughter.

"Well, well," she resumed, "an' she sold 'im out for money! Ah, Jack Rance, you're a better guesser'n I am!" And with these words she sank down at the table in an apathy of misery. Horror and hatred and hopelessness had possession of her. A fierce look was in her eyes when a moment later she raised her head and abruptly dismissed the boys, saying:

"Well, boys, it's gittin' late—good-night!"

Sonora was the first to make a movement towards the door.

"Come on, boys," he growled in his deep bass voice; "don't you intend to let a lady go to bed?"

One by one the men filed through the door which Nick held open for them; but when all but himself had left, the devoted little barkeeper turned to the Girl with a look full of meaning, and whispered:

"Do you want me to stay?"

"Me? Oh, no, Nick!" And with a "Good-night, all! Good-night, Sonora, an' thank you! Good-night, Nick!" the Girl closed the door upon them. The last that she heard from them was the muffled ejaculation:

"Oh, Lordy, we'll never git down to Cloudy to-night!"

Now the Girl slid the bolts and stood with her back against the door as if to take extra precautions to bar out any intrusion, and with eyes that blazed she yelled out:

"Come out o' that, now! Step out there, Mr. Johnson!"

Slowly the road agent parted the curtains and came forward in an attitude of dejection.

"You came here to rob me," at once began the Girl, but her anger made it impossible for her to continue.

"I didn't," denied the road agent, quietly, his countenance reflecting how deeply hurt he was by her words.

"You lie!" insisted the Girl, beside herself with rage.

"I don't—"

"You do!"

"I admit that every circumstance points to—"

"Stop! Don't you give me any more o' that Webster Unabridged. You git to cases. If you didn't come here to steal you came to The Polka to rob it, didn't you?"

Johnson, his eyes lowered, was forced to admit that such were his intentions, adding swiftly:

"But when I knew about you—" He broke off and took a step towards her.

"Wait! Wait! Wait where you are! Don't you take a step further or I'll—" She made a significant gesture towards her bosom, and then, laughing harshly, went on denouncingly: "A road agent! A road agent! Well, ain't it my luck! Wouldn't anybody know to look at me that a gentleman wouldn't fall my way! A road agent! A road agent!" And again she laughed bitterly before going on: "But now you can git—git, you thief, you imposer on a decent woman! I ought to have tol' 'em all, but I wa'n't goin' to be the joke o' the world with you behind the curtains an' me eatin' charlotte rusks an' lemming turnovers an' a-polkyin' with a road agent! But now you can git—git, do you hear me?"

Johnson heard her to the end with bowed head; and so scathing had been her denunciations of his actions that the fact that pride alone kept her from breaking down completely escaped his notice. With his eyes still downcast be said in painful fragments:

"One word only—only a word and I'm not going to say anything in defence of myself. For it's all true—everything is true except that I would have stolen from you. I *am* called Ramerrez; I *have* robbed; I *am* a road agent—an outlaw by profession. Yes, I'm all that—and my father was that before me. I was brought up, educated, thrived on thieves' money, I suppose, but until six months ago when my father died, I did not know it. I lived much in Monterey—I lived there as a gentleman. When we met that day I wasn't the thing I am to-day. I only learned the truth when my father died and left me with a rancho and a band of thieves—nothing else—nothing for us all, and I—but what's the good of going into it—the circumstances. You wouldn't understand if I did. I was my father's son; I have no excuse; I guess, perhaps, it was in me—in the blood. Anyhow, I took to the road, and I didn't mind it much after the first time. But I drew the line at

killing—I wouldn't have that. That's the man that I am, the blackguard that I am. But—" here he raised his eyes and said with a voice that was charged with feeling—"I swear to you that from the moment I kissed you to-night I meant to change, I meant to—"

"The devil you did!" broke from the Girl's lips, but with a sound that was not unlike a sob.

"I did, believe me, I did," insisted the man. "I meant to go straight and take you with me—but only honestly—when I could honestly. I meant to work for you. Why, every word you said to me to-night about being a thief cut into me like a knife. Over and over again I have said to myself, she must never know. And now—well, it's all over—I have finished."

"An' that's all?" questioned the Girl with averted face.

"No—yes—what's the use...?"

The Girl's anger blazed forth again.

"But there's jest one thing you've overlooked explainin', Mr. Johnson. It shows exactly what you are. It wasn't so much your bein' a road agent I got against you. It's this:" And here she stamped her foot excitedly. "You kissed me—you got my first kiss."

Johnson hung his head.

"You said," kept on the Girl, hotly, "you'd ben thinkin' o' me ever since you saw me at Monterey, an' all the time you walked straight off an' ben kissin' that other woman." She shrugged her shoulder and laughed grimly. "You've got a girl," she continued, growing more and more indignant. "It's that I've got against you. It's my first kiss I've got against you. It's that Nina Micheltoreña that I can't forgive. So now you can git—git!" And with these words she unbolted the door and concluded tensely:

"If they kill you I don't care. Do you hear, I don't care..."

At those bitter words spoken by lips which failed so utterly to hide their misery, the Girl's face became colourless.

With the instinct of a brave man to sell his life as dearly as possible, Johnson took a couple of guns from his pocket; but the next moment, as if coming to the conclusion that death without the Girl would be preferable, he put them back, saying:

"You're right, Girl."

The next instant he had passed out of the door which she held wide open for him.

"That's the end o' that—that's the end o' that," she wound up, slamming the door after him. But all the way from the threshold to the bureau she kept murmuring to herself: "I don't care, I don't care... I'll be like the rest o' the women I've seen. I'll give that Nina Micheltoreña cards an' spades. There'll be another hussy around here. There'll be—" The threat was never finished. Instead, with eyes that fairly started out of their sockets, she listened to the sound of a couple of shots, the last one exploding so loud and distinct that there was no mistaking its nearness to the cabin.

"They've got 'im!" she cried. "Well, I don't care—I don't—" But again she did not finish what she intended to say. For at the sound of a heavy body falling against the cabin door she flew to it, opened it and, throwing her arms about the sorely-wounded man, dragged him into the cabin and placed him in a chair. Quick as lightning she was back at the door bolting it.

With his eyes Johnson followed her action.

"Don't lock that door—I'm going out again—out there. Don't bar that door," he commanded feebly, struggling to his feet and attempting to walk towards it; but he lurched forward and would have fallen to the floor had she not caught him. Vainly he strove to break away from her, all the time crying out: "Don't you see, don't you see, Girl—open the door." And then again with almost a sob: "Do you think me a man to hide behind a woman?" He would have collapsed except for the strong arms that held him.

"I love you an' I'm goin' to save you," the Girl murmured while struggling with him. "You asked me to go away with you; I will when you git out o' this. If you can't save your own soul—" She stopped and quickly went over to the mantel where she took down a bottle of whisky and a glass; but in the act of pouring out a drink for him there came a loud rap on the window, and quickly looking round she saw Rance's piercing eyes peering into the room. For an instant she paled, but then there flashed through her mind the comforting thought that the Sheriff could not possibly see Johnson from his position. So, after giving the latter his drink, she waited quietly until a rap at the door told her that Rance had left the window when, her

eye having lit on the ladder that was held in place on the ceiling, she quickly ran over to it and let it down, saying:

"Go up the ladder! Climb up there to the loft You're the man that's got my first kiss an' I'm goin' to save you..."

"Oh, no, not here," protested Johnson, stubbornly.

"Do you want them to see you in my cabin?" she cried reproachfully, trying to lift him to his feet.

"Oh, hurry, hurry...!"

With the utmost difficulty Johnson rose to his feet and catching the rounds of the ladder he began to ascend. But after going up a few rounds he reeled and almost fell off, gasping:

"I can't make it—no, I can't..."

"Yes, you can," encouraged the Girl; and then, simultaneously with another loud knock on the door: "You're the man I love an' you must—you've got to show me the man that's in you. Oh, go on, go on, jest a step an' you'll git there."

"But I can't," came feebly from the voice above. Nevertheless, the next instant he fell full length on the boarded floor of the loft with the hand outstretched in which was the handkerchief he had been staunching the blood from the wound in his side.

With a whispered injunction that he was all right and was not to move on any account, the Girl put the ladder back in its place. But no sooner was this done than on looking up she caught sight of the stained handkerchief. She called softly up to him to take it away, explaining that the cracks between the boards were wide and it could plainly be seen from below.

"That's it!" she exclaimed on observing that he had changed the position of his hand. "Now, don't move!"

Finally, with the lighted candle in her hand, the Girl made a quick survey of the room to see that nothing was in sight that would betray her lover's presence there, and then throwing open the door she took up such a position by it that it made it impossible for anyone to get past her without using force.

"You can't come in here, Jack Rance," she said in a resolute voice. "You can tell me what you want from where you are."

Roughly, almost brutally, Rance shoved her to one side and entered.

"No more Jack Rance. It's the Sheriff coming after Mr. Johnson," he said, emphasizing each word.

The Girl eyed him defiantly.

"Yes, I said Mr. Johnson," reiterated the Sheriff, cocking the gun that he held in his hand. "I saw him coming in here."

"It's more 'n I did," returned the Girl, evenly, and bolted the door. "Do you think I'd want to shield a man who tried to rob me?" she asked, facing him.

Ignoring the question, Rance removed the glove of his weaponless hand and strode to the curtains that enclosed the Girl's bed and parted them. When he turned back he was met by a scornful look and the words:

"So, you doubt me, do you? Well, go on—search the place. But this ends your acquaintance with The Polka. Don't you ever speak to me again. We're through."

Suddenly there came a smothered groan from the man in the loft; Rance wheeled round quickly and brought up his gun, demanding:

"What's that? What's that?"

Leaning against the bureau the Girl laughed outright and declared that the Sheriff was becoming as nervous as an old woman. Her ridicule was not without its effect, and, presently, Rance uncocked his gun and replaced it in its holster. Advancing now to the table where the Girl was standing, he took off his cap and shook it before laying it down; then, pointing to the door, his eyes never leaving the Girl's face, he went on accusingly:

"I saw someone standing out there against the snow. I fired. I could have sworn it was a man."

The Girl winced. But as she stood watching him calmly remove his coat and shake it with the air of one determined to make himself at home, she cried out tauntingly:

"Why do you stop? Why don't you go on—finish your search—only don't ever speak to me again."

At that, Rance became conciliatory.

"Say, Min, I don't want to quarrel with you."

Turning her back on him the Girl moved over to the bureau where she snapped out over her shoulder:

"Go on with your search, then p'r'aps you'll leave a lady to herself to go to bed."

The Sheriff followed her up with the declaration:

"I'm plumb crazy about you, Min."

The Girl shrugged her shoulder.

"I could have sworn I saw—I—Oh, you know it's just you for me—just you, and curse the man you like better. I—I—even yet I can't get over the queer look in your face when I told you who that man really was." He stopped and flung his overcoat down on the floor, and fixing her with a look he demanded: "You don't love him, do you?"

Again the Girl sent over her shoulder a forced little laugh.

"Who—me?"

The Sheriff's face brightened. Taking a few steps nearer to her, he hazarded:

"Say, Girl, was your answer final to-night about marrying me?"

Without turning round the Girl answered coyly:

"I might think it over, Jack."

Instantly the man's passion was aroused. He strode over to her, put his arms around her and kissed her forcibly.

"I love you, I love you, Minnie!" he cried passionately.

In the struggle that followed, the Girl's eyes fell on the bottle on the mantel. With a cry she seized it and raised it threateningly over her head. Another second, however, she sank down upon a chair and began to sob, her face buried in her hands.

Rance regarded her coldly; at last he gave vent to a mirthless laugh, the nasty laugh of a man whose vanity is hurt.

"So, it's as bad as that," he sneered. "I didn't quite realise it. I'm much obliged to you. Good-night." He snatched up his coat, hesitated, then repeated a little less angrily than before: "Good-night!"

But the Girl, with her face still hidden, made no answer. For a moment he watched the crouching form, the quivering shoulders, then asked, with sudden and unwonted gentleness:

"Can't you say good-night to me, Girl!"

Slowly the Girl rose to her feet and faced him, aversion and pity struggling for mastery. Then, as she noted the spot where he was now standing, his great height bringing him so near to the low boards of the loft where her lover was lying that it seemed as though he must hear the wounded man's breathing, all other feelings were swept away by overwhelming fear. With the one thought that she must get rid of him,—do anything, say anything, but get rid of him quickly, she forced herself forward, with extended hand, and said in a voice that held out new promise:

"Good-night. Jack Rance,—good-night!"

Rance seized the hand with an almost fierce gladness in both his own, his keen glance hungrily striving to read her face. Then, suddenly, he released her, drawing back his hand with a quick sharpness.

"Why, look at my hand! There's blood on it!" he said.

And even as he spoke, under the yellow flare of the lamp, the Girl saw a second drop of blood fall at her feet. Like a flash, the terrible significance of it came upon her. Only by self-violence could she keep her glance from rising, tell-tale, to the boards above.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she heard herself saying contritely, all the time desperately groping to invent a reason; at length, she added futilely: "I must have scratched you."

Rance looked puzzled, staring at the spatter of red as though hypnotised.

"No, there's no scratch there," he contended, wiping off the blood with his handkerchief.

"Oh, yes, there is," insisted the Girl tremulously; "that is, there will be in the mornin'. You'll see in the mornin' that there'll be—" She stopped and stared in frozen terror at the sinister face of the Sheriff, who was coolly watching his handkerchief turn from white to red under the slow rain of blood from the loft above.

"Oho!" he emitted sardonically, stepping back and pointing his gun towards the loft. "So, he's up there!"

The Girl's fingers clutched his arm, dragging desperately.

"No, he isn't, Jack—no, he isn't!" she iterated in blind, mechanical denial.

With an abrupt movement, Rance flung her violently from him, made a grab at the suspended ladder and lowered it into position; then, deaf to the Girl's pleadings, harshly ordered Johnson to come down, meanwhile covering the source of the blood-drops with his gun.

"Oh, wait,—wait a minute!" begged the Girl helplessly. What would happen if he couldn't obey the summons? He had spent himself in his climb to safety. Perhaps he was unconscious, slowly bleeding to death! But even as she tortured herself with fears, the boards above creaked as though a heavy body was dragging itself slowly across them. Johnson was evidently doing his best to reach the top of the ladder; but he did not move quickly enough to suit the Sheriff.

"Come down, or I'll—"

"Oh, just a minute, Jack, just a minute!" broke in the Girl frantically. "Don't shoot!—Don't you see he's tryin' to—?"

"Come down here, Mr. Johnson!" reiterated the Sheriff, with a face inhuman as a fiend.

The Girl clenched her hands, heedless of the nails cutting into her palms: "Won't you wait a moment,—please, wait, Jack!"

"Wait? What for?" the Sheriff flung at her brutally, his finger twitching on the trigger.

The Girl's lips parted to answer, then closed again dumbly,—for it was then that she saw the boots, then the legs of the road agent slide uncertainly through the open trap, fumble clumsily for the rungs of the ladder, then slip and stumble as the weight of the following body came upon them while the weak fingers strained desperately for a hold. The whole heart and soul and mind of the Girl seemed to be reaching out impotently to give her lover strength, to hurry him down fast enough to forestall a shot from the Sheriff. It seemed hours until the road agent reached the bottom of the ladder, then lurched with unseeing eyes to a chair and, finally, fell forward limply, with his arms and head resting on the table. Still dumb with dread, the Girl watched Rance slowly circle round the wounded man; it was not until the Sheriff returned his pistol to its holster that she breathed freely again.

"So, you dropped into The Polka to-night to play a little game of poker? Funny how things change about in an hour or two!" Rance chuckled mirthlessly; it seemed to suit his sardonic humour to taunt his helpless rival. "You think you can play poker,—that's your conviction, is it? Well, you can play freeze-out as to your chances, Mr. Johnson of Sacramento. Come, speak up,—it's shooting or the tree,—which shall it be?"

Goaded beyond endurance by Rance's taunting of the unconscious man, the Girl, fumbling in her bosom for her pistol, turned upon him in a sudden, cold fury:

"You better stop that laughin', Jack Rance, or I'll send you to finish it in some place where things ain't so funny."

Something in the Girl's altered tone so struck the Sheriff that he obeyed her. He said nothing, but on his lips were the words, "By Heaven, the Girl means it!" and his eyes showed a smouldering admiration.

"He doesn't hear you,—he's out of it. But me—me—I hear you—I ain't out of it," the Girl went on in compelling tones. "You're a gambler; he was, too; well, so am I." She crossed deliberately to the bureau, and laid her pistol away in the drawer, Rance meanwhile eyeing her with puzzled interest. Returning, she went on, incisively as a whip lash:

"I live on chance money, drink money, card money, saloon money. We're gamblers,—we're all gamblers!" She paused, an odd expression coming over her face,—an expression that baffled Rance's power to read. Presently she resumed: "Now, you asked me to-night if my answer was final,—well, here's your chance. I'll play you the game,—straight poker. It's two out o' three for me. Hatin' the sight o' you, it's the nearest chance you'll ever get for me."

"Do you mean—" began Rance, his hands resting on the table, his hawk-like glance burning into her very thoughts.

"Yes, with a wife in Noo Orleans all right," she interrupted him feverishly. "If you're lucky,—you'll git 'im an' me. But if you lose,—this man settin' between us is mine—mine to do with as I please, an' you shut up an' lose like a gentleman."

"You must be crazy about him!" The words seemed wrung from the Sheriff against his will.

"That's my business!" came like a knife-cut from the Girl.

"Do you know you're talkin' to the Sheriff?"

"I'm talkin' to Jack Rance, the gambler," she amended evenly.

"You're right,—and he's just fool enough to take you up," returned Rance with sudden decision. He looked around him for a chair; there was one near the table, and the Girl handed it to him. With one hand he swung it into place before the table, while with the other he jerked off the table-cover, and flung it across the room. Johnson neither moved nor groaned, as the edge slid from beneath his nerveless arms.

"You and the cyards have got into my blood. I'll take you up," he said, seating himself.

"Your word," demanded the Girl, leaning over the table, but still standing.

"I can lose like a gentleman," returned Rance curtly; then, with a swift seizure of her hand, he continued tensely, in tones that made the Girl shrink and whiten, "I'm hungry for you, Min, and if I win, I'll take it out on you as long as I have breath."

A moment later, the Girl had freed her hand from his clasp, and was saying evenly, "Fix the lamp." And while the Sheriff was adjusting the wick that had begun to flare up smokily, she swiftly left the room, saying casually over her shoulder that she was going to fetch something from the closet.

"What you goin' to get?" he called after her suspiciously. The Girl made no reply. Rance made no movement to follow her, but instead drew a pack of cards from his pocket and began to shuffle them with practiced carelessness. But when a minute had passed and the girl had not returned, he called once more, with growing impatience, to know what was keeping her.

"I'm jest gettin' the cards an' kind o' steadyin' my nerves," she answered somewhat queerly through the doorway. The next moment she had returned, quickly closing the closet door behind her, blew out her candle, and laying a pack of cards upon the table, said significantly:

"We'll use a fresh deck. There's a good deal depends on this, Jack." She seated herself opposite the Sheriff and so close to the

unconscious form of the man she loved that from time to time her left arm brushed his shoulder.

Rance, without protest other than a shrug, took up his own deck of cards, wrapped them in a handkerchief, and stowed them away in his pocket. It was the Girl who spoke first:

"Are you ready?"

"Ready? Yes. I'm ready. Cut for deal."

With unfaltering fingers, the Girl cut. Of the man beside her, dead or dying, she must not, dared not think. For the moment she had become one incarnate purpose: to win, to win at any cost,—nothing else mattered.

Rance won the deal; and taking up the pack he asked, as he shuffled:

"A case of show-down?"

"Show-down."

"Cut!" once more peremptorily from Rance; and then, when she had cut, one question more: "Best two out of three?"

"Best two out of three." Swift, staccato sentences, like the rapid crossing of swords, the first preliminary interchange of strokes before the true duel begins.

Rance dealt the cards. Before either looked at them, he glanced across at the Girl and asked scornfully, perhaps enviously:

"What do you see in him?"

"What do you see in me?" she flashed back instantly, as she picked up her cards; and then: "What have you got?"

"King high," declared the gambler.

"King high here," echoed the Girl.

"Jack next," and he showed his hand.

"Queen next," and the Girl showed hers.

"You've got it," conceded the gambler, easily. Then, in another tone, "but you're making a mistake—"

"If I am, it's my mistake! Cut!"

Rance cut the cards. The Girl dealt them steadily. Then,

"What have you got?" she asked.

"One pair,—aces. What have you?"

"Nothing," throwing her cards upon the table.

With just a flicker of a smile, the Sheriff once more gathered up the pack, saying smoothly:

"Even now,—we're even."

"It's the next hand that tells, Jack, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"It's the next hand that tells me,—I'm awfully sorry,—" the words seemed to come awkwardly; her glance was troubled, almost contrite, "at any rate, I want to say jest now that no matter how it comes out—"

"Cut!" interjected Rance mechanically.

"—that I'll always think of you the best I can," completed the Girl with much feeling. "An' I want you to do the same for me."

Silently, inscrutably, the gambler dealt the ten cards, one by one. But as the Girl started to draw hers toward her, his long, thin fingers reached across once more and closed not ungently upon hand and cards.

"The last hand, Girl!" he reminded her. "And I've a feeling that I win,—that in one minute I'll hold you in my arms." And still covering her fingers with his own, he stole a glance at his cards.

"I win," he announced, briefly, his eyes alone betraying the inward fever. He dropped the cards before her on the table. "Three kings,—and the *last hand*!"

Suddenly, as though some inward cord had snapped under the strain, the Girl collapsed. Limply she slid downward in her chair, one groping hand straying aimlessly to her forehead, then dropping of its own weight. "Quick, Jack,—I'm ill,—git me somethin'!" The voice trailed off to nothingness as the drooping eyelids closed.

In real consternation, the Sheriff sprang to his feet. In one sweeping glance his alert eye caught the whisky bottle upon the mantel. "All right, Girl, I'll fix you in no time," he said cheeringly over his shoulder. But where the deuce did she keep her tumblers? The next minute he was groping for them in the dark of the adjoining closet and softly cursing himself for his own slowness.

Instantaneously, the Girl came to life. The unturned cards upon the table vanished with one lightning movement; the Girl's hand

disappeared beneath her skirts, raised for the moment knee-high; then the same, swift reverse motion, and the cards were back in place, while the Girl's eyes trembled shut again, to hide the light of triumph in them. A smile flickered on her lips as the Sheriff returned with the glass and bottle.

"Never mind,—I'm better now," her lips shaped weakly.

The Sheriff set down the bottle, and put his arm around the Girl with a rough tenderness.

"Oh, you only fainted because you lost," he told her.

Averting her gaze, the Girl quietly disengaged herself, rose to her feet and turned her five cards face upwards.

"No, Jack, it's because I've won,—three aces and a pair."

The Sheriff shot one glance at the girl, keen, searching. Then, without so much as the twitch of an eyelid, he accepted his defeat, took a cigar from his pocket and lit it, the flame of the match revealing no expression other than the nonchalance for which he was noted; then, picking up his hat and coat he walked slowly to the door. Here he halted and wished her a polite good-night—so ceremoniously polite that at any other time it would have compelled her admiration.

Pale as death and almost on the point of collapse, the Girl staggered back to the table where the wounded road agent was half-sitting, half-lying.

Thrusting her hand now into the stocking from which she had obtained the winning, if incriminating, cards, she drew forth those that remained and scattered them in the air, crying out hysterically:

"Three aces an' a pair an' a stockin' full o' pictures—but his life belongs to me!"

XIV.

Conscious-stricken at the fraud that she had imposed upon the gambler, the Girl lived a lifetime in the moments that followed his departure. With her face buried in her hands she stood lost in contemplation of her shameful secret.

A sound—the sound of a man in great pain checked her hysterical sobs. Dazed, she passed her hand over her face as if to clear away the

dark shades that were obstructing her vision. Another groan—and like a flash she was down on her knees lavishing endearments upon the road agent.

Never before, it is true, had the Girl had any experience in gun-shot wounds. She had played the part of nurse, however, more than once when the boys met with accidents at the mines. For the women of the California camps at that time had endless calls upon them. It was a period for sacrifices innumerable, and help and sympathy were never asked that they were not freely given. So, if the Girl did not know the very best thing to do, she knew, at least, what not to do, and it was only a few minutes before she had cut the coat from his back.

The next thing to be done—the dragging of the unconscious man to the bed—was hard work, of course, but being strong of arm, as well as stout of heart, she at last accomplished it.

Now she cut away his shirt in order to find the wound, which proved to be in his breast. Quickly then she felt with her fingers in an endeavour to find the ball, but in this she was unsuccessful. So after a moment's deliberation she made up her mind that the wound was a flesh one and that the ball was anywhere but in the man's body—a diagnosis that was largely due to the cheerful optimism of her nature and which, fortunately, proved to be true.

Presently she went to a corner of the room and soon returned with a basin of water and some hastily torn bandages. For a good fifteen minutes after that she washed the gash and, finally, bandaged it as well as she knew how. And now, having done all that her knowledge or instinct prompted, she drew up a chair and prepared to pass the rest of the night in watching by his side.

For an hour or so he slept the sleep of unconsciousness. In the room not a sound could be heard, but outside the storm still roared and raged. It was anything but an easy or cheerful situation: Here she was alone with a wounded, if not dying, man; and she well knew that, unless there came an abatement in the fury of the storm, it might be days before anyone could climb the mountain. True, the Indians were not far off, but like as not they would remain in their wigwam until the sun came forth again. In the matter of food there was a scant supply, but probably enough to tide them over until communication could be had with The Polka.

For three days she watched over him, and all the time the storm continued. On the third day he became delirious, and that was the night of her torture. Despite a feeling that she was taking an unfair advantage of him, the Girl strained her ears to catch a name which, in his delirium, was constantly on his lips; but she could not make it out. All that she knew was that it was not her name that he spoke, and it pained her. She had given him absolute faith and trust and, already, she was overwhelmed with the fierce flames of jealousy. It was a new sensation, this being jealous of anyone, and it called forth a passionate resentment. In such moments she would rise and flee to the other end of the room until the whispered endearments had ceased. Then she would draw near again with flushes of shame on her cheeks for having heeded the sayings of an irresponsible person, and she would take his head in her lap and, caressing him the while, would put cold towels on his heated brow.

Dawn of the fourth day saw the Girl still pale and anxious, though despair had entirely left her; for the storm was over and colour and speech had come back to the man early that morning. Love and good nursing, not to speak of some excellent whisky that she happened to have stored away in her cabin, had pulled him through. With a sigh of relief she threw herself down on the rug for a much-needed rest.

The man woke just before the sun rose. His first thought, that he was home in the foothills, was dissipated by the sight of the snow ranges. Through the window of the cabin, as far as the eye could see, nothing of green was visible. Snow was everywhere; everything was white, save at the eastern horizon where silver was fast changing into rose and rose to a fiery red as the fast-rising sun sent its shafts over the snow-coated mountains.

And now there came to him a full realisation of what had happened and where he was. To his amazement, though, he was almost without pain. That his wound had been dressed he was, of course, well aware for when he attempted to draw back still further the curtain at the window the movement strained the tight bandage, and he was instantly made conscious of a twinge of pain.

Nevertheless, he persevered, for he wisely decided that it would be well to reconnoitre, to familiarise himself, as much as possible, with the lay of the land and find out whether the trail that he had followed to reach the cabin which, he recalled, was perched high up above a

ravine, was the only means of communication with the valley below. It was a useless precaution, for the snow would have wholly obliterated any such trail had there been one and, soon realising the fact, he fell back exhausted by his effort on the pillows.

A half hour passed and the man began to grow restless. He had, of course, no idea whatever of the length of time he had been in the cabin, and he knew that he must be thinking of an immediate escape. In desperation, he tried to get out of bed, but the task was beyond his power. At that a terrible feeling of hopelessness assailed him. His only chance was to reach the valley where he had little fear of capture; but wounded, as he was, that seemed out of the question, and he saw himself caught like a rat in a trap. In an access of rage at the situation in which he was placed he made another effort to raise himself up on his elbow and peer through the window at the Sierras. The noise that he made, slight though it was, awoke the Girl. In an instant she was at his bedside drawing the curtain over the window.

"What you thinkin' of?" she asked. "At any moment—jest as soon as the trail can be cleared—there'll be someone of the boys up here to see how I've pulled through. They mustn't see you..."

Forcibly, but with loving tenderness, she put him back among his pillows and seated herself by the bed. An awkward silence followed. For now that the man was in his right senses it was borne in upon her that he might remember that she had fed him, given him drink and fondled him. It was a situation embarrassing to both. Neither knew just what to say or how to begin. At length, the voice from the bed spoke:

"How long have I been here?"

"Three days."

"And you have nursed me all that—"

"You mustn't talk," warned the girl. "It's dangerous in more ways than one. But if you keep still no one'll suspect that you're here."

"But I must know what happened," he insisted with increasing excitement. "I remember nothing after I came down the ladder. The Sheriff—Rance—what's become...?"

The Girl chided him with gentle authority.

"You keep perfectly still—you mustn't say nothin' 'til you've rested. Everythin's all right an' you needn't worry a bit." But then seeing

that he chafed at this, she added: "Well, then, I'll tell you all there is to know." And then followed an account of the happenings of that night. It was not a thoroughly truthful tale, for in her narrative she told him only what she thought was necessary and good for him to know, keeping the rest to herself. And when she had related all that there was to tell she insisted upon his going to sleep again, giving him no opportunity whatsoever to speak, since she left his bedside after drawing the curtains.

Unwillingly the man lay back and tried to force himself to be patient; but he fretted at the enforced quietude and, as a result, sleep refused to come to him. From time to time he could hear the Girl moving noiselessly about the room. The knowledge that she was there gave him a sense of security, and he began to let his thoughts dwell upon her. No longer did he doubt but what she was a real influence now; and the thought had the effect of making him keenly alive to what his life had been. It was not a pleasant picture that he looked back upon, now that he had caught a glimpse of what life might mean with the Girl at his side. From the moment that he had taken her in his arms he realised to the full that his cherished dream had come true; he realised, also, that there was now but one answer to the question of keeping to the oath given to his father, and that was that gratitude—for he had guessed rightly, though she had not told him, that she had saved him from capture by the Sheriff and his posse—demanded that he should put an end to his vocation and devote his life henceforth to making her happy.

Once or twice while thus communing with himself he fancied that he heard voices. It seemed to him that he recognised Nick's voice. But whoever it was, he spoke in whispers, and though the wounded man strove to hear, he was unsuccessful.

After a while he heard the door close and then the tension was somewhat relaxed, for he knew that she was keeping his presence in her cabin a secret with all the wiles of a clever and loving woman. And more and more he determined to gain an honoured place for her in some community—an honoured place for himself and her. Vague, very vague, of course, were the new purposes and plans that had so suddenly sprang up because of her influence, but the desire to lead a clean life had touched his heart, and since his old calling had

never been pleasing to him, he did not for a moment doubt his ability to succeed.

The morning was half gone when the Girl returned to her patient. Then, in tones that did her best to make her appear free from anxiety, she told him that it was the barkeeper, as he had surmised, with whom she had been talking and that she had been obliged to take him into her confidence. The man made no comment, for the situation necessarily was in her hands, and he felt that she could be relied upon not to make any mistake. Four people, he was told, knew of his presence in the cabin. So far as Rance was concerned she had absolute faith in his honour, gambler though he was; there was nothing that Nick would not do for her; and as for the Indians, the secret was sure to be kept by them, unless Jackrabbit got hold of some whisky—a contingency not at all likely, for Nick had promised to see to that. In fact, all could be trusted to be as silent as the grave.

The invalid had listened intently; nevertheless, he sighed:

"It's hard to lie here. I don't want to be caught *now*."

The Girl smiled at the emphasis on the last word, for she knew that it referred to her. Furthermore, she had divined pretty well what had been his thoughts concerning his old life; but, being essentially a woman of action and not words, she said nothing.

A moment or so later he asked her to read to him. The Girl looked as she might have looked if he had asked her to go to the moon. Notwithstanding, she got up and, presently, returned with a lot of old school-books, which she solemnly handed over for his inspection.

The invalid smiled at the look of earnestness on the Girl's face.

"Not these?" he gently inquired. "Where is the Dante you were telling me about?"

Once more the Girl went over to the book-shelf; when she came back she handed him a volume, which he glanced over carefully before showing her the place where he wished her to begin to read to him.

At first the Girl was embarrassed and stumbled badly. But on seeing that he seemed not to notice it she gained courage and acquitted herself creditably, at least, so she flattered herself, for she could detect, as she looked up from time to time, no expression other

than pleasure on his face. It may be surmised, though, that Johnson had not merely chosen a page at random; on the contrary, when the book was in his hand he had quickly found the lines which the Girl had, so to say, paraphrased, and he was intensely curious to see how they would appeal to her. But now, apparently, she saw nothing in the least amusing in them, nor in other passages fully as sentimental. In fact, no comment of any kind was forthcoming from her—though Johnson was looking for it and, to tell the truth, was somewhat disappointed—when she read that Dante had probably never spoken more than twice to Beatrice and his passion had no other food than the mists of his own dreaming. However, it was different when,—pausing before each word after the manner of a child,—she came to a passage of the poet's, and read:

"'In that moment I say most truly that the spirit of life, which hath its dwelling in the most secret chambers of the heart, began to tremble so violently that the least pulse of my body shook herewith, and in the trembling it said these words: "Here is a deity stronger than I who, coming shall rule over me."'"

At that the Girl let the book fall and, going down on her knees and taking both his hands in hers, she raised to him a look so full of adoring worship that he felt himself awed before it.

"That 'ere Dante ain't so far off after all. I know jest how he feels. Oh, I ain't fit to read to you, to talk to you, to kiss you."

Nevertheless, he saw to it that she did.

After this he told her about the Inferno, and she listened eagerly to his description of the unfortunate characters, though she declared, when he explained some of the crimes that they had committed, that they "Got only what was rightly comin' to them."

The patient could hardly suppress his amusement. Dante was discarded and instead they told each other how much love there was in that little cabin on Cloudy Mountain.

The days that followed were all much like this one. Food was brought up from The Polka and, by degrees, the patient's strength came back. And it was but natural that he became so absorbed in his newly-found happiness that he gradually was losing all sense of danger. Late one night, however, when he was asleep, an incident

happened that warned the Girl that it was necessary to get her lover away just as soon as he was able to ride a horse.

Lying on the rug in front of the fire she had been thinking of him when, suddenly, her quick ear, more than ever alert in these days, caught the sound of a stealthy footstep outside the cabin. With no fear whatever except in relation to the discovery of her lover, the Girl went noiselessly to the window and peered out into the darkness. A man was making signs that he wished to speak with her. For a moment she stood watching in perplexity, but almost instantly her instinct told her that one of that race, for she believed the man to be a Mexican, would never dare to come to her cabin at that time of night unless it was on a friendly errand. So putting her face close to the pane to reassure herself that she had not been mistaken in regard to his nationality, she then went to the door and held it wide open for the man to enter, at the same time putting her finger to her lips as a sign that he should be very still.

"What are you doin' here? What do you want?" she asked in a low voice, at the same time leading him to the side of the room further away from her lover.

Jose Castro's first words were in Spanish, but immediately perceiving that he failed to make her understand, he nodded comprehendingly, and said:

"All righta—I espeak Engleesh—I am Jose Castro too well known to the *Maestro*. I want to see 'im."

The Girl's intuition told her that a member of the band stood before her, and she regarded him suspiciously. Not that she believed that he was disloyal and had come there with hostile intent, but because she felt that she must be absolutely sure of her ground before she revealed the fact that Johnson was in the cabin. She let some moments pass before she replied:

"I don't know nothin' about your master. Who is he?"

An indulgent smile crossed the Mexican's face.

"That ver' good to tella other peoples; but I know 'im here too much. You trusta me—me quita safe."

All this was said with many gestures and an air that convinced the Girl that he was speaking the truth. But since she deemed it best that

the invalid should be kept from any excitement, she resolved to make the Mexican divulge to her the nature of his important errand.

"How do you know he's here?" she began warily. "What do you want 'im for?"

The Mexican's shifty eyes wandered all over the room as if to make certain that no inimical ears were listening; then he whispered:

"I tella you something—you lika the *Maestro*?"

Unconsciously the Girl nodded, which evidently satisfied the Mexican, for he went on:

"You thinka well of him—yees. Now I tella you something. The man Pedro 'e no good. 'E wisha the reward—the money for Ramerrez. 'E and the woman—woman no good—tell Meester Ashby they thinka 'im 'ere."

The Girl felt the colour leave her cheeks, though she made a gesture for him to proceed.

"Pedro not 'ere any longer," smiled the Mexican. "Me senda 'im to the devil. Serva 'im right."

"An' the woman?" gasped the Girl.

"She gone—got away—Monterey by this time," replied Castro with evident disappointment. "But Meester Ashby 'e know too much—'ees men everywhere searched the camp—no safa 'ere now. To-norrow—" Castro stopped short; the next instant with a joyful gleam in his eyes he cried out: "*Maestro*!"

"Castro's right, Girl," said Johnson, who had waked and heard the Mexican's last words; "it is not safe a moment more here, and I must go."

With a little cry of loving protest the Girl abruptly left the men to talk over the situation and sought the opposite side of the room. There, her eyes half-closed and her lips pressed tightly together she gave herself up to her distressing fears. After a while it was made plain to her that she was being brought into the conversation, for every now and then Castro would look curiously at her; at length, as if it had been determined by them that nothing should be undertaken without her advice, Johnson, followed by his subordinate, came over to her and related in detail all the startling information that Castro had brought.

Quietly the Girl listened and, in the end, it was agreed between them that it would be safer for the men not to leave the cabin together, but that Castro should go at once with the understanding that he should procure horses and wait for the master at a given point across the ravine. It was decided, too, that there was not a moment to be lost in putting their plan into execution. In consequence, Castro immediately took his departure.

The hour that passed before the time set for Johnson to leave the cabin was a most trying one for both of them. It was not so hard on the man, of course, for he was excited over the prospect of escaping; but the Girl, whose mind was filled with the dread of what might happen to him, had nothing to sustain her. Despite his objection, she had stipulated that, with Jackrabbit as a companion, she should accompany him to the outskirts of the camp. And so, at the moment of departure, throwing about her a cloak of some rough material, she went up to her lover and said with a quiver in her voice:

"I'm ready, Dick, but I'm a-figurin' that I can't let you go alone—you jest got to take me below with you, an' that's all there is to it."

The man shook his head.

"There's very little risk, believe me. I'll join Castro and ride all through the night. I'll be down below in no time at all. But we must be going, dear."

The man passed through the door first. But when it came the Girl's turn she hesitated, for she had seen a dark shadow flit by the window. It was as if someone had been stealthily watching there. In another moment, however, it turned out to be Jackrabbit and, greatly relieved, the Girl whispered to Johnson that he was to descend the trail between the Indian and herself, and that on no account was he to utter a word until she gave him permission.

For another moment or so they stood in silence; Johnson, appreciating fully what were the Girl's feelings, did not dare to whisper even a word of encouragement to her. At last, she ordered the Indian to lead the way, and they started.

The trail curved and twisted around the mountain, and in places they had to use the greatest care lest a misstep should carry them over a precipice with a drop of hundreds of feet. It was a perilous

descent, inasmuch as the path was covered with snow. Moreover, it was necessary that as little noise as possible should be made while they were making their way past the buildings of the camp below, for the Mexican had not been wrong when he stated that Ashby's men were quartered at, or in the immediate vicinity of, The Palmetto. Fortunately, they passed through without meeting anyone, and before long they came to the edge of the plateau beneath which was the ravine which Johnson had to cross to reach the spot where it had been agreed that Castro should be waiting with horses for his master. It was also the place where the Girl was to leave her lover to go on alone, and so they halted. A few moments passed without either of them speaking; at length, the man said in as cheery a voice as he could summon:

"I must leave you here. I remember the way well. All danger is past."

The Girl's lips were quivering; she asked:

"An' when will you be back?"

The man noted her emotion, and though he himself was conscious of a choking sensation he contrived to say in a most optimistic tone:

"In two weeks—not more than two weeks. It will take all that time to arrange things at the rancho. As it is, I hardly see my way clear to dismissing my men—you see, they belong to me, almost, and—but I'll do so, never fear. No power on earth could make me take up the old life again."

The Girl said nothing in reply; instead she put both her arms around his neck and remained a long time in his embrace. At last, summoning up all her fortitude she put him resolutely from her, and whispered:

"When you are ready, come. You must leave me now." And with a curt command to the Indian she fled back into the darkness.

For an instant the road agent's eyes followed the direction that she had taken; then, his spirits rising at the thought that his escape was now well-nigh assured, he turned and plunged down the ravine.

XV.

As has been said, it was a custom of the miners, whenever a storm made it impossible for them to work in the mines, to turn the dance-hall of the Polka Saloon into an Academy, the post of teacher being filled by the Girl. It happened, therefore, that early the following morning the men of Cloudy Mountain Camp assembled in the low, narrow room with its walls of boards nailed across inside upright beams—a typical miners' dance-hall of the late Forties—which they had transformed into a veritable bower, so eager were they to please their lovely teacher. Everyone was in high spirits, Rance alone refraining from taking any part whatsoever in the morning's activities; dejectedly, sullenly, he sat tilted back in an old, weather-beaten, lumber chair before the heavily-dented, sheet-iron stove in a far corner of the room, gazing abstractedly up towards the stove's rusty pipe that ran directly through the ceiling; and what with his pale, waxen countenance, his eyes red and half-closed for the want of sleep, his hair ruffled, his necktie awry, his waistcoat unfastened, his boots unpolished, and the burnt-out cigar which he held between his white, emaciated fingers, he was not the immaculate-looking Rance of old, but presented a very sad spectacle indeed.

Outside, through the windows,—over which had been hung curtains of red and yellow cotton,—could be seen the green firs on the mountain, their branches dazzling under their burden of snow crystals; and stretching out seemingly interminably until the line of earth and sky met were the great hills white with snow except in the spots where the wind had swept it away. But within the little, low dance-hall, everywhere were evidences of festivity and good cheer, the walls being literally covered with pine boughs and wreaths of berries, while here and there was an eagle's wing or an owl's head, a hawk or a vulture, a quail or a snow-bird, not to mention the big, stuffed game cock that was mounted on a piece of weather-beaten board, until it would seem as if every variety of bird native to the Sierra Mountains was represented there.

Grouped together on one side of the wall were twelve buck horns, and these served as a sort of rack for the miners to hang their hats and coats during the school session. Several mottoes, likewise upon

the wall, were intended to attract the students' attention, the most conspicuous being: "Live and Learn" and "God Bless Our School." A great bear's skin formed a curtain between the dance-hall and the saloon, while upon the door-frame was a large hand rudely painted, the index-finger outstretched and pointing to the next room. It said:

"To The Bar."

It was, however, upon the teacher's desk—a whittled-up, hand-made affair which stood upon a slightly-raised platform—that the boys had outdone themselves in the matter of decoration. Garlanded both on top and around the sides with pine boughs and upon the centre of which stood a tall glass filled with red and white berries, it looked not unlike a sacrificial altar which, in a way, it certainly was. A box that was intended for a seat for the teacher was also decorated with pine branches; while several cheap, print flags adorned the primitive iron holder of the large lamp suspended from the ceiling in the centre of the room. Altogether it was a most festive-looking Academy that was destined to meet the teacher's eye on this particular morning.

For some time Nick had been standing near the window gazing in the direction of the Girl's cabin. Turning, suddenly, to Rance, the only other occupant of the room, he remarked somewhat sadly:

"I'd be willin' to lose the profits of the bar if we could git back to a week ago—before Johnson walked into this room."

At the mention of the road agent's name Rance's eyes dropped to the floor. It required no flash of inspiration to tell him that things would never be what they had been.

"Johnson," he muttered, his face ashen white and a sound in his throat that was something like a groan. "A week—a week in her cabin—nursed and kissed..." he finished shortly.

Nick had been helping himself to a drink; he wheeled swiftly round, confronting him.

"Oh, say, Rance, she—"

Rance took the words out of his mouth.

"Never kissed him! You bet she kissed him! It was all I could do to keep from telling the whole camp he was up there." His eyes blazed and his hands tightened convulsively.

"But you didn't..." Nick broke in on him quickly. "If I hadn't been let into the game by the Girl I'd a thought you were a level Sheriff lookin' for him. Rance, you're my ideal of a perfect gent."

Rance braced up in his chair.

"What did she see in that Sacramento shrimp, will you tell me?" presently he questioned, contempt showing on every line of his face.

The little barkeeper did not answer at once, but filled a glass with whisky which he handed to him.

"Well, you see, I figger it out this way, boss," at last he answered, meeting him face to face frankly, earnestly, his foot the while resting on the other's chair. "Love's like a drink that gits a hold on you an' you can't quit. It's a turn of the head or a touch of the hands, or it's a half sort of smile, an' you're doped, doped, doped with a feelin' like strong liquor runnin' through your veins, an' there ain't nothin' on earth can break it up once you've got the habit. That's love."

Touched by the little barkeeper's droll philosophy, the Sheriff dropped his head on his breast, while the hand which held the glass unconsciously fell to his side.

"I've got it," went on Nick with enthusiasm; "you've got it; the boy's got it; the Girl's got it; the whole damn world's got it. It's all the heaven there is on earth, an' in nine cases out of ten it's hell."

Rance opened his lips to speak, but quickly drew them in tightly. The next instant Nick touched him lightly on the shoulder and pointed to the empty glass in his hand, the contents having run out upon the floor.

With a mere glance at the empty glass Rance returned it to Nick. Presently, then, he took out his watch and fell to studying its face intently, and only when he had finally returned the watch to his pocket did he voice what was in his mind.

"Well, Nick," he said, "her road agent's got off by now."

Whereupon, the barkeeper, too, took out his watch and consulted it.

"Left Cloudy at three o'clock this morning—five hours off..." was his brief comment.

Once more a silence fell upon the room. Then, all of a sudden, the sound of horses' hoofs and the murmur of rough voices came to their ears, and almost instantly a voice was heard to cry out:

"Hello!"

"Hello!" came from an answering voice.

"Why, it's The Pony Express got through at last!" announced Nick, incredulously; and so saying he took up the whisky bottle and glasses which lay on the teacher's desk and dashed into the saloon. He had barely left, however, than The Pony Express, muffled up to his ears and looking fit to brave the fiercest of storms, entered the room, hailing the boys with:

"Hello, boys! Letter for Ashby!"

The Deputy—who with Trinidad and Sonora had come running in, the latter carrying a boot-leg and a stove-polishing brush in his hand—took the letter and started in search of the Wells Fargo Agent who, Rance had told them, had gone to sleep.

"Well, boys, how d'you like bein' snowed in for a week?" asked The Pony Express, warming himself by the stove; and then without waiting for an answer he rattled on: "There's a rumour at The Ridge that you all let Ramerrez freeze an' missed a hangin'. Say, they're roarin' at you, chaps!" And with a "So long, boys!" he strode out of the room.

Sonora started in hot pursuit after him, hollering out:

"Wait! Wait!" And when The Pony Express halted, he added: "Says you to the boys at The Ridge as you ride by, the Academy at Cloudy is open to-day full blast!"

"Whoopee! Whoop!" chimed in Trinidad and began to execute a *pas seul* in the middle of the room, dropping into a chair just in time to avoid running into Nick, who hurriedly returned with two glasses and a bottle.

"Help yourselves, boys," he said; which they did to the accompaniment of a succession of joyous yells from Trinidad.

Meantime Rance had relighted the burnt-out cigar which he had been holding for some time between his fingers, and was sending curls of smoke upwards towards the ceiling.

"Academy," he sneered.

Sonora surveyed him critically for some moments; at length he said:

"Say, Rance, what's the matter with you? We began this Academy game together—we boys an' the Girl—an' there's a damn pretty piece of sentiment back of it. She's taught some of us our letters, and—"

"He's a wearin' mournin' because Johnson didn't fall alive into his hands," interposed Trinidad with a laugh.

"Is that it?" queried Sonora.

"Ain't it enough, Rance, that he must be lyin' dead down some canyon, with his mouth full of snow?" A mocking smile was on Trinidad's face as he asked the question.

"You done all you could to git 'im," went on Sonora as if there had been no interruption. "The boys is all satisfied he's dead."

"Dead?" Rance fairly picked up the word. "Dead? Yes, he's dead," he declared tensely, and unconsciously arose and went over to the window where he stood motionless, gazing through the parted curtains at the snow-covered hills. Presently the boys saw a cynical smile spread over his face, and a moment later, he added: "The matter with me is that I'm a Chink."

This depreciation of himself was so thoroughly un-Rance like, that it brought forth great bursts of laughter from the men, but notwithstanding which, Rance went on to admit, in the same sullen tone, that it was all up with him and the Girl.

"Throwed 'im!" whispered Trinidad to Sonora with a pleased look on his face.

Sonora, likewise, was beaming with joy when almost instantly he turned to Nick with:

"As sure's you live she's throwed 'im for me!"

Nick, among his other accomplishments, had a faculty for dumbness and said nothing; but a smile which approached a grin formed on his face as he stood eyeing quizzically first one and then the other. Finally, picking up the empty glasses, he left the room.

"Will old dog Tray remember me"—immediately sung out Trinidad, gleefully. While Sonora, in the seventh heaven of delight, began to caper about the room. Of a sudden Nick poked his head in through the door to inquire into the cause of their hilarity, but they ignored him completely. At the bar-room door, however, Sonora halted and, glancing over his shoulder in the Sheriff's direction, he added in a most tantalising manner:

"... for me!"

But while Trinidad and Sonora were going out through one door the Deputy was entering through another. He was greatly agitated and carried in his hand the letter which The Pony Express had entrusted to his keeping for Ashby.

"Why, Ashby's skipped!" he announced uneasily. "Got off just after three this morning—posse and all."

A question was in Nick's eyes as he turned upon the speaker with the interjection:

"What!" And then as the Deputy made a dash for the bar-room, he added with a swift change of manner: "Help yourself, Dep."

But if Nick was slow to realise the situation, not so the Sheriff, who instantly awoke to the fact that the Wells Fargo Agent was on Johnson's trail. His lips drew quickly back in a half-grin.

"Ashby's after Johnson," presently he said with a savage little laugh. "Nick, he was watchin' that greaser... Took him ten minutes to saddle up—Johnson has ten minutes' start"—He broke off abruptly and ended impatiently with: "Oh, Lord, they'll never get him! He's a wonder on the road—you've got to take your hat off to the damn cuss!" And with a dig at the other's ribs that was half-playful, half-serious, he was off in pursuit of Ashby.

A moment later the miners began to pile in for school, whooping and yelling, their feet covered with snow. Sonora led with an armful of wood, which he deposited on the floor beside the stove; then came Handsome Charlie and Happy Halliday, together with Old Steady and Bill Crow, who immediately dropped on all fours and began to play leap-frog.

"Boys gatherin' for school," observed Trinidad, hurriedly opening the door; and while the men proceeded to flock in, he got into his jacket which lay on a chair beside the teacher's desk.

"Here, Trin, here's the book!" cried out Happy Halliday; and the book, which was securely tied in a red cotton handkerchief, went flying through the air.

In those few words the signal was given; the fun was on in earnest. Instantly the miners—veritable school-boys they were, so genuine was their merriment—braced themselves for a catch of the book, which had landed safely in Trinidad's hands. Now it was aimed at

Sonora, who caught it on the fly; from Sonora it travelled to Old Steady, who sent it whizzing over to Handsome. Now the Deputy made ready to receive it; but instead it landed once more in Sonora's hands amidst cheers of "Come on, Sonora! Whoopee! Whoop!"

"Sh-sh-sh, boys!" warned the Deputy as Sonora was about to send the book on another expedition through the air; "here comes the noo scholar from Watson's."

An ominous hush fell upon the room. One could have heard a pin drop as the school settled itself down with anticipatory grins that said, "What won't we do to Bucking Billy!" Therefore, there was not an eye that was not upon the new pupil when with dinner-pail swinging on one arm and the other holding tightly onto a small slate, he slowly advanced towards them.

"Did you ever play Lame Soldier, m' friend?" was Sonora's greeting, while the miners crowded around them.

"No," replied the big, raw-boned, gullible-looking fellow with a grin.

"We'll play it after school; you'll be the stirrup," promised Sonora; then turning to his mates with a laugh, which was unobserved by Bucking Billy, he added: "We'll initiate 'im."

Presently the miners began to move away and Trinidad, picking up a chip which he espied under a bench, put it on his shoulder and stood in the centre of the room, thereby indirectly challenging the new pupil to a scrimmage.

"Don't do it!" cried Old Steady as he hung up his hat upon a buck's horn on the wall.

"Go on! Go on!" encouraged Bill Crow, hanging up his hat beside Old Steady's.

The boys took up his words in chorus.

"Go on! Go on!"

Whereupon, Sonora made a dash far the chip and knocked it off of Trinidad's shoulder, blazing huskily into his face as he did so:

"You do, do you?"

In the twinkling of an eye Trinidad's jacket was off and the two men were engaged in a hand-to-hand scuffle.

"Soak him!" came from a voice somewhere in the crowd.

"Hit him!" urged another.

"Bat him in the eye!" shrieked Handsome Charlie.

Finally Sonora succeeded in throwing down his opponent and sent him rolling along the floor, the contents of his pockets marking his trail.

The rafters of The Polka shook to a storm of cheering, and there is no telling when the men would have ceased had not Nick interfered at that moment by yelling out:

"Boys, boys, here she is!"

"Here comes the Girl!" came simultaneously from Happy Halliday, who had got a glimpse of her coming down the trail.

None the worse for his defeat and fall, Trinidad sprang to his feet; while Sonora made a dash for a seat. They had not been placed; whereupon he cried out excitedly:

"The seats, boys, where's the seats?"

For the few minutes that preceded the Girl's entrance into the room no men were ever known to work more rapidly or more harmoniously. They fairly flew in and out of the room, now bringing in the great whittled-up, weather-beaten benches and placing them in school-room fashion, and then rolling in boxes and casks which served as a ground-hold for the planks which were stretched across them for desks. It was in the midst of these pilgrimages that Trinidad rushed over to Nick to ask whether he did not think to-day a good time to put the question to the Girl.

Nick's eyes twinkled up with merriment; nevertheless, his face took on a dubious look when presently he answered:

"I wouldn't rush her, Trin—you've got plenty of time..." And when he proceeded to put up the blackboard he almost ran into Sonora, who stood by the teacher's desk getting into his frock coat.

"Hurry up, boys, hurry up!" urged Trinidad, though he himself smilingly looked on.

A moment later the Girl, carrying a small book of poems, walked quietly into their midst. She was paler and not as buoyant as usual, but she managed to appear cheerful when she said:

"Hello, boys!"

The men were all smiles and returned her greeting with:

"Hello, Girl!"

Then followed the presentation of their offerings—mere trifles, to be sure, but given out of the fulness of their hearts. Sonora led with a bunch of berries, which was followed by Trinidad with an orange.

"From 'Frisco," he said simply, watching the effect of his words with pride.

A bunch of berries was also Happy's contribution, which he made with a stiff little bow and the one word:

"Regards."

Meantime Nick, faithful friend that he was, went down on his knees and began to remove the Girl's moccasins. The knowledge of his proximity encouraged the Girl to glance about her to see if she could detect any signs on the men's faces which would prove that they suspected the real truth concerning her absence. Needless to say adoration and love was all that she saw; nevertheless, she felt ill-at-ease and, unconsciously, repeated:

"Hello, boys!" And then added, a little more bravely: "How's everythin'?"

"Bully!" spoke up Handsome Charlie, who was posing for her benefit, as was his wont, beside one of the desks.

"Say, we missed you," acknowledged Sonora with a world of tenderness in his voice. "Never knew you to desert The Polka for a whole week before."

"No, I—I..." stammered guiltily, and with their little gifts turned abruptly towards her desk lest she should meet their gaze.

"Academy's opened," suddenly announced Happy, "and—"

"Yes, I see it is," quickly answered the Girl, brushing away a tear that persisted in clinging to her eyelids; slowly, now, she drew off her gloves and laid them on the desk.

"I guess I'm kind o' nervous to-day, boys," she began.

"No wonder," observed Sonora. "Road agent's been in camp an' we missed a hangin'. I can't git over that."

All a-quiver and not daring to meet the men's gaze, much less to discuss the road agent with them, the Girl endeavoured to hide her confusion by asking Nick to help her off with her cape. Turning presently she said in a strained voice:

"Well, come on, boys—come, now!"

Immediately the boys fell in line for the opening exercises, which consisted of an examination by the Girl of their general appearance.

"Let me see your hands," she said to the man nearest to her; a glance was sufficient, and he was expelled from her presence. "Let me see yours, Sonora," she commanded.

Holding his hands behind his back the man addressed moved towards her slowly, for he was conscious of the grime that was on them. Before he had spoken his apology she ordered him none too gently to go and wash them, ending with an emphatic:

"Git!"

"Yes'm," was his meek answer, though he called back as he disappeared: "Been blackenin' my boots."

The Girl took up the word quickly.

"Boots! Yes, an' look at them boots!" And as each man came up to her, "An' them boots! an' them boots! Get in there the whole lot o' you an' be sure that you leave your whisky behind."

When all had left the room save Nick, who stood with her cape on his arm near the desk she suddenly became conscious that she still had her hood on, and at once began to remove it—a proceeding which brought out clearly the extraordinary pallor of her face which, generally, had a bright, healthy colouring. Now she beckoned to Nick to draw near. No need for her to speak, for he had caught the questioning look in her eyes, and it told him plainer than any words that she was anxious to hear of her lover. He was about to tell her the little he knew when with lips that trembled she finally whispered:

"Have you heard anythin'? Do you think he got through safe?"

Nick nodded in the affirmative.

"I saw 'im off, you know," she went on in the same low voice; then, before Nick could speak, she concluded anxiously: "But s'pose he don't git through?"

"Oh, he'll git through sure! We'll hear he's out of this country pretty quick," consoled the little barkeeper just as Rance, unperceived by them, quietly entered the room and went over to a chair by the stove.

XVI.

No man had more of a dread of the obvious than the Sheriff. His position, he felt, was decidedly an unpleasant one. Nevertheless, in the silence that followed the Girl's discovery of his presence, he struggled to appear his old self. He was by no means unconscious of the fact that he had omitted his usual cordial greeting to her, and he felt that she must be scrutinising him, feature by feature. When, therefore, he shot a covert glance at her, it was with surprise that he saw an appealing look in her eyes.

"Oh, Jack, I want to thank you—" she began, but stopped quickly, deterred by the hard expression that instantly spread itself over the Sheriff's face. Resentment, all the more bitter because he believed it to be groundless, followed hard on the heels of her words which he thought to be inspired solely by a delicate tactfulness.

"Oh, don't thank me that he got away," he said icily. "It was the three aces and the pair you held—"

This was the Girl's opportunity; she seized it.

"About the three aces, I want to say that—"

It was Rance's turn to interrupt, which he did brutally.

"He'd better keep out of my country, that's all."

"Yes, yes."

To the Girl, any reference to her lover was a stab. Her face was pale with her terrible anxiety; notwithstanding, the contrast of her pallid cheeks and masses of golden hair gave her a beauty which Rance, as he met her eyes, found so extraordinarily tempting that he experienced a renewed fury at his utter helplessness. At the point, however, when it would seem from his attitude that all his self-control was about to leave him, the Girl picked up the bell on the desk and rang it vigorously.

Began then the long procession of miners walking around the room before taking their seats on the benches. At their head was Happy Halliday, who carried in his hands a number of slates, the one on the top having a large sponge attached. These were all more or less in bad condition, some having no frames, while others were mere slits of slate, but all had slate-pencils fastened to them by strings.

"Come along, boys, get your slates!" sang out Happy as he left the line and let the others file past him.

"Whoop!" vociferated Trinidad in a burst of enthusiasm.

"Trin, you're out o' step there!" reprimanded the teacher a little sharply; and then addressing Happy she ordered him to take his place once more in the line.

In a little while they were all seated, and now, at last, it seemed to the barkeeper as if the air of the room had been freed of its tension. No longer did he experience a sense of alertness, a feeling that something out of the ordinary was going to happen, and it was with immense relief that he heard the Girl take up her duties and ask:

"What books were left from last year?"

At first no one was able to give a scrap of information on this important matter; maybe it was because all lips were too dry to open; in the end, however, when the silence was becoming embarrassing, Happy moistened his lips with his tongue, and answered:

"Why, we scared up jest a whole book left. The name of it is—is—is—" The effort was beyond his mental powers and he came to a helpless pause.

Swelling with importance, and drawing forth the volume in question from his pocket, Sonora stood up and finished:

"—is 'Old Joe Miller's Jokes.'"

"That will do nicely," declared the Girl and seated herself on the pine-decorated box.

"Now, boys," continued Sonora, ever the most considerate of pupils, "before we begin I propose no drawin' of weppings, drinkin' or swearin' in school hours. The conduct of certain members wore on teacher last term. I don't want to mention no names, but I want Handsome an' Happy to hear what I'm sayin'." And after a sweeping glance at his mates, who, already, had begun to disport themselves and jeer at the unfortunate pair, he wound up with: "Is that straight?"

"You bet it is!" yelled the others in chorus; whereupon Sonora dropped into his seat.

In time order was restored and now the Girl, looking at Rance out of her big, frightened, blue eyes, observed:

"Rance, last year you led off with an openin' address, an'—"

"Yes, yes, go on Sheriff!" cried the boys, hailing her suggestion with delight.

Nevertheless, the Sheriff hesitated, seeing which, Trinidad contributed:

"Let 'er go, Jack!"

At length, fixing a look upon the Girl, Rance rose and said significantly:

"I pass."

"Oh, then, Sonora," suggested the Girl, covering up her embarrassment as best she could, "won't you make a speech?"

"Me—speak?" exploded Sonora; and again; "Me—speak? Oh, the devil!"

"Sh-sh!" came warningly from several of the boys.

"Why, I didn't mean that, o' course," apologised Sonora, colouring, and incidentally expectorating on Bucking Billy's boots. But to his infinite sorrow no protest worthy of the word was forthcoming from the apparently insensible Bucking Billy.

"Go on! Go on!" urged the school.

Sonora coughed behind his hand; then he began his address.

"Gents, I look on this place as something more 'n a place to sit around an' spit on—the stove. I claim that there's culture in the air o' Californay an' we're here to buck up again it an' hook on."

"Hear! Hear! Hear!" voiced the men together, while their fists came down heavily upon the improvised desks before them.

"With these remarks," concluded Sonora, "I set." And suiting the action to the word he plumped himself down heavily upon the bench, but only to rise again quickly with a cry of pain and strike Trinidad a fierce blow, who, he rightly suspected, was responsible for the pin that had found a lodging-place in the seat of his trousers.

At that not even the Girl's remonstrances prevented the boys, who had been silent as mice all the time that the instrument of torture was being adjusted, from giving vent to roars of laughter; and for a moment things in the school-room were decidedly boisterous.

"Sit down, boys, sit down!" ordered the Girl again and again; but it was some moments before she could get the school under control.

When, finally, the skylarking had ceased, the Girl said in a voice which, despite its strange weariness, was music to their ears:

"Once more we meet together. There's ben a lot happened o' late that has learned me that p'r'aps I don't know as much as I tho't I did, an' I can't teach you much more. But if you're willin' to take me for what I am—jest a woman who wants things better, who wants everybody all they ought to be, why I'm willin' to rise with you an' help reach out—" She stopped abruptly, for Handsome was waving his hand excitedly at her, and asked a trifle impatiently: "What is it, Handsome?"

Handsome rose and hurriedly went over to her.

"Whisky, teacher, whisky! I want it so bad—"

The school rose to its feet as one man.

"Teacher! Teacher!" came tumultuously from all, their hands waving frantically in the air. And then without waiting for permission to speak the cry went up: "Whisky! Whisky!"

"No, no whisky," she denied them flatly.

Gradually the commotion subsided, for all knew that she meant what she said, at least for the moment.

"An' now jest a few words more on the subject o' not settin' judgment on the errin'—a subject near my heart."

This remark of the Girl's brought forth murmurs of wonder, and in the midst of them the door was pushed slowly inward and The Sidney Duck, wearing the deuce of spades which the Sheriff had pinned to his jacket when he banished him from their presence for cheating at cards, stood on the threshold, looking uncertainly about him. At once all eyes were focused upon him.

"Git! Git!" shouted the men, angrily. This was followed by a general movement towards him, which so impressed The Sidney Duck that he turned on his heel and was fleeing for his life when a cry from the Girl stopped him.

"Boys, boys," said the Girl in a reproving voice, which silenced them almost instantly; then, beckoning to Sid to approach, she went on in her most gentle tones: "I was jest gittin' to you, Sid, as I promised. You can stay."

Looking like a whipped dog The Sidney Duck advanced warily towards her.

Sonora's brow grew thunderous.

"What, here among gentlemen?"

And that his protest met with instantaneous approval was shown by the way the miners shifted uneasily in their seats and shouted threateningly:

"Git! Git!"

"Why, the fellow's a—" began Trinidad, but got no further, for the Girl stopped him by exclaiming:

"I know, I know, Trin—I've tho't it all over!"

For the next few minutes the Girl stood strangely still and her face became very grave. Never before had the men seen her in a mood like this, and they exchanged wondering glances. Presently she said:

"Boys, of late a man in trouble has been on my mind—" She paused, her glance having caught the peculiar light which her words had caused to appear in Rance's eyes, and lest he should misunderstand her meaning, she hastened to add: "Sid, o' course,—an' I fell to thinkin' o' the Prodigal Son. He done better, didn't he?"

"But a card sharp," objected Sonora from the depths of his big voice.

"Yes, that's what!" interjected Trinidad, belligerently.

The Girl's eyebrows lifted and a shade of resentment was in the answering voice:

"But s'pose there was a moment in his life when he was called upon to find a extra ace—can't we forgive 'im? He says he's sorry—ain't you, Sid?"

All the while the Girl had been speaking The Sidney Duck kept his eyes lowered and was swallowing nervously. Now he raised them and, with a feeble attempt to simulate penitence, he acknowledged that he had done wrong. Nevertheless, he declared:

"But if I 'adn't got caught things would 'a' been different. Oh, yes, I'm sorry."

In an instant the Girl was at his side removing the deuce of spades from his coat.

"Sid, you git your chance," she said with trembling lips. "Now go an' sit down."

A broad smile was creeping over The Sidney Duck's countenance as he moved towards the others; but Happy took it upon himself to limit its spread.

"Take that!" he blazed, striking the man in the face. "And git out of here!

"Happy, Happy!" cried the Girl. Her voice was so charged with reproach that The Sidney Duck was allowed by the men to pass on without any further molestation. Nevertheless, when he attempted to sit beside them, they moved as far away as possible from him and compelled him to take a stool that stood apart from the benches which held them together in friendly proximity.

At this point Trinidad inquired of the Girl whether she meant to infer that honesty was not the best policy, and by way of illustration, he went on to say:

"S'posin' my watch had no works an' I was to sell it to the Sheriff for one hundred dollars. Would you have much respect for me?"

For the briefest part of a second the Girl seemed to be reflecting.

"I'd have more respect for you than for the Sheriff," she answered succinctly.

"Hurrah! Whoopee! Whoop!" yelled the men, who were delighted both with what she said as well as her pert way of saying it.

It was in the midst of these shouts that Billy Jackrabbit and Wowkle, unobserved by the others, quietly stole into the room and squatted themselves down under the blackboard. When the merriment had subsided Rance rose and took the floor. His face was paler than usual, though his voice was calm when presently he said:

"Well, bein' Sheriff, I'm careful about my company—I'll sit in the bar. Cheats and road agents"—and here he paused meaningly and glanced from The Sidney Duck to the Girl—"ar'n't jest in my line. I walk in the open road with my head up and my face to the sun, and whatever I've pulled up, you'll remark I've always played square and stood by the cyards."

"I know, I know," observed the Girl and fell wearily into her seat; the next instant she went on more confidently: "An' that's the way to travel—in the straight road. But if ever I don't travel that road, or you—"

"You always will, you bet," observed Nick with feeling.

"You bet she will!" shouted the others.

"But if I don't," continued the Girl, insistently, "I hope there'll be someone to lead me back—back to the right road. 'Cause remember, Rance, some of us are lucky enough to be born good, while others have to be 'lected."

"That's eloquence!" cried Sonora, moved almost to tears; while Rance took a step forward as if about to make some reply; but the next instant, his head held no longer erect and his face visibly twitching, he passed into the bar-room.

A silence reigned for a time, which was broken at last by the Girl announcing with great solemnity:

"If anybody can sing 'My Country 'Tis,' Academy's opened."

At this request, really of a physical nature, and advanced in a spirit of true modesty, all present, curiously enough, seemed to have lost their voices and nudged one another in an endeavour to get the hymn started. Someone insisted that Sonora should go ahead, but that worthy pupil objected giving as his excuse, obviously a paltry one and trumped up for the occasion, that he did not know the words. There was nothing to it, therefore, but that the Indians should render the great American anthem. And so, standing stolidly facing the others, their high-pitched, nasal voices presently began:

"My country 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing."

"Well, if that ain't sarkism!" interjected Sonora between the lines of the hymn.

"Land where our fathers died—"

"You bet they died hard!" cut in Trinidad, rolling his eyes upward in a comical imitation of the Indians.

"Land of the Pilgrim's pride,
From every mountain side
Let freedom ring."

All the while the Indians were singing the last lines of the hymn the Girl's face was a study in reminiscent dreams, but when they had finished and were leaving the room, she came back to earth, as it were, and clapped her hands, an appreciation which brought forth from Wowkle a grateful "Huh!"

"I would like to read you a little verse from a book of poems," presently went on the teacher; and when the men had given her their attention, she read with much feeling:

"'No star is ever lost we once have seen,
We always may be what we might have been.'"

"Why, what's the matter?" inquired Sonora, greatly moved at the sight of the tears which, of a sudden, began to run down the teacher's cheeks.

"Why, what's—?" came simultaneously from the others, words failing them.

"Nothin', nothin', only it jest came over me that I'll be leavin' you soon," stammered the Girl. "How can I do it? How can I do it?" she wailed.

Sonora gazed at her unbelievingly.

"Do what?" he said.

"What did she say?" questioned Trinidad.

Now Sonora went over to her, and asked:

"What d'you say? Why, what's the matter?"

Slowly the Girl raised her head and looked at him through half-closed lids, the tears that still clung to them, blinding her almost. Plainly audible in the silence of the room the seconds ticked away on the clock, and still she did not speak; at last she murmured:

"Oh, it's nothin', nothin', only I jest remembered I've promised to leave Cloudy soon an', p'r'aps, we might never be together again—you an' me an' The Polka. Oh, it took me jest like that when I seen your dear, ol' faces, your dear, plucky, ol' faces an' realised that—" She could not go on, and buried her face in her hands, her glistening blonde head shaking with her sobs.

It was thus that the Sheriff, entering a moment later, found her. Without a word he resumed his seat in front of the fire.

Sonora continued to stare blankly at her. He was too dazed to speak, much less to think. He broke silence slowly.

"What—you leavin' us?"

"Leavin' us?" inquired Happy, incredulously.

"Careful, girl, careful," warned Nick, softly.

The Girl hesitated a moment, and then went recklessly on:

"It's bound to happen soon."

Sonora looked more puzzled than ever; he rested his hand upon her desk as if to support himself, and said:

"I don't quite understand. Great Gilead! We done anythin' to offend you?"

"Oh, no, no, no!" she hastened to assure him, at the same time letting her hand rest upon his.

But this explanation did not satisfy Sonora. Anxious to discover what she had at heart he went on sounding:

"Tired of us? Ain't we got style enough for you?"

The Girl did not answer; her breathing, swift and short, painfully intensified the hush that had fallen on the room; at last, the boys becoming impatient began to bombard her with questions.

"Be you goin' to show them Ridge boys we've petered out an' culture's a dead dog here?" began Happy, rising.

"Do you want them to think Academy's busted?" asked Handsome.

"Ain't we your boys no more?" put in Trinidad, wistfully.

"Ain't I your boy?" asked Sonora, sentimentally. "Why, what is it, Girl? Has anybody—tell me—perhaps—"

The Girl raised her head and dried her eyes; when she spoke one could have heard a pin drop.

"Oh, no, no, no," she said with averted face, and added tremulously: "There, we won't say no more about it. Let's forgit it. Only when I go away I want to leave the key o' my cabin with Old Sonora here, an' I want you all to come up sometimes, an' to think o' me as the girl who loved you all, an' sometimes is wishin' you well, an' I want to think o' little Nick here runnin' my bar an' not givin' the boys too much whisky." Her words died away in a sob and her head fell forward, her hand, the while, resting upon Nick's shoulder.

At last, Sonora saw what lay beneath her tears; the situation was all too clear to him now.

"Hold on!" he cried hoarsely. "There's jest one reason for the Girl to leave her home an' friends—only one: There must be some fellow away from here that she—that she likes better 'n she does any of us."

And turning once more upon the Girl, he demanded excitedly: "Is that it? Speak!"

The Girl raised her tear-stained face and looked him in the eye.

"Likes—" she repeated with a world of meaning in her voice—"in a different way, yes."

"Well, so help me!" ejaculated Happy, unhappily, while Sonora, with head bent low, went over to his seat.

The next moment the boys of the front rows had joined those of the rear and were grouping themselves together to discuss the situation.

"Sure you ain't makin' a mistake?" Trinidad questioned suddenly.

The Girl came down from her seat on the platform and went over to them.

"Mistake," she repeated dreamily. "Oh, no, no, no, boys, there's no mistake about this. Oh, Trin!" she burst out tearfully, and two soft arms crept gently about his neck. "An' Sonora—Ah, Sonora!" She raised herself on her tiny toes and kissed him on the left cheek.

The next instant she was gone.

XVII.

Whatever may be said to the contrary, there are few more humiliating moments in a man's life than when he learns that some other person has supplanted him in the affections of his adored one. And it was the Girl's knowledge of this, together with her desire to spare the feelings of her two old admirers,—for in her nature there was ever that thoughtfulness of others which never permitted her to do a mean thing to anyone,—that had caused her to flee so precipitously from the room.

But painful as was their humiliation as they stood in silence, gazing with saddened faces at the door through which the Girl had gone out, their cup of bitterness was not yet full. The next moment the Sheriff, his lips curled inscrutably, said mockingly:

"Well, boys, the right man has come at last. Take your medicine, gentlemen."

His words cut Sonora to the quick, and it was with difficulty that he braced himself to hear the worst.

"Who's the man?" he inquired gruffly.

The Sheriff's eyes fastened themselves upon him; at length with deadly coldness he drawled out:

"Johnson's the man."

All the colour went out of Sonora's face, while his lips ejaculated:

"Gol A'mighty!"

"You lie!" blazed Trinidad in the next breath, and made a quick movement towards the Sheriff.

But Rance was not to be denied. Seeing Nick advancing towards them he called upon him to verify his words; but that individual merely looked first at one and then the other and did not answer, which silence infuriated Sonora.

"Why, you tol' me...?" he said with an angry look in his eye.

"Tol' you, Sonora? Why he tol' me the same thing," protested Trinidad with an earnestness that, at any other time, would have sent his listeners into fits of laughter.

This was too much for Sonora; he flew into a paroxysm of rage.

"Well, for a first-class liar...!"

"You bet!" corroborated Trinidad, relapsing, despite his anger, into his pet phrase.

For some minutes the dejected suitors continued in this strain, now arguing and then condoling with one another, the boys, meanwhile, proceeding to clear the school-room of the benches, casks and planks, lifting or rolling them back into place as if they were made of paper.

All of a sudden Sonora's face cleared perceptibly. Turning swiftly to the sheriff, who sat tilted back in a chair before the fire, he said with unexpected cheerfulness of voice:

"Why, Johnson's dead. He got away, an'—"

"Yes, he got away," remarked Rance, dully, shaking the ashes from his cigar, which answer, together with the peculiar look which Sonora saw on the other's face, made him at once suspicious that something was being held back from them which they had a right to know. It came about, therefore, that, with a hasty movement towards the Sheriff, his eyes glaring, his voice husky, Sonora demanded:

"Jack Rance, I call on you as Sheriff for Johnson! He was in your county."

Instantly the cry was taken up by the others, but it was Trinidad who, shaking his fist in Rance's face, supplemented:

"You hustle up an' run a bridle through your p'int o' teeth or your boom for re-election 's over, you lily-fingered gambler!"

But the Sheriff did not move a muscle, though after a moment he answered coolly:

"Oh, I don't know as I give a damn...!" Which reply, to say the least, was somewhat disconcerting to the men who had surrounded him and were eyeing him threateningly.

"No talk—we want Johnson," insisted Trinidad, hotly.

"We want Johnson," echoed the crowd in low, tense voices, their fists clenched.

And still Rance did not waver, but calmly puffing sway at his long, black cigar he looked blankly into space. Presently a voice outside calling, "Boys!" sounded throughout the room and brought him back to actuality. He sat straight up in his chair while Nick, shifting uneasily about on his feet, muttered:

"Why, that's Ashby!"

"Oh, if—" began the Sheriff and stopped. The next instant the Wells Fargo Agent, a cool, triumphant look on his face, stood framed in the doorway. With a hasty movement towards him Rance asked tensely: "Did you get him?"

The answer came back, almost before the question was asked:

"Yes—we've got him."

"Not Johnson?" demanded Sonora, truculently.

"Yes, Johnson," affirmed the Wells Fargo Agent with a hard laugh, his eyes the while upon Handsome, who, unaided, was lifting a heavy cask to a bench nearby.

"Not alive?" questioned Trinidad, unwilling to trust his own ears.

"You bet!" was Ashby's sententious confirmation, at which pandemonium broke loose, Nick alone appearing dejected and morose-looking. For his love and devotion to the Girl were too genuine to permit of his taking any part whatsoever in what he believed was opposed to her happiness. On the other hand, Rance, as

may be inferred, was inwardly rejoicing, though when he perceived that Nick was eyeing him steadily he was careful to lower his eyes lest the little barkeeper should see the triumph shining beneath them. And, finally, unable to bear Nick's scrutiny any longer, he explained with a feeble attempt at self-defence:

"Well, I didn't do it, Nick, I didn't do it." But a moment later, his face hard and set, he added: "Now he be damned! There's an end of Johnson!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth, however, than Johnson, his arms bound, followed by the Deputy, strode into the room with the courage of one who has long faced death, and stood before the men who glared at him with fire in their eyes and murder in their hearts.

"How do you do, Mr. Johnson. I think, Mr. Johnson, five minutes will do for you." Rance gave to the words a peculiar accent and inflection, but this caused the prisoner to look even more composed and calm than before; he returned crisply:

"I think so."

"So this is the gentleman the Girl loves?" Sonora's face wore a cruel grin as he stood with arms folded leering at the prisoner.

The biting humour of the thought appealed to Rance, and he smiled grimly to himself.

"That's the gentleman"—he was saying when a voice outside broke in upon his words with:

"Nick! Boys! Boys!"

"It's the Girl!" cried Nick in dismay, at the same time rushing over to the door to intercept her; while Ashby, desirous of preventing any communication between the Girl and the prisoner took up a position between them—unnecessary precautions, since the Girl had no intention of re-entering the room, but wished merely to say that she had forgotten that it was recess and that the boys might have one drink.

At the sound of her voice Johnson paled. He listened to her retreating steps, then turning towards Nick he asked him to lock the door.

"Why, the devil...!" objected the Sheriff, angrily.

"Please," urged the prisoner with such a look of entreaty in his eyes that Nick could not find it in his heart to deny him, and went forthwith to the door and locked it.

"Why, you—" began Sonora with a hurried movement towards the prisoner.

"You keep out of this, Sonora," enjoined the Sheriff, coming forward to take a hand in the proceedings. "I handle the rope—pick the tree..."

"Then hurry..." said Sonora, impatiently, while Trinidad interposed with his usual, "You bet!"

"One moment," said the prisoner as the miners started to go out; and, strange to relate, the Sheriff ordered the men to halt. Turning once more to the prisoner, he said:

"Be quick—what is it?"

"It is true," began the unfortunate road agent in an even, unemotional voice, "that I love the Girl."

At these words Rance's arms flew up threateningly, while a mocking smile sprang to his lips.

"Well, you won't in a minute," he reminded him grimly.

The taunt brought no change of expression to the prisoner's face or change of tone in his voice as he went on to say that he did not care what they did to him; that he was prepared for anything; and that every man who travelled the path that he did faced death every day for a drink of water or ten minutes' sleep, concluding calmly:

"You've got me and I wouldn't care but for the Girl."

"You've got just three minutes!" A shade almost of contempt was in Sonora's exclamation.

"Yes...!" blazed Trinidad.

There was an impressive silence; then in a voice that trembled strangely between pride and humility Johnson continued:

"I don't want her to know my end. Why, that would be an awful thought for her to go on with all her life—that I died out there—near at hand. Why, boys, she couldn't stay here after that—she couldn't..."

"That's understood," replied Rance, succinctly.

"I'd like her to think," went on the prisoner, with difficulty choking back the tears, "that I got away clear and went East and

changed my way of living. So you just drag me a good ways from here before you—" He stopped abruptly and began to swallow nervously. When he spoke again it was with a perceptible change of manner. "And when I don't write and she never hears why she will say, 'he's forgotten me,' and that will be about enough for her to remember, because she loved me before she knew what I was—and you can't change love in a minute."

All the while Johnson had been speaking the Sheriff's jealousy had been growing steadily until, finally, turning upon the other with a succession of oaths he struck him a fierce blow in the face.

"I don't blame you," returned the prisoner without a trace of malice in his voice. "Strike me again—strike me—one death is not enough for me. Damn me—I wish you could... Oh, why couldn't I have let her pass! I'm sorry I came her way—but it's too late now, it's too late..."

Rance, not in the least affected by what the prisoner had been saying, asked if that was his last word.

Johnson nodded.

Trinidad, simultaneously with his nod, snapped his finger, indicating that the prisoner's time was up.

"Dep!" called the Sheriff, sharply.

The Deputy came forward and took his prisoner in charge.

"Good-bye, sir!" said Nick, who was visibly affected.

"Good-bye!" returned the prisoner, briefly. "You tell the Girl—no, come to think of it, Nick, don't say anything..."

"Come on, you!" ordered Happy.

Whereupon with a shout and an imprecation the men removed en masse to the door.

"Boys," intervened Nick at this juncture, rushing into their midst, "when Alliger was hanged Rance let 'im see his sweetheart. I think, considerin' as how she ain't goin' to see no more o' Mr. Johnson here, an' knowin' the Girl's feelin's—well, I think she ought to have a chance to—"

Nick was not allowed to finish, for instantly the men were up in arms raising a most vigorous objection to his proposal; but,

notwithstanding, Nick, evidently bent upon calling the Girl, started for the door.

"No," objected Rance, obstinately.

The road agent took a step forward and, turning upon the Sheriff with a desperately hopeless expression upon his face, he said:

"Jack Rance, there were two of us—I've had my chance. Inside of ten minutes I'll be dead and it will be all your way. Couldn't you let me—"

He paused, and ended almost piteously with:

"Oh, I thought I'd have the courage not to ask, but, Oh, couldn't you let me—couldn't you—"

Once more Nick intervened by shrewdly prevaricating:

"Here's the Girl, boys!"

But this ruse of Nick's met with no greater success than his previous efforts, for Rance, putting his foot down heavily upon the stove, voiced a vigorous protest.

"All right," said the prisoner, resignedly. Nevertheless, his face reflected his disappointment. Turning now to Nick he thanked him for his efforts in his behalf.

"You must excuse Rance," remarked the little barkeeper with a significant look at the Sheriff, "for bein' so small a man as to deny the usual courtesies, but he ain't quite himself."

Weary of their cavilling, for he believed that in the end the Sheriff would carry his point, and determined to go before his courage failed him, Johnson made a movement towards the door. Speaking bravely, though his voice trembled, he said:

"Come, boys—come."

But, odd as it may seem, Nick's words had taken root.

"Wait a minute," Rance temporised.

The prisoner halted.

"I don't know that I'm so small a man as to deny the usual courtesies, since you put it that way," continued Rance. "I always have extended them. But we'll hear what you have to say—that's our protection. And it might interest some of us to hear what the Girl will have to say to you, Mr. Johnson—after a week in her cabin there may be more to know than—"

Fire leapt to Johnson's eyes; he cried hoarsely—

"Stop!"

"Rance, you don't know what you're sayin'," resented Nick, casting hard looks at him; while Sonora put a heavy hand upon the Sheriff and threatened him with:

"Now, Rance, you stop that!"

"We'll hear every word he has to say," insisted the Sheriff, doggedly.

"You bet!" affirmed Trinidad.

"Nick! Nick!" called the Girl once more, and while the little barkeeper went over to admit her the Wells Fargo Agent took his leave, calling back after him:

"Well, boys, you've got him safe—I can't wait—I'm off!"

"Dep, untie the prisoner! Boys, circle round the bar! Trin, put a man at that door! And Sonora, put a couple of men at those windows!" And so swift were the men in carrying out his instructions, that even as he spoke, everyone was at his post, the Sheriff himself and Sonora remaining unseen but on guard at the doors, while the prisoner, edging up close to the door, was not in evidence when the Girl entered.

"You can think of something to tell her—lie to her," had been the Sheriff's parting suggestion.

"I'll let her think I risked coming back to see her again," had replied the prisoner, his throat trembling.

"She won't know it's for the last time—we'll be there," had come warningly from the Sheriff as he pointed to the door that led to the bar-room.

* * * * * *

"Why, what have you got the door barred for?" asked the Girl as she came into the room; and then without waiting for an answer: "Why, where are the boys?"

"Well, you see, the boys—the boys has—has—" began Nick confusedly and stopped.

"The boys—" There was a question in the Girl's voice.

"Has gone."

"Gone where?"

"Why, to the Palmetter," came out feebly from Nick; and then with a sudden change of manner, he added: "Oh, say, Girl, I likes you!" And here he laid his hand affectionately upon her shoulder. "You've been my religion—the bar an' you. Why, you don't never want to leave us—why, I'd drop dead for you."

"Nick, you're very nice to—" began the Girl, gratefully, and stopped, for at that instant a gentle tap came upon the door. Turning swiftly, she saw Johnson coming towards her.

"Girl!" he cried in an agony of joy, and held out his arms to receive her.

"You? You?" she admonished softly.

"Don't say a word," he whispered hurriedly.

"You shouldn't have come back," she said with knitted brow.

"I had to—to say good-bye once more." And his voice was so filled with tenderness that she readily forgave him for the indiscretion.

"It's all right, it's all right," murmured Nick, his hand still on the door, which he had taken the precaution to bolt after the Girl had passed through it.

There was a moment's silence; then, going over to the windows, the Girl pulled down the curtains.

"The boys are good for quite a little bit," she said as she came back. "Don't git nervous—I'll give you warnin'..."

Nick, unwilling to witness the heartrending scene which he foresaw would follow, noiselessly withdrew into the bar-room, leaving the prisoner alone with the Girl.

"Don't be afraid, my Girl," said Johnson, softly.

But the Girl's one thought, after her first gladness, was of his safety:

"But you can't git away now without bein' seen?"

"Yes, there's another way out of Cloudy,—and I'm going to take it."

The grimness of his meaning was lost on the Girl, who answered urgently:

"Then go—go! Don't wait, go now!"

Johnson smiled a sad little smile:

"But remember that I'm sorry for the past, and—and don't forget me," he said, with an odd break in his voice,—so odd that it roused the Girl into startled wonderment.

"Forget you? Why, Dick...!"

"I mean, till we meet again," he reassured her hastily.

The Girl heaved a troubled sigh. Her fears for him were still on edge. Then, with a nervous start, she asked:

"Did he call?"

"No. He'll—he'll warn me," Johnson told her unsteadily.

"Oh, every day that dawns I'll wait for a message from you. I'll feel you wanting me. Every night I'll say to-morrow, and every to-morrow I'll say to-day... Oh, you've changed the whole world for me! I can't let you go, but I must, Dick, I must..." And bursting into tears, she buried her face on his shoulder, repeating piteously, between shaking sobs, "Oh, I'm so afraid,—I'm so afraid!"

He held her close, the strength of his arms around her reassuring her silently. "Why, you mustn't be afraid," he said in tones that were almost steady. "In a few minutes I'll be quite free, and then—"

"An' you'll make a little home for me when you're free—soon—will you?" asked the Girl, with a wan smile dawning on her trembling lips. She was drying her eyes and did not see how the light died out of the man's face, as he gazed down at her hungrily, hopelessly. This time he could not trust himself to speak, but merely nodded "yes."

"A strange feelin' has come over me," went on the Girl, brokenly, "a feelin' to hold you—to cling to you—not to let you go. Somethin' in my heart keeps sayin', 'Don't let him go!'"

Johnson felt his knees sagging oddly beneath him. The Girl's sure instinct of danger, the piteousness of their case, were making a coward of him. He tore himself from her in a panic desire to go while he still had the manhood to play his part to the end; then suddenly broke down completely, and with his face buried in his hands, sobbed aloud.

"Why, Girl," he managed to say, brokenly, "it's been worth—the whole of life just—to know you. You've brought me nearer Heaven,—you, to love a man like me!"

"Don't say that, Oh, don't say that," she hastened to say with a great tenderness in her voice. "S'pose you was only a road agent an' I

was a saloon keeper. We both came out o' nothin' an' we met, but through lovin' we're goin' to reach things now—that's us. We had to be lifted up like this to be saved."

Johnson tried to speak, but the words would not come. It was, therefore, with a feeling of relief that, presently, he heard Nick at the door, saying, "It's all clear now."

Johnson wheeled round, but Nick had flown. Turning once more to the Girl, he said with trembling lips:

"Good-bye!"

The Girl's face wore a puzzled look, and she told him that he acted as if they were never going to meet again.

"An' we are, we are, ain't we?" she questioned eagerly.

A faint little smile hovered about the corners of the road agent's mouth when presently he answered:

"Why, surely we are..."

His words cleared her face instantly.

"I want you to think o' me here jest waitin'," she said. "You was the first—there'll never be anyone but you. Why, you're the man I'd want sittin' across the table if there was a little kid like I was playin' under it. I can't say no more 'n that. Only you—you will—you must get through safe an' come back—an' well, think o' me here jest waitin', jest waitin', waitin'..."

At these words a tightness gripped the man's throat, and in the silence that followed the tears ran steadily down his cheeks.

"Oh, Girl, Girl," at last he said, "that first night I went to your cabin I saw you kneeling, praying. Say that in your heart again for me now. Perhaps I believe it—perhaps I don't... I hope I do—I want to—but say it, say it, Girl, just for the luck of it—say it..."

Quickly the Girl crossed herself, and while she sent a silent prayer to Heaven Johnson knelt at her knees, his head bowed low.

"God bless you," he murmured when the prayer was finished and arose to his feet; then bending over her hand he touched it softly with his lips.

"Good-bye!" he said chokingly and started for the door.

"Good-bye!" came slowly in return, her face no less moist than his. Presently she murmured like one in a dream: "Dick, Dick!"

The man hastened his steps and did not turn. At the door, however, he burst out in an agony of despair: "Girl! Girl...!"

But when the Girl looked up he had reached the open. She listened a moment to the retreating steps, then raising her tear-stained face above her arms, she sobbed out: "He's gone—he's gone—he's gone...!" She started in pursuit of him, but half-way across the room she fell into Nick's arms, crying out:

"He's gone, he's gone, he's gone! Dick! Dick! Dick...!"

Terribly affected at the sight of the Girl's sorrow, the little barkeeper did his best to soothe her, now patting her little blonde head as it rested upon his arm, now murmuring words of loving tenderness.

Suddenly she raised her head, and then it was that she saw for the first time the men standing huddled together near the door. In a flash the truth of the situation dawned upon her. With a look of indescribable horror upon her face she turned upon Nick, turned upon them all with:

"You knew, Nick—you all knew you had 'im! You knew you had 'im an' you're goin' to kill 'im! But you shan't—no, you shan't kill 'im—you shan't—you shan't...!"

Once more she started in pursuit of her lover, but only to fall with her face against the door, sobbing as if her heart would break.

Outside there was nothing in the enchanting scene to suggest finality. Nature never was more prodigal of her magic beauties. The sun still shone on the winter whiteness of the majestic mountains; the great arch of sky was still an azure blue; the wild things still roamed the great forest at will.

Life indeed was very beautiful.

Minutes passed and still the Girl wept.

A wonderful thing happened then—and as suddenly as it was characteristic of these impulsive and tender-hearted men. In thinking over their action long afterwards the Girl recalled how for an instant she could believe neither her ears nor her eyes. With Sonora it was credible, at least; but with Rance—it seemed wonderful to her even when observed through the vista of many years. And yet, men like Rance more often than not exhibit to the world the worst side of their nature. It is only when some cataclysm

of feeling bursts that their inner soul is disclosed and joyously viewed by eyes which have long been accustomed to judging them solely from the icy and impenetrable reserve which they invariably wear.

And so it came about that Sonora—first of the two—went over to her and laid an affectionate hand upon her shoulder.

"Why, Girl," he said, all the kindliness of his gentle nature flooding his eyes, "the boys an' me ain't perhaps realised jest what Johnson stood for you, an' hearin' what you said, an' seein' you prayin' over the cuss—"

Rance's face lit up scornfully.

"The cuss?" he cut in, objecting to a term which is not infrequently used affectionately.

"Yes, the cuss," repeated Sonora, all the vindictiveness gone from his heart now. "I got an idee maybe God's back of this 'ere game."

The Girl's heart was beating fast; she was hoping against hope when, a moment later, she asked:

"You're not goin' to pull the rope on 'im?"

"You mean I set him free," came from Rance, his tone softer, gentler than anyone had heard it in some time.

"You set 'im free?" repeated the Girl, timidly, and not daring to meet his gaze.

"I let him go," announced the Sheriff in spite of himself.

"You let 'im go?" questioned the Girl, still in a daze.

"That's our verdict, an' we're prepared to back it up," declared Sonora with a smile on his weathered face, though the tears streamed down his cheeks.

The Girl's face illumined with a great joy. She did not stop now to dissipate the tears which she saw rolling down Sonora's face, as was her wont when any of the boys were grieved or distressed, but fairly flew out of the cabin, calling half-frantically, half-ecstatically:

"Dick! Dick! You're free! You're free! You're free...!"

The minutes passed and still the miners did not move. They stood with an air of solemnity gazing silently at one another. Only too well did they realise what was happening to them. They were inconsolable. Presently, Sonora, all in a heap on a bench, took out

some tobacco and began to chew it as fast as his mouth would let him; Happy, going over to the teacher's desk, picked up the bunch of berries which he had presented her at the opening of the school session and began to fondle them; while Trinidad, too overcome to speak, stood leaning against the door, gazing sadly in the direction that the Girl had taken. As for Rance, after calling to Nick to bring him a drink, he quietly brought out a pack of cards from his pocket and, seemingly, became absorbed in a game of solitaire.

A little while later, his eyes still red from weeping, Nick remarked:

"The Polka won't never be the same, boys—the Girl's gone."

XVIII.

The soft and velvety blackness of night was giving place to a pearly grey, and the feathery streaks of a trembling dawn were shooting heavenward when a man, whose head had been pillowed on a Mexican saddle, rose from the ground in front of a tepee, made of blankets on crossed sticks, and seated himself on an old tree-stump where he proceeded to light a cigarette.

In the little tepee, sheltered by an overhanging rock, the Girl was still sleeping; and the man, sitting opposite the mound of earth and rock on which it was built, was Johnson.

A week had passed since the lovers had left Cloudy Mountain, and each day, at the moment when the sun burst above the snow-capped mountains, found them up and riding slowly eastward. No attempt whatever was made at haste, but, instead, now climbing easily to the top of the passes, now descending into the valleys, they rode slowly on, ever loathe to leave behind them the great forests and high mountains.

Noon of each day found them always resting in some glen where the sun made golden lacework of the branches over their heads; while at the approach of night when the great orb was no longer to be seen through the tree-tops and twilight was fast settling upon the woods, they would halt near a pool of a dancing brook where, with the relish of fatigue, they would partake of their rations; and then, when the silences came on, Johnson would proceed to put up with loving skill the Girl's rude quarters and, stretching himself out on a gentle slope, covered with pine needles matted close together, the

man and the Girl would go to sleep listening to the music of the stream as it gurgled and dashed along, foaming and leaping, over the rocks and beneath the little patches of snow forgotten by the sun. And to these two, whether in the depths of the vast forest or, as now, at the edge of the merciless desert, stretching away like a world without end, their environment seemed nothing less than a paradise.

There were moments, however, in the long days, which could be devoted to reflection; and often Johnson pondered over the strange fate that had brought him under the influence—an influence which held him now and which he earnestly prayed would continue to hold him—and into close relationship with a character so different from his own. A contemplation of his past life was wholly unnecessary, for the realisation had come to him that it was her personality alone that had awakened his dormant sense of what was right and what was wrong, and changed the course of his life. That his future was full of possibilities, evil as well as good, he was only too well aware; nevertheless, his faith in himself was that of a strong man whose powers of resistance, in this case, would be immeasurably strengthened by constant association with a stronger character.

It was while he was in the midst of these thoughts that the Girl, without letting him see her, quietly drew the blankets of the tepee a little to one side and peered out at him. She, too, had not been without her moments of meditation. Not that she regretted for an instant that she had committed herself to him irrevocably but, rather, because she feared lest he should find it difficult to detach himself, soul and body, from the adventurous life he had been leading. Such painful communings, however, were rare and quickly dismissed as unworthy of her; and now as she looked at him with faith and joy in her eyes, it seemed to her that never before had she seen him appear so resolute and strong, and she rejoiced that he belonged to her. At the thought a blush spread over her features, and it was not until she had drawn the blankets back into their place that she called from behind them:

"Are you awake, Dick?"

At the sound of her voice the man quickly arose and, going over to the tepee, he parted the blankets and held them open. And even as she passed out the greyness of dawn was replaced by silver, and silver by pink tints which lighted up the pale green of the sage brush,

the dwarf shrubs and clumps of Buffalo grass around them as well as the darker green of the pines and hemlocks of the foothills in the near distance.

"Another day, Girl," he said softly. "See, the dawn is breaking!"

For some moments they stood side by side in silence, the man thinking of the future, the woman serenely happy and lost in admiration of the calm beauty of the scene which, in one direction, at least, differed greatly from anything that she had ever beheld. Every night previous to the one just passed they had encamped in the great forests; but now they looked upon a vast expanse of level plain which to the north and east, stretched trackless and unbroken by mountain or ravine to an infinitude—the boundless prairies soon to be mellowed and turned to a golden brown by the shafts of a burning sun already just below the edge of an horizon aglow with opaline tints.

The Girl had ever been a lover of nature. All her life the mystery and silences of the high mountains had appealed to her soul; but never until now had she realised the marvellous beauty and glory of the great plains. And yet, though her eyes shone with the wonder of it all, there was an unmistakably sad and reminiscent note in the voice that presently murmured:

"Another day."

After a while, and as if under the spell of some unseen power, she slowly turned and faced the west where she gazed long and earnestly at the panorama of the snow-capped peaks, rising range after range, all tipped with dazzling light.

"Oh, Dick, look back!" she cried in distress. "The foothills are growin' fainter." She paused, but suddenly with a far-off look in her eyes she went on: "Every dawn—every dawn they'll be farther away. Some night when I'm goin' to sleep I'll turn an' they won't be there—red an' shinin'." Again she paused as if almost overwhelmed with emotion, saying at length with a deep sigh: "Oh, that was indeed the promised land!"

Johnson was greatly moved. It was some time before he found his voice. At length he chided her softly:

"We must always look ahead, Girl—not backwards. The promised land is always ahead."

It was perhaps strange that the Girl failed to see the new light—the light that reflected his desire for a cleaner life and an honoured place in another community with her ever at his side—the hope and faith in his eyes as he spoke; but still in that sad, reminiscent mood, with her eyes fixed on the dim distances, she failed to see it, though she replied in a voice of resignation:

"Always ahead—yes, it must be." And then again with tears in her eyes: "But, Dick, all the people there in Cloudy, how far off they seem now—like shadows movin' in a dream—like shadows I've dreamt of. Only a few days ago I clasped their hands—I seen their faces—their dear faces—I—" She broke off; then while the tears streamed down her cheeks: "An' now they're fadin'—in this little while I've lost 'em—lost 'em."

"But through you all my old life has faded away... I have lost that ..." And so saying he stretched out his arms towards her; but very gently she waved him back with a murmured:

"Not yet!"

For a little while longer her gaze remained on the mountains in the west. The mist was still over her eyes when she turned again and saw that the sun was clearing the horizon in opulent splendour.

"See," she cried with a quick transition of mood, "the sun has risen in the East—far away—fair an' clear!"

Again Johnson held out his arms to her.

"A new day—a new life—trust me, Girl."

In silence she slipped one hand into his; then she bowed her head and repeated solemnly:

"Yes—a new life."

Suddenly she drew a little away from him and faced the west again. Clinging tightly now to him with one hand, and the other raised high above her head, she cried in a voice that was fraught with such passionate longing that the man felt himself stirred to the very depths of his emotions:

"Oh, my mountains, I'm leavin' you! Oh, my California—my lovely West—my Sierras, I'm leavin' you!" She ended with a sob; but the next moment throwing herself into Johnson's arms she snuggled there, murmuring lovingly: "Oh, my home!"

A little while later, happy in their love and fearlessly eager to meet the trials of the days to come in a new country, they had mounted their mustangs and were riding eastward.

THE END

The Girl of the Golden West

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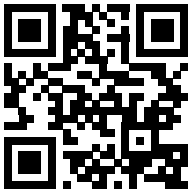

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