

Garland Hamlin

Money Magic: A Novel



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«Public Domain»

Garland H.

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CHAPTER I

THE CLERK OF THE GOLDEN EAGLE

Sibley Junction is in the sub-tropic zone of Colorado. It lies in a hot, dry, but immensely productive valley at an altitude of some four thousand feet above the sea, a village laced with irrigating ditches, shaded by big cotton-wood-trees, and beat upon by a genial, generous-minded sun. The boarders at the Golden Eagle Hotel can sit on the front stoop and see the snow-filled ravines of the mountains to the south, and almost hear the thunder crashing round old Uncompahgre, even when the broad leaves above their heads are pulseless and the heat of the mid-day light is a cataract of molten metal.

It is, as I have said, a productive land, for upon this ashen, cactus-spotted, repellent flat men have directed the cool, sweet water of the upper world, and wherever this life-giving fluid touches the soil grass and grain spring up like magic.

For all its wild and beautiful setting, Sibley is now a town of farmers and traders rather than of miners. The wagons entering the gates are laden with wheat and melons and peaches rather than with ore and giant-powder, and the hotels are frequented by ranchers of prosaic aspect, by passing drummers for shoes and sugars, and by the barbers and clerks of near-by shops. It is, in fact, a bit of slow-going village life dropped between the diabolism of Cripple Creek and the decay of Creede.

Nevertheless, now and then a genuine trailer from the heights, or cow-man from the mesas, does drop into town on some transient business and, with his peculiar speech and stride, remind the lazy town-loafers of the vigorous life going on far above them. Such types nearly always put up at the Eagle Hotel, which was a boarding-house advanced to the sidewalk of the main street and possessing a register.

At the time of this story trade was good at the Eagle for two reasons. Mrs. Gilman was both landlady and cook, and an excellent cook, and, what was still more alluring, Bertha, her pretty daughter, was day-clerk and general manager. Customers of the drummer type are very loyal to their hotels, and amazingly sensitive to female charm – therefore Bertha, who would have been called an attractive girl anywhere, was widely known and tenderly recalled by every brakeman on the line. She was tall and straight, with brown hair and big, candid, serious eyes – wistful when in repose, boyishly frank and direct as she stood behind her desk attending to business, or smiling as she sped her parting guests at the door.

"I know Bertie ought to be in school," Mrs. Gilman said one day to a sympathetic guest. "But what can I do? We got to live. I didn't come out here for my health, but goodness knows I never expected to slave away in a hot kitchen in this way. If Mr. Gilman had lived – "

It was her habit to leave her demonstrations – even her sentences – unfinished, a peculiarity arising partly from her need of hastening to prevent some pot from boiling over and partly from her failing powers. She had been handsome once – but the heat of the stove, the steam of the washtub, and the vexation and prolonged effort of her daily life had warped and faded and battered her into a pathetic wreck of womanhood.

"I'm going to quit this thing as soon as I get my son's ranch paid for. You see – "

She did not finish this, but her friend understood. Bertha's time for schooling was past. She had already entered upon the maiden's land of dreams – of romance. The men who had hitherto courted her, half-laughingly, half-guiltily, knowing that she was a child, had at last dropped all

subterfuge. To them she was a "girl," with all that this word means to males not too scrupulous of the rights of women.

"I oughtn't to quit now when business is so good," Mrs. Gilman returned to the dining-room to add. "I'm full all the time and crowded on Saturday. More and more of the boys come down the line on purpose to stay over Sunday. If I can stick it out a little while – "

The reason why "the boys came down the line to stay over Sunday," was put into words one day by Winchell, the barber, who took his meals at the Eagle.

He was a cleanly shaven young man of twenty-four or five, with a carefully tended brown mustache which drooped below the corners of his mouth.

He began by saying to Bertha:

"I wish I could get out of my business. Judas, but I get tired of it! When I left the farm I never s'posed I'd find myself nailed down to the floor of a barber-shop, but here I am and making good money. How'd you like to go on a ranch?" he asked, meaningly.

"I don't believe I'd like it. Too lonesome," she replied, without any attempt to coquette with the hidden meaning of his question. "I kind o' like this hotel business. I enjoy having new people sifting along every day. Seems like I couldn't bear to step out into private life again, I've got so used to this public thing. I only wish mother didn't have to work so hard – that's all that troubles me at the present time."

Her speech was quite unlike the birdlike chatter with which girls of her age entertain a lover. She spoke rather slowly and with the gravity of a man of business, and her blunt phrases made her smile the more bewitching and her big, brown eyes the more girlish. She did not giggle or flush – she only looked past his smirking face out into the street where the sun's rays lay like flame. And yet she was profoundly moved by the man, for he was a handsome fellow in a sleek way.

"Just the same, you oughtn't to be clerk," said the barber. "It's no place for a girl, anyway. Housekeeping is all right, but this clerking is too public."

"Oh, I don't know! We have a mighty nice run of custom, and I don't see anything bad about it. I've met a lot of good fellows by being here."

The barber was silent for a moment, then pulled out his watch. "Well, I've got to get back." He dropped his voice. "Don't let 'em get gay with you. Remember, I've got a mortgage on you. If any of 'em gets fresh you let me know – they won't repeat it."

"Don't you worry," she replied, with a confident smile. "I can take care of myself. I grew up in Colorado. I'm no tenderfoot."

This boast, so childish, so full of pathetic self-assertion, was still on her lips when a couple of men came out of the dining-room and paused to buy some cigars at the counter. One of them was at first sight a very handsome man of pronounced Western sort. He wore a long, gray frock-coat without vest, and a dark-blue, stiffly starched shirt, over which a red necktie fluttered. His carriage was erect, his hands large of motion, and his profile very fine in its bold lines. His eyes were gray and in expression cold and penetrating, his nose was broad, and the corners of his mouth bitter. He could not be called young, and yet he was not even middle-aged. His voice was deep, and harsh in accent, but as he spoke to the girl a certain sweetness came into it.

"Well, Babe, here I am again. Couldn't get along without coming down to spend Sunday – seems like Williams must go to church on Sunday or lose his chance o' grace."

His companion, a short man with a black mustache that almost made a circle about his mouth, grinned in silence.

Bertha replied, "I think I'll take a forenoon off to-morrow, Captain Haney, and see that you both go to mass for once in your life."

The big man looked at her with sudden intensity. "If you'll take me – I'll go." There was something in his voice and eyes that startled the girl. She drew back a little, but smiled bravely, carrying out the jest.

"I'll call you on that. Unless you take water, you go to church to-morrow."

The big man shoved his companion away and, leaning across the counter, said, in a low and deeply significant tone:

"There ain't a thing in this world that you can't do with Mart Haney – not a thing. That's what I came down here to tell you – you can boss my ranch any day."

The girl was visibly alarmed, but as she still stood fascinated by his eyes and voice, struggling to recover her serenity, another group of diners came noisily past, and the big man, with a parting look, went out and took a seat on one of the chairs which stood in a row upon the walk. The hand which held the cigar visibly trembled, and his companion said:

"Be careful, Mart – "

Haney silenced him with a look. "You're on the outside here, partner."

"I didn't mean to butt in – "

"I understand, but this is a matter between that little girl and me," replied the big man in a tone that, while friendly, ended all further remark on the part of his companion, who rose, after a little pause, and walked away.

Haney remained seated, buried in thought, amazed at the fever which his encounter with the girl had put into his blood.

It was true that he had been coming down every Saturday for weeks – leaving his big saloon on the best evening in the week for a chance to see this child – this boyish school-girl. In a savage, selfish, and unrestrained way he loved her, and had determined to possess her – to buy her if necessary. He knew something of the toil through which the weary mother plodded, and he watched her bend and fade with a certainty that she would one day be on his side.

When at home and afar from her, he felt capable of seizing the girl – of carrying her back with him as the old-time savage won his bride; but when he looked into her clear, calm eyes his villiany, his resolution fell away from him. He found himself not merely a man of the nearer time, but a Catholic – in training at least – and the words he had planned to utter fell dead on his lips. Libertine though he was, there were lines over which even his lawlessness could not break.

He was a desperate character – a man of violence – and none too delicate in his life among women; but away back in his boyhood his good Irish mother had taught him to fight fair and to protect the younger and weaker children, and this training led to the most curious and unexpected acts in his business as a gambler.

"I will not have boys at my lay-out," he once angrily said, to Williams, his partner, "and I will not have women there. I've sins enough to answer for without these. Cut 'em out!" He was oddly generous now and then, and often returned to a greenhorn money enough to get home on. "Stay on the farm, me lad – 'tis better to milk a cow with a mosquito on the back of your neck than to fill a cell at Cañon City."

In other ways he was inexorable, taking the hazards of the game with his visitors and raking in their money with cold eyes and a steady hand. He collected all notes remorselessly – and it was in this way that he had acquired his interests in "The Bottom Dollar" and "The Flora" mines – "prospects" at the time, but immensely valuable at the present. It was, indeed, this new and measurably respectable wealth which had determined him upon pressing his suit with Bertha. As he sat there he came to a most momentous conclusion. "Why not marry the girl and live honest?" he asked himself; and being moved by the memory of her sweetness and humor, he said, "I will," and the resolution filled his heart with a strange delight.

He presented the matter first to the mother, not with any intention of doing the right thing, but merely because she happened into the room before the girl returned, and because he was overflowing with his new-found grace.

Mrs. Gilman came in wiping her face on her apron – as his mother used to do – and this touched him almost like a caress. He rose and offered her a chair, which she accepted, highly flattered.

"It must seem warm to you down here, Captain?" she remarked, as she took a seat beside him.

"It does. I wouldn't need to suffer it if you were doing business in Cripple. I can't leave go your Johnny-cake and pie; 'tis the kind that mother didn't make – for she was Irish."

"I've thought of going up there," she replied, matter-of-factly, "but I can't stand the altitude, I'm afraid – and then down here we have my son's little ranch to furnish us eggs and vegetables."

"That's an advantage," he admitted; "but on the peak no one expects vegetables – it's still a matter of ham and eggs."

"Is that so?" she asked, concernedly.

"'Tis indeed. I live at the Palace Hotel, and I know. However, 'tis not of that I intended to speak, Mrs. Gilman. I'm distressed to see you working so hard this warm weather. You need a rest – a vacation, I'm thinkin'."

"You're mighty neighborly, Captain, to say so, but I don't see any way of taking it."

"Furthermore, your daughter is too fine to be clerkin' here day by day. She should be in a home of her own."

"She ought to be in school," sighed the mother, "but I don't see my way to hiring anybody to fill her place – it would take a man to do her work."

"It would so. She's a rare little business woman. Let me see, how old is she?"

"Eighteen next November."

"She seems like a woman of twenty."

"I couldn't run for a week without her," answered the mother, rolling down her sleeves in acknowledgment that they had entered upon a real conversation.

"She's a little queen," declared Haney.

It was very hot and the flies were buzzing about, but the big gambler had no mind to these discomforts, so intent was he upon bringing his proposal before the mother. Straightened in his chair and fixing a keen glance upon her face, he began his attack. "'Tis folly to allow anything to trouble you, my dear woman – if anny debt presses, let me know, and I'll lift it for ye."

The weary mother felt the sincerity of his offer, and replied, with much feeling: "You're mighty good, Captain Haney, but we're more than holding our own, and another year will see the ranch clear. I'm just as much obliged to you, though; you're a true friend."

"But I don't like to think of you here for another year – and Bertie should not stand here another day with every Tom, Dick, and Harry passin' their blarney with her. She's fitter to be mistress of a big house of her own, an' 'tis that I've the mind to give her; and I can, for I'm no longer on the ragged edge. I own two of the best mines on the hill, and I want her to share me good-fortune with me."

Mrs. Gilman, worn out as she was, was still quick where her daughter's welfare was concerned, and she looked at the big man with wonder and inquiry, and a certain accusation in her glance.

"What do you mean, Captain?"

The big gambler was at last face to face with his decision, and with but a moment's hesitation replied, "As my wife, I mean, of course."

She sank back in her chair and looked at him with eyes of consternation. "Why, Captain Haney! Do you really mean that?"

"I do!" He had a feeling at the moment that he had always been honorable in his intentions.

"But – but – you're so old – I mean so much older –"

"I know I am, and I'm rough. I don't deny that. I'm forty, but then I'm what they call well preserved," he smiled, winningly, "and I'll soon have an income of wan hundred thousand dollars a year."

This turned the current of her emotion – she gasped. "One hundred thousand dollars!"

He held up a warning hand. "Sh! now that's between us. There are those younger than I, 'tis true, but there is a kind of saving grace in money. I can take you all out of this daily tile like winkin' – all you need to do is to say the wan word and we'll have a house in Colorado Springs or Denver – or even in New York. For what did you think I left me business on the busiest day of every week? It was to see your sweet daughter, and I came this time to ask her to go back with me."

"What did she say?"

"She has not said. We had no time to talk. What I propose now is that we take a drive out to the ranch and talk it over. Williams will fill her place here. In fact, the house is mine. I bought it this morning."

The poor woman sat like one in a stupor, comprehending little of what he said. The room seemed to be revolving. The earth had given way beneath her feet and the heavens were opening. Her first sensation was one of terror. She feared a man of such power – a man who could in a single moment, by a wave of his hand, upset her entire world. His enormous wealth dazzled her even while she doubted it. How could it be true while he sat there talking to her – and she in her apron and her hair in disorder? She rose hurriedly with instinct to make herself presentable enough to carry on this conversation. As she stood weakly, she apologized incoherently.

"Captain, I appreciate your kindness – you've always been a good customer – one I liked to do for – but I'm all upset – I can't get my wits – "

"No hurry, madam," he said, with a generous intent. "To-morrow is coming. Don't hurry at all – at all."

She hurried out, leaving him alone – with the clock, the cat, and the hostler, who was spraying the sidewalk under the cotton-wood-trees. Quivering with fear of the girl's refusal, the gambler rose and went out into the sunsmit streets to commune with this new-found self.

Life was no longer simple for Mrs. Gilman. It was, indeed, filled with a wind of terror. Haney's promise of relief from want was very sweet, yet disturbingly empty, like the joy of dreams, and yet his words took her breath – clouded her judgment, befogged her insight.

She went back to the dining-room, where her daughter sat eating dinner, with a numbness in her limbs and a sense of dizziness in her brain, and dropping into a chair at the table gasped out:

"Do you know – what Captain Haney just said to me?"

"Not being a mind-reader, I don't," replied the girl, calmly, though she was moved by her mother's white, awed face.

"He wants you!"

Bertha flushed and braced both hands against the table as she replied, "Well, he can't have me!"

With the opposition in her daughter's tone, Mrs. Gilman was suddenly moved to argue.

"Think what it means, Bertie! He's rich. Did you know that? He owns two mines."

"I know he is a gambler and runs two saloons. You see, the boys keep me posted, and I'm not marrying a gambler – not this summer," she ended, decisively.

"But he's going to give that up, he says." He hadn't said this, but she was sure he would. "His income is a hundred thousand dollars a year. Think of that!"

"I don't want to think of it," the girl answered, frowning slightly. "It makes my head ache. Nobody has a right to so much money. How did he get it?"

"Out of his mine – and oh, Bertie, he says if you'll speak the word we needn't do another day's work in this hot, greasy old place! The house is his, anyway. Did you know that?"

Bertha eyed her mother closely – with cool, bright, accusing eyes – for a moment, then she softened. "Poor old mammy, it's pretty tough lines on you – no two ways about that. You've got the heavy end of the job. I'd marry most anybody to give you a rest – but, mother, Captain Haney is forty, if he's a day, and he's a hard citizen. He has been a gambler all his life. You can't expect me to marry a sport like him. And then there's Ed."

The mother's face changed. "A barber!" she exclaimed, scornfully.

"Yes, he's a barber now, but he's going to make a break soon and get into something else."

"Don't bank on Ed, Bertie; he'll never be anything more than he is now. No man ever got anywhere who started in as a barber."

"Would you rather I married a gambler and a sure-shot? They tell me Haney has killed his man."

"That may be all talk. Well, anyhow, he wants to see you and talk it over; and oh, Bertie, it does seem a wonderful chance – and my heart's so bad to-day it seems as though I couldn't see to another meal! I don't want you to marry him if you don't want to – I'm not asking you to. You know I'm not. But he is a noble-looking man – and I get awfully discouraged sometimes. It scares me to think of dying and leaving you without any security."

One of the waiters, half-dead with curiosity, was edging near, under pretense of brushing the table, and so the mistress rose and took up the burdens of her stewardship.

"But we'll talk it over to-night. Don't be hasty."

"I won't," replied the girl.

She was by no means as unmoved as she gave out. She had always admired and liked Captain Haney, though he never moved her in the same way that the young barber did (for Ed Winchell had youth as well as comeliness, and there is a divine suppleness in youth), yet he had been a welcome guest. "A hundred thousand dollars a year! And yet he's been coming to our little hotel for a year – to see me!"

This consideration was the one that moved her most. All the bland words, the jocular phrases of his singular wooing came back to her now, weighted with deep significance. She had called it "joshing," and had put it all aside, just as she had parried the rude jests of the brakemen of her acquaintance. Now she saw that he had been in earnest.

She was wise beyond her years, this calm-faced, keen-eyed girl, trained by adversity to take care of herself. She knew instinctively that she lived surrounded by wolves, and, much as she admired the big frame and bold profile of Captain Haney, she had placed him among her enemies. His coming always pleased her but at the same time put her upon the defensive.

Strange to say, she enjoyed her position there in her battered little hotel. "If it weren't for poor old mother – " She arrested herself and went back to the counter with a certain timidity, a self-consciousness new to her, fearing to face the gambler now that she knew his intent was honorable.

The room was empty, all the men having gone out upon the walk to escape the heat, and she took her seat behind her desk and gave herself up to a consideration of the life to which the possession of so much wealth would introduce her. She could have unlimited new gowns, she could travel, and she could rescue her mother from drudgery and worry. These things she could discern – but of the larger life which money could open to her she could only vaguely dream.

The first effect of marrying Marshall Haney would be to cut short her life in Sibley; the second, the establishment of a home in the great camps about them.

As she looked around the dingy room buzzing with flies, she experienced a premonitory pang of the pain she would suffer in going out of its doors forever.

When Haney came back an hour later, he read in the cold, serious look she gave him a warning, therefore he spoke but a few words on commonplace subjects, and returned to his seat on the walk to await a change in her mood.

This meekness on the part of a powerful man moved the girl, and a little later she went to the doorway and said to the crowd generally, "It's a wonder some fellow wouldn't open a cantaloupe or something."

Haney put his finger to his mouth and whistled to the grocer opposite. He came on the run, alert for trade.

"Roll up a couple of big melons," called Haney, largely. "We're all drying to cinders over here."

The loafers cheered, but the girl said, in a lower voice, "I was only joking."

"What you say goes," he replied, with significance.

She did not stay to see the melons cut, but went back to her desk, and he brought a choice slice in to her.

She took it, but she said, "You mustn't think you own me – not yet." Her tone was resentful. "I don't want you to say things like that – before people."

"Like what?" he asked.

She did not answer.

He went on: "I don't mean to assume anything, God knows. I'm only waitin' and hopin'. I'll go away if you want me to and let you think it over alone."

"I wish you would," she said, realizing that this committed her to at least a consideration of his proposal.

He held out his hand. "Good-bye – till next Saturday."

She put her small, brown hand in his. He crushed it hard and his bold face softened. "I need you, my girl. Sure I do!" And in his eyes was something very winning.

CHAPTER II

MARSHALL HANEY CHANGES HEART

It was well for Haney that Bertie did not see him as he sat above his gambling boards, watchful, keen-eyed, grim of visage, for she would have trembled in fear of him. "Haney's" was both saloon and gambling hall. In the front, on the right, ran the long bar with its shining brass and polished mahogany (he prided himself on having the best bar west of Denver), and in the rear, occupying both sides of the room, stood two long rows of faro and roulette outfits, together with card-tables and dice-boards. It was the largest and most prosperous gambling hall in the camps, and always of an evening was crowded with gamblers and those who came as lookers-on.

On the right side, in a raised seat about midway of the hall, Haney usually sat, a handsome figure, in broad white hat, immaculate linen, and well-cut frock-coat, his face as pale as that of a priest in the glare of the big electric light. On the other side, and directly opposite, Williams kept corresponding "lookout" over the dealers and the crowd. He was a bold man who attempted any shenanigan with Mart Haney, and the games of his halls were reported honest.

To think of a young and innocent girl married to this remorseless gambler, scarred with the gun and the knife, was a profanation of maidenhood – and yet, as he fell now and then into a dream, he took on a kind of savage beauty which might allure and destroy a woman. Whatever else he was, he was neither commonplace nor mean. The visitors to whom he was pointed out as "a type of our modern Western desperado" invariably acknowledged that he looked the part. His smile was of singular sweetness – all the more alluring because of its rarity – and the warm clasp of his big, soft hand had made him sheriff in San Juan County, and his bravery and his love of fair play were well known and admired among the miners.

The sombre look in his face, which resembled that of a dreaming leopard, was due to the new and secret plans with which his mind was now engaged. "If she takes me, I quit this business," he had promised himself. "She despises me in it, and so does the mother, and so I reckon 'tis up to me to clean house."

Then he thought of his own mother, who had the same prejudice, and who would not have taken a cent of his earnings. "I see no harm in the business," he said. "Men will drink and they will gamble, and I might as well serve their wish as any other – better, indeed, for no man can accuse me of dark ways nor complain of the order of me house. I am a business man the same as him that runs a grocery store; but 'tis no matter, she dislikes it, and that ends it. She's a clear-headed wan," he thought, with a glow of admiration for her. "She's the captain."

He no longer thought of her as his victim – as something to be ruthlessly enjoyed – he trembled before her, big and brave and relentless as he was in the world of men. "What has come over me?" he asked himself. "Sure she has me on me knees – the witch. Me mind is filled with her."

All through the week his agents were at work attempting to sell his saloons. "I'm ready to close out at a moment's notice," he declared.

At times, as he sat in his place, he lost consciousness of the crowding, rough-hatted, intent men and the monotonous calls of the dealers. The click of balls, the buzz of low-toned comment died out of his ears – he was back in Troy, looking for his father, whom he had not seen or written to in twenty years. He saw himself, with a dainty little woman on his arm, taking the boat to New York. "I will go to the biggest hotel in the city; the girl shall have the best the old town has. Nothing will be too good for her – "

He roused himself to a touch on his elbow. One of his agents had a new offer for the two saloons. It was still less than he considered the business worth, but in his softened mood he said, "It goes!"

"Make out your papers," replied the other man, with almost equal brevity.

During the rest of the evening the gambler sat above his lay-out with mingled feelings of relief and regret. After all, he was in command here. He knew this business, and he loved the companionship and the admiration of the men who dropped round by his side to discuss the camp or the weather, or to invite him to join a hunting trip. He felt himself to be one of the chief men of the town, and that he could at any time become their Representative if he chose. For some years (he couldn't have told why) he had taken on a thrift unknown to him before, and had been attending strictly to business. He now saw that it must have been from a foreknowledge of Bertha. In him the superstitions of both miner and gambler mingled. The cards had run against him for three years, now they were falling in his favor. "I will take advantage of them," he declared.

Slowly the crowd thinned out, and at one o'clock only a few inveterate poker-players and one or two young fellows who were still "bucking" the roulette wheel remained and, calling one of his men to take charge, Haney nodded to Williams and they went out on the street.

As he reached the cold, crisp, deliciously rarefied air outside, he took off his hat and involuntarily looked up at the stars blazing thick in the deep-blue midnight sky. With solemn voice he said to his partner: "Well, 'Spot,' right here Mart Haney's saloon business ends. We're all in."

Williams felt that his partner was acting rashly. "Oh, I wouldn't say that! You may get into it again."

"No – the little girl and her mother won't stand for it, and, besides, what's the use? I don't need to do it, and if I'm ever going to see the world now is my chance. I'm goin' back East to discover how many brothers and sisters I have livin'. The old father is dodderin 'round somewheres back there. I'll surprise him, too. Now, have those papers all made out ready to sign by eleven o'clock to-morrow. I'm goin' down the valley on the noon train."

"All right, Mart, but you're makin' a mistake."

"Never you mind, me bucko. 'Tis me own game, and the mines will take all the gray matter you can spare."

As the big man was walking away towards his hotel a woman met him. "Hello, Mart!"

"Hello, Mag; what's doing?"

She was humped and bedraggled, and her face looked white in the moonlight. "Nothing. Stake a fellow to a hot soup, won't you?"

"Sure thing, Mag." He handed her a five-dollar gold piece. "Is it as bad as that? What's t' old man doin' these days?"

"Servin' time," she answered, bitterly.

"Oh, so he is!" replied Haney, hastily. "I'd forgotten. Well, take care o' yourself," he added, genially, walking on in instant forgetfulness of the woman's misery, for his mind was turned upon the talk which his younger brother Charley had given him not long before in Denver.

It was not a cheerful conversation, for Charley flippantly confessed that he didn't hold any family reunions, and that all he knew of his brothers he gained by chance. "They're all great boozers," he said, in summing them up. "Tim is a ward heeler in Buffalo – came to see me at the stage-door loaded to the gunnels. Tom is a greasy, three-fingered brakeman on the Central. Fannie married a carpenter and has about seventeen young ones. Mary died, you know?"

"No, I didn't know."

"Yes, died about four years ago. She was like mother – a nice girl. Dad sent me a paper with a notice of her death. He never writes, but now and then, when Tim has a fight or Tom gets drunk and slips into the criminal column, I hear of them."

Charles did not say so, but Mart knew that he was lumped among the other poverty-stricken, worthless members of the family. He did not at the time undeceive his brother, but now that he was no longer a gambler and saloon-keeper, now that he was rich, he resolved not only to let his father

know of his good-fortune and his change of life, but also (and this was due to Bertie's influence) he earnestly desired to help his family out of their mire.

"We had good stuff in us," he said, "but we went wrong after the mother left us."

As he walked on down the street a strange radiance came into the world. The distant peaks of the Sangre de Cristo range rose in dim and shadowy majesty to the south, and, wondering, astonished at the emotion stirring in his heart, the regenerated desperado turned to see the moon lifting above the crown of the great peak to the east. For the first time in many years his heart was filled with a sense of the beauty of the world.

CHAPTER III

BERTHA YIELDS TO TEMPTATION

Bertie looked older and graver when Haney entered the Eagle Hotel, and his heart expanded with a tenderness that was partly paternal. She seemed so young and looked so pale and troubled. She greeted him unsmilingly and calmly handed him the pen with which to register.

"How are you all?" he asked, with genuine concern.

"Pretty bum. Mother gave out this week. It's the heat, I guess. Hottest weather we've had since I came to town."

"Why didn't you let me know?"

She avoided his question. "We're too low here at Junction. Mother ought to go a couple of thousand feet higher. She needs rest and a change. I've sent her out to the ranch."

"You're not running the house alone?"

"Why, cert! – that is, except my brother's wife is taking mother's place in the kitchen. I'm runnin' the rest of it just as I've been doin' for three years."

He looked his admiration before he uttered it. "You're a wonder!"

"Don't you think it! How does it happen you're down to-day? You said Saturday."

"I've sold out – signed the deeds to-day. I'm out of the liquor trade forever."

She nodded gravely. "I'm glad of that. I don't like the business – not a little bit."

He took this as an encouragement. "I knew you didn't. Well, I'm neither saloon-keeper nor gambler from this day. I'm a miner and a capitalist – and all I have is yours," he added, in a lover's voice, bending a keen glance upon her.

The girl was standing very straight behind her desk, and her face did not change, but her eyes shifted before his gaze. "You'd better go in to supper while the biscuit are hot," she advised, coolly.

He had tact enough to take his dismissal without another word or glance, and after he had gone she still stood there in the same rigid pose, but her face was softer and clouded with serious meditation. It was wonderful to think of this rich and powerful man changing his whole life for her.

Winchell, the young barber, came in hurriedly, his face full of accusation and alarm. "Was that Haney who just came in?" he asked, truculently.

"Yes, he's at supper – want to see him?"

"See him? No! And I don't want *you* to see him! He's too free with you, Bert; I don't like it."

She smiled a little, curious smile. "Don't mix it up with *him*, Ed – I'd hate to see your remains afterwards."

"Bert, see here! You've been funny with me lately." (By funny he meant unaccountable.) "And your mother has been hinting things at me – and now here is Haney leaving his business to come down the middle of the week. What's the meaning of it?"

"It isn't the middle of the week. It's Friday," she corrected him.

He went on: "I know what he keeps coming to see you for, but for God's sake don't you think of marrying an old tout and gambler like him."

"He isn't old, and he isn't a gambler any more," she significantly retorted.

"What do you mean?"

"He's sold out – clean as a whistle."

"Don't you believe it! It's a trick to get you to think better of him. Bert, don't you dare to go back on me," he cried out, warningly – "don't you dare!"

The girl suddenly ceased smiling, and asserted herself. "See here, Ed, you'd better not try to boss me. I won't stand for it. What license have you got to pop in here every few minutes and tell me what's what? You 'tend to your business and you'll get ahead faster."

He stammered with rage and pain. "If you throw me down – fer that – old tout, I'll kill you both."

The girl looked at him in silence for a long time, and into her brain came a new, swift, and revealing concept of his essential littleness and weakness. His beauty lost its charm, and a kind of disgust rose in her throat as she slowly said, with cutting scorn:

"If you really meant that! – but you don't, you're only talking to hear yourself talk. Now you shut up and run away. This is no place for chewing the rag, anyway – this is my busy day."

For a moment the man's face expressed the rage of a wild-cat and his hands clinched. "Don't you do it – that's all!" he finally snarled. "You'll wish you hadn't."

"Run away, little boy," she said, irritably. "You make me tired. I don't feel like being badgered by anybody, and, besides, I'm not mortgaged to anybody just yet."

His mood changed. "Bertie, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be fresh. But don't talk to me that way, it uses me all up."

"Well, then, stop puffing and blowing. I've troubles of my own, with mother sick and a new cook in the kitchen."

"Excuse me, Bert; I'll never do it again."

"That's all right."

"But it riled me like the devil to think – " he began again.

"Don't think," she curtly interrupted; "cut hair."

Perceiving that she was in evil mood for his plea, he turned away so sadly that the girl relented a little and called out:

"Say, Ed!" He turned and came back. "See here! I didn't intend to hurt your feelings, but this is one of my touchy days, and you got on the wrong side of me. I'm sorry. Here's my hand – now shake, and run."

His face lightened, and he smiled, displaying his fine, white teeth. "You're a world-beater, sure thing, and I'm going to get you yet!"

"Cut it out!" she slangily retorted, sharply, withdrawing her hand.

"You'll see!" he shouted, laughing back at her, full of hope again.

She was equally curt with two or three others who brazenly tried to buy a smile with their cigars. "Do business, boys; this is my day to sell goods," she said, and they took the hint.

When Haney came out from his supper, he stepped quietly in behind the counter and said: "I'll take your place. Get your grub. Then put on your hat and we'll drive out to see how the mother is." The girl acknowledged a sense of relief as she left him in charge and went to her seat in the far corner of the dining-room – a relief and a dangerous relaxation. It was, after all, a pleasure to feel that a strong, sure hand was out-stretched in sympathy – and she was tired. Even as she sat waiting for her tea the collapse came, and bowing her head to her hands she shook with silent sobs.

The waitresses stared, and young Mrs. Gilman came hurrying. "What's the matter, Bertie; are you sick?"

"Oh no – but I'm worried – about mother."

"You haven't heard anything – ?"

"No, but she looked so old and so worn when she went away. She ought to have quit here a month ago."

"Well, I wouldn't worry. It's cooler out to the ranch, and the air is so pure she'll pick up right away – you'll see."

"I hope so, but she ought to take it easy the rest of her days. She's done work enough – and I'm kind o' discouraged myself."

Slowly she recovered her self-possession. She drank her tea in abstracted silence, and at last she said: "I'm going out there, Cassie; you'll have to look after things. I'll get some of the boys to 'tend the office."

"You're not going alone?"

"No, Mart Haney is going to drive me."

"Oh!" There was a look of surprise and consternation in the face of the young wife, but she only asked, "You'll be back to-night?"

"Yes, if mother is no worse."

Haney had the smartest "rig" in town waiting for her as she came out, but as he looked at her white dress and pretty hat of flowers and tulle he apologized for its shortcomings – "'Tis lined with cream-colored satin it *should* be."

She colored a little at this, but quickly replied: "Blarney. Anybody'd know you were an Irishman."

"I am, and proud of it."

"I want to take the doctor out to see mother."

"Not in this rig," he protested.

She smiled. "Why not? No, but I want to go round to his office and leave a call."

"I'll go round the world fer you," he replied.

The air was deliciously cool and fragrant now that the sun was sinking, and the town was astir with people. It was the social hour when the heat and toil of the day were over, and all had leisure to turn wondering eyes upon Haney and his companion. The girl felt her position keenly. She was aware that a single appearance of this kind was equivalent to an engagement in the minds of her acquaintances, but as she shyly glanced at her lover's handsome face, and watched his powerful and skilled hands upon the reins, her pride in him grew. She acknowledged his kindness, and was tired and ready to lean upon his strength.

"When did your mother quit?" he asked, after they had left the town behind.

"Sunday night. You see, we had a big rush all day, and on top of that, about twelve o'clock, an alarm of fire next door. So she got no sleep. Monday morning she didn't get up, Tuesday she dressed but was too miserable to work, so finally I just packed her off to the ranch."

"That was right – only you should have sent for me."

She was silent, and her heart began to beat with a knowledge of the demand he was about to make. She felt weak and unprotected here – in the office they were on more equal terms – but she enjoyed in a subconscious way the swift rush of the horses, the splendor of the sunset, and the quiet authority in his voice – even as she lifted eyes to the mesa towards which they were driving he began to speak.

"You know my mind, little girl. I don't mean to ask you till to-morrow – that's the day set – but I want to say that I've been cleaning house all the week, thinkin' of you. I'm to be a leading citizen from this day on. You won't need to apologize for me. I've never been a drinking man, but I have been a reckless devil. I don't deny that I've planted a wide field of wild oats. However, all that I put away from this hour. 'Tis true I'm forty, but that's not old – I'm no older than I was at twenty-one, sure – and, besides, you're young enough to make up." He smiled, and again she acknowledged the charm of his face when he smiled. "You'll see me grow younger whilst you grow older, and so wan day we'll be of an age."

Her customary readiness of reply had left her, and she still sat in silence, a sob in her throat, a curious numbness in her limbs.

He seemed to feel that she did not wish to talk. "If you come into partnership with me you need never worry about the question of bread or rent or clothes, and that's worth considerin' – Which road now?"

She silently pointed to the left, and they drew near the foot of the great mesa whose level top was cutting the sun in half.

The miner was filled with grateful homage. "'Tis a great world!" he exclaimed, softly. "Sure, 'tis only yesterday that I found it out, and lifting me head took a look at the hills and the stars for the first time in twenty years. 'Tis a new road I'm enterin' – whether you come to me or not."

All this was wonderful to the girl. Could it be that she was capable of changing the life of a powerful man like this? It filled her with a sense of duty as well as exaltation, an emotion that made a woman of her. She seemed suddenly to have put the hotel and all its worriments far, far behind her.

Seized by an impulse to acquaint her with his family, Haney began to tell about his father and his attempts to govern his five sons. "We were devils," he admitted – "broncos, if ever such walked on two legs. We wouldn't go to school – not wan of us except Charley; he did pretty well – and we fished and played ball and went to the circus – " He chuckled. "I left home the first time with a circus. I wanted to be a lion-tamer, but had to content meself with driving the cook wagon. Then I struck West, and I've never been back and I've never seen the old man since, but now I've made me pile, I think I'll go home and hunt him up and buy him new spectacles; it's ace to the three-spot he's using the same horn-rimmed ones he wore when I left."

Bertha was interested. "How long did you stay with the circus?"

"Not very long. I got homesick and went back, but the next time I left, I left for fair. I've been everywhere but East since. I've been in Colorado mostly. 'Tis a good State."

"I like it – but I'd like to see the rest of the country."

"You can. If you join hands with me we'll go round the ball together."

She did not follow this lead. "I've been to Denver once – went on one of these excursion tickets."

"How did you like it there?"

"Pretty good; but I got awful tired, and the grub at the hotel was the worst ever – it was a cheap place, of course. Didn't dare to look in the door of the big places."

"You can have a whole soot of rooms at the Royal Flush – if you will."

Again she turned away. "I can't imagine anybody rich enough to live at such hotels – There's our ranch."

"Shy as a coyote, ain't it?" he commented, as he looked where she pointed. "I'd prefer the Eagle House to that."

"I love it out here," she said. "I helped plant the trees."

"Did you? Then I want the place. I want everything your pretty hands planted."

"Oh, rats!" was her reproving comment, and it made him laugh at his own sentimental speech.

The ranch house stood at the foot of the mesa near a creek that came out of a narrow gorge and struck out upon the flat valley. It was a little house – a shack merely, surrounded by a few out-buildings, all looking as temporary as an Indian encampment, but there were trees – thriftily green – and some stacks of grain to testify to the energy and good husbandry of the owner.

Mrs. Gilman was lying in a corner room, close to the stream which rippled through the little orchard, and its gentle murmur had been a comfort to her – it carried her back to her home in Oxford County (State of Maine), where her early girlhood had been spent. At times it seemed that she was in the little, old, gray house in the valley, and that her father's sharp voice might come at any moment to break her delicious drowse.

Her breakdown had been caused as much by her mental turmoil as by her overtaxing duties. She was confronted by a mighty temptation (through her daughter) at a time when she was too weak and too ill to carry forward her ordinary duties. To urge this marriage upon Bertha would be to bring it about. That she knew, for the girl had said, "I'll do it if you say so, mother."

"I don't want you to do it if you'd rather not," had been her weak answer.

Bertie entered quietly, in a singularly mature, almost manly way, and bending to her mother, asked cordially, "Well, how are you to-day?"

The sick woman took her daughter's hand and drew it to her tear-wet cheek. "Oh, my baby! I can't bear to leave you now."

"Don't talk that way, mother. You're not going to leave me. The doctor is coming out to see you, and everything is going all right at the house, so don't you worry. You set to work to get well. That's your little stunt. I'll look after the rest of it."

Bertie had never been one to bestow caresses, even on her parents, and her only sign of deep feeling now lay in the tremble of her voice. She drew her hand away, and putting her arm about her mother's neck patted her cheek. "Cassie's doing well," she said, abruptly, "and the girls are fine. They brace right up to the situation, and – and everybody's nice to us. I reckon a dozen of the church ladies called yesterday to ask how you were – and Captain Haney came down to-day on purpose to find out how things were going."

The sufferer's eyes opened wide. "Bert, he's with you!"

"Yes, he drove me out here," answered the girl, quietly. "He's come for an answer to his proposition. It's up to us to decide right now."

The mother broke into a whimper. "Oh, darling, I don't know what to think. I'm afraid to leave this to you – it's an awful temptation to a girl. I guess I've decided against it. He ain't the kind of man you ought to marry."

She hushed her mother's wail. "Sh! He'll hear you," she said, solemnly. "There are lots o' worse men than Mart Haney."

"But he's so old – for you."

"He's no boy, that's true, but we went all over that. The new fact in the case is this: he's sold out up there – cleared out his saloon business – and all for *me*. Think o' that – and I hadn't given him a word of encouragement, either! Now that speaks well for him, don't you think?"

The mother nodded. "Yes, it surely does, but then –"

The girl went on: "Well, now, it ain't as though I hated him, for I don't – I like him, I've always liked him. He's the handsomest man I know, and he's treated me right from the very start. He didn't come down to hurry me or crowd me at all, so he says. Well, I told him I wouldn't answer yet awhile – time isn't really up till to-morrow. I can take another week if I want to."

The mother lay in silence for a few moments, and then with closed eyes, streaming with hot tears, she again prayed silently to God to guide her girl in the right path. When she opened her eyes the tall form of Marshall Haney towered over her, so handsome, so full of quiet power that he seemed capable of anything. His face was strangely sweet as he said: "You must not fret about anything another minute. You've but to lie quiet and get strong." He put his broad, soft, warm, and muscular hand down upon her two folded ones, and added: "Let me do fer ye as I would fer me own mother. 'Twill not commit ye to a thing." He seemed to understand her mood – perhaps he had overheard her plea. "I'm not asking a decision till you are well, but I wish you would trust me now – I could do so much more fer you and the girl. Here's the doctor, so put the whole thing by for the present. I ask nothing till you are well."

If this was policy on his part it was successful; for the poor tortured mother's heart was touched and her nerves soothed by his voice, as well as by the touch of his hand, and when they left the house she was in peaceful sleep, and the doctor's report was reassuring. "But she must have rest," he said, positively, "and freedom from care."

"She shall have it," said Haney, with equal decision.

This bluff kindness, joined to the allurements of his powerful form, profoundly affected the girl. Her heart went out towards him in admiration and trust, and as they were on the way home she turned suddenly to him, and said:

"You're good to me – and you were good to mother; you needn't wait till to-morrow for my answer. I'll do as you want me to – some time – not now – next spring, maybe."

He put his arm about her and kissed her, his eyes dim with a new and softening emotion.

"You've made Mart Haney over new – so you have! As sure as God lets me live, I'll make you happy. You shall live like a queen."

CHAPTER IV

HANEY MEETS AN AVENGER

Haney took the train back to his mountain town in a mood which made him regard his action as that of a stranger. Whenever he recalled Bertha's trusting clasp of his hand he felt like removing his hat – the stir of his heart was close akin to religious reverence. "Faith, an' she's taking a big risk," he said. "But I'll not see her lose out," he added, with a return of the gambler's phrase. "She has stacked her chips on the right spot this time."

With all his brute force, his clouded sense of justice, this gambler, this saloon-man, was not without qualifying characteristics. He was a Celt, and in almost every Celt there is hidden a poet. Quick to wrath, quick to jest and fierce in his loves was he, as is the typical Irishman whom England has not yet succeeded in changing to her own type. Moreover, he was an American as well as a Celt (and the American is the most sentimental of men – it is said); and now that he had been surprised into honorable matrimony he began to arrange his affairs for his wife's pleasure and glory. The words in which she had accepted him lingered in his ears like phrases of a little hesitating song. For her he had sold his gambling halls, for her he was willing at the moment to abandon the associates of a lifetime.

He was sitting in the car dreamily smoking, his hat drawn low over his brows, when an acquaintance passing through the car stopped with a word of greeting. Ordinarily Haney would have been glad of his company, but he made a place for him at this time with grudging slowness.

"How are ye, Slater? Set ye down."

"I hear you've sold your saloons," Slater began, as he settled into place.

Haney nodded, without smiling.

His neighbor grinned. "You don't seem very sociable to-day, Mart?"

"I'm not," Haney replied, bluntly.

"I just dropped down beside you to say that young Wilkinson went broke in your place last night and has it in for you. He's plum fuzzy with drink, and you better look sharp or he'll do you. He's been on the rampage for two days – crazy as a loon."

"Why does he go after me?" Haney asked, irritably. "I'm out of it. 'Tis like the fool tenderfoot. Don't he know I had nothing to do with his bust-up?"

"He don't seem to – or else he's so locoed he's forgot it. All I know is he's full of some pizen notion against you, and I thought I'd put you on your guard."

They talked on about this a few minutes, and then Slater rose, leaving Haney to himself. But his tender mood was gone. His brow was knit. He began to understand that a man could not run a bad business for twenty years, and then at a day's notice clear himself of all its trailing evil consequences. "I'll vamoose," he said to himself, with resolution. "I'll put me mines in order, and go down into the valley and take the girl with me – God bless her! We'll take a little turn as far as New York. I'll put long miles between the two of us and all this sporting record of mine. She don't like it, and I'll quit it. I'll begin a new life entirely." And a glow of new-found virtue filled his heart. Of Wilkinson he had no fear – only disgust. "Why should the fool pursue me?" he repeated. "He took his chances and lost out. If he weren't a 'farmer' he'd drop it."

He ate his supper at the hotel in the same abstraction, and then, still grave with plans for his new career, went out into the street to find Williams, his partner. It was inevitable that he should bring up at the bar of his former saloon; no other place in the town was so much like home, after all. Habit drew him to its familiar walls. He was glad to find a couple of old friends there, and they, having but just heard of the sale of his outfit, hastened to greet and congratulate him. Of his

greatest good-fortune, of his highest conquest, they, of course, knew nothing, and he was not in a mood to tell them of it.

The bar-room was nearly empty, for the reason that the miners had not yet finished their evening meal, and Haney and his two cronies had just taken their second round of drinks when the side door was burst violently open, and a man, white and wild, with a double-barrelled shotgun in his hand, abruptly entered. Darting across the floor, he thrust the muzzle of his weapon almost against Haney's breast and fired, uttering a wild curse at the moment of recoil.

The tall gambler reeled under the shock, swinging half way about, his hands clutching at the railing, a look of anguish and surprise upon his face. The assassin, intent, alert, would have fired again had not a by-stander felled him to the floor. The room filled instantly with excited men eager to strike, vociferous with hate; but Haney, with one palm pressed to his breast, stood silent – curiously silent – his lips white with his effort at self-control.

At length two of his friends seized him, tenderly asking: "How is it, old man? Are you hurt bad?"

His lips moved – they listened – as he faintly whispered: "He's got me, boys. Here's where I quit."

"Don't say that, Mart. You'll pull through," said his friend, chokingly. Then with ferocious impatience he yelled: "Somebody get the doctor! Damn it all, get moving! Don't you see him bleed?"

Haney moved his head feebly. "Lay me down, Pete – I'm torn to pieces – I'm all in, I'm afraid. Get me little girl – that's all I ask."

Very gently they took him in their arms and laid him on one of the gambling-tables in the rear room, while the resolute barkeeper pushed the crowd out.

Again Haney called, impatiently, almost fiercely: "Send for Bertie – quick!"

The men looked at each other in wonder, and one of them tapped his brow significantly, for no one knew of his latest love-affair. While still they stared Williams came rushing wildly in. All gave way to him, and the young doctor who followed him was greeted with low words of satisfaction. To his partner, whom he recognized, Haney repeated his command: "Send for Bertie." With a hurried scrawl Williams put down the girl's name and address on a piece of paper, and shouted: "Here! Somebody take this and rush it. Tell her to come quick as the Lord will let her." Then, with the tenderness of a brother, he bent to Haney. "How is it, Mart?"

Mart did not reply. His supreme desire attended to, he sank into a patient immobility that approached stupor, while the surgeon worked with intent haste to stop the flow of blood. The wound was most barbarous, and Williams' eyes filled with tears as he looked upon that magnificent torso mangled by buckshot. He loved his big partner – Haney was indeed his highest enthusiasm, his chief object of adoration, and to see him riddled in this way was devil's work. He lost hope. "It's all over with Mart Haney," he said, chokingly, a few minutes later to the men crowding the bar-room – and then his rage against the assassin broke forth. He became the tiger seeking the blood of him who had slain his mate. His curses rose to primitive ferocity. "Where is he?" he asked.

To him stepped a man – one whose voice was quiet but intense. "We've attended to his case, Williams. He's toing the moonlight from a lamp-post. Want to see?"

For an instant his rage flared out against these officious friends who had cheated him of his share in the swift delight of the avenger. Then tears again misted his eyes, and with a dignity and pathos which had never graced his speech before he pronounced a slow eulogy upon his friend: "No man had a right to accuse Mart Haney of any trick. He took his chances, fair and square. He had no play with crooked cards or 'doctored' wheels. It was all 'above board' with him. He was dead game and a sport, you all know that, and now to be ripped to bits with buckshot – just when he was takin' a wife – is hellish."

His voice faltered, and in the dead silence which followed this revelation of Haney's secret he turned and re-entered the inner room, to watch beside his friend.

The hush which lay over the men at the bar lasted till the barkeeper softly muttered: "Boys, that's news to me. It does make it just too tough." Then those who had hitherto opposed the lynching of the murderer changed their minds and directed new malediction against him, and those who had handled the rope took keener comfort and greater honor to themselves.

"Who is the woman?" asked one of those who waited.

This question remained unanswered till the messenger to the telegraph office returned. Even then little beyond her name was revealed, but each of the watchers began to pray that she might reach the dying man before his eyes should close forever. "He can't live till sunrise," said one, "and there is no train from the Junction till morning. She can't get here without a special. Did you order a special for her?"

"No, I didn't think of it," the messenger replied, with a sense of shortcoming.

"It must be done!"

"I'll attend to that," said Slater. "I know the superintendent. I'll wire him to see her – and bring her."

"Well, be quick about it. Expense don't count now."

It was beautiful to see how these citizens, rough and sordid as many of them were, rose to the poetic value of the situation. As one of them, who had seen (and loved) the girl, told of her youth and beauty, they all stood in rigidly silent attention. "She's hardly more than a child," he explained, "but you never saw a more level-headed little business woman in your life. She runs the Golden Eagle Hotel at Junction, and does it alone. That's what caught Mart, you see. She's as straight as a Ute, and her eyes are clear as agates. She's a little captain – just the mate for Mart. She'll save him if anybody can."

"Will she come? Can she get away?"

"Of course she'll come. She'll ride an engine or jump a flat-car to get here. You can depend on a woman in such things. She don't stop to calculate, she ain't that kind. She comes – you can bet high on that. I'm only worrying for fear Mart won't hold out till she gets here."

Meanwhile, every man in the room where Haney lay, sat in silence, with an air of waiting – waiting for the inevitable end. The bleeding had been checked, but the sufferer's breathing was painful and labored, and the doctor, sitting close beside him, was studying means to prolong life – he had given up hope of saving it. With stiffened lips Haney repeated now and again: "Keep me alive till she comes, doctor. She must marry me – here. I want her to have all I've got —*everything!*"

At another time he said: "Get the judge – have everything ready!"

They understood. He wished to dower his love with his wealth, to place in her hands his will, beyond the reach of any contestant, and this resolution through the hours of his agony, through the daze of his weakness persisted heroically – till even the doctor's throat filled with sympathetic emotion, as he thought of the young maiden soon to be thrust into this tragic drama. He answered, soothingly: "I'll do all I can, Mart. There's a lot of vitality in you yet. We won't give up. You'll pull through, with her help."

To this Haney made no reply, and the hours passed with ghostly step. It was a most moving experience for the young doctor to look round that wide room littered with scattered cards, the wheels of chance motionless at the hazard where the last gambler's bet had ended. In the "lookout's chair," where Haney himself used to sit, an unseen arbiter now gloomed, watching a game where life was the forfeit. A spectral finger seemed to rest upon the blood-red spot of every board. No sound came from the drinking-saloon in front. The miners had all withdrawn. Only the barkeeper and a few personal friends kept willing vigil.

About nine o'clock an answering telegram came to Slater: "Girl just leaving on special. Will make all speed possible."

Haney faintly smiled when Williams read this message to him. "I knew it," he whispered, "she'll come." Then his lips set in a grim line. "And I'll be here when she comes." Thereafter he had the look of a man who hangs with hooked fingers in iron resolution above an abyss, husbanding every resource – forcing himself to think only of the blue sky above him.

A little later the priest knocked at the door and asked to see the dying man, but to this request Haney shook his head and whispered. "No, no; I've no strength to waste – 'tis good of him. Wait! Tell him to be here – to marry us – " And with this request the priest was forced to be content. "May the Lord God be merciful to him!" he exclaimed fervently, as he turned away.

Once again, about midnight, the wounded man roused up to say: "The ceremony must be legal – I want no lawsuits after. The girl must be protected." He was thinking of his brothers, of his own kind, rapacious and selfish. Every safeguard must be thrown around his sweetheart's life.

"We'll attend to that," answered Williams, who seemed able to read his partner's thoughts. "We'll take every precaution. He wants the judge to be present as well as the priest," he explained to the doctor, "so that if the girl would rather she can be married by the Court as well as by the Church."

Every man in the secret realized fully that the girl was being endowed with an immense fortune, and that she would inevitably be the quarry of every self-seeking relative whose interest would be served by attacking her rights in the premises. "The lawsuits must be cut out," was Williams' order to the judge. "Mart's brothers are a wolfish lot. We don't want any loose ends for them to catch on to."

From time to time messages flashed between the oncoming train and the faithful watchers. "It's all up grade, but Johnson is breaking all records. At this rate she'll reach here by daylight," said Slater. "But that's a long time for Mart to wait on that rough bed," he added to Williams, with deep sympathy in his voice.

"I know that, but to move him would hasten his death. The doctor is afraid to even turn him. Besides, Mart himself won't have it. 'I'm better here,' he says. So we've propped him into the easiest position possible. There's nothing to do but wait for the girl."

CHAPTER V

BERTHA'S UPWARD FLIGHT

Bertha was eating her supper, after a hard day's work in her little hotel, when a little yellow envelope was handed to her. The words of the message were few, but they were meaning-full: "Come at once. Mart hurt, not expected to live." It was signed by Williams. While still she sat stunned and hesitant, under the weight of this demand, another and much more explicit telegram came: "Johnson, superintendent, is ordered to fetch you with special train. Don't delay. Mart needs you – is calling for you. Come at once!"

The phrase "is calling for you" reached her heart – decided her. She rose, and, with a word of explanation to her housekeeper, put on her hat, and threw a cloak over her arm. "I've got to go to Cripple. Captain Haney is sick, and I've got to go to him. I don't know when I'll be back," she said. "Get along the best you can." Her face was white but calm, and her manner deliberate. "Send word to mother that Mart is hurt, and I've gone up to see him. Tell her not to worry."

To her night clerk, who had come on duty, she quietly remarked: "I reckon you'll have to look after things to-morrow. I'll try to get back the day after. If I don't, Lem Markham will take my place." While still she stood arranging the details of her business a short, dark man stepped inside the door, and very kindly and gravely explained his errand. "I'm Johnson, the division superintendent. They've telegraphed me for a special, and I'm going to take you up myself. Mart is a friend of mine," he added, with some feeling.

She thanked him with a look and a quick clasp of his hand, and together they hurried into the street and down to the station, where a locomotive coupled to a single coach stood panting like a fierce animal, a cloud of spark-lit smoke rolling from its low stack. The coach was merely a short caboose; but the girl stepped into it without a moment's hesitation, and the engine took the track like a spirited horse. As the fireman got up speed the car began to rock and roll violently, and Johnson remarked to the girl: "I guess you'd better take my chair; it's bolted to the floor, and you can hang on when we go round the curves."

She obeyed instantly, and with her small hands gripping the arm-rests of the rude seat cowered in silence, while the clambering monster rushed and roared over the level lands and labored up the grades, shrieking now and again, as if in mingled pain and warning. Johnson and the brakeman, for the most part, kept to the lookout in the turret, and the girl rode alone – rode far, passing swiftly from girlhood to womanhood, so full of enforced meditation were the hours of that ride. It seemed that she was leaving something sweet and care-free behind her, and it was certain that she was about to face death. She had one perfectly clear conception, and that was that the man who had been most kind to her, and to whom she had given her promise of marriage, was dying and needed her – was calling for her through the night.

Burdened with responsibility from her childhood, accustomed to make her own decisions, she had responded to this prayer, knowing dimly that this journey denoted a new and portentous experience – a fundamental change in her life.

She had admired and liked Haney from the first, but her feeling even yet was very like that of a boy for a man of heroic statue – her regard had very little of woman's passion in it. She was appalled and benumbed by the thought that she was soon to look upon him lying prone. That she might soon be called upon to meet those bold eyes closing in death she had been warned, and yet she did not shrink from it. The nurse, latent in every woman, rose in her, and she ached with desire of haste, longing to lay her hand upon the suffering man in some healing way. His kindness, his gentleness, during the days of his final courtship had sunk deep – his generosity had been so full, so free, so unhesitating.

She thought of her mother, and as a fuller conception of the alarm and anxiety she would feel came to her, she decided to send her a telegram. "She will know it was my duty to go," she decided. "As for the hotel – what does it matter now?" Nothing seemed to matter, indeed, save the speed of her chariot.

The night was long, interminably long. Once and again Johnson came down out of his perch, and spoke a few clumsy words of well-meaning encouragement, but found her unresponsive. Her brain was too busy with taking leave of old conceptions and in mastering new duties to be otherwise than vaguely grateful to her companions. Her mind was clear on one other point – this journey committed her to Marshall Haney. There could be no further hesitation. "Some time, soon, if he lives, I must marry him," she thought, and the conception troubled her with a new revelation of what that relationship might mean. She felt suddenly very small, very weak, and very helpless. "He must be good to me," she murmured. And then, as the words of his prayer to her came back, she added: "And I'll be good to him."

Far and farther below her shone the lights in the little hotel, and the busy and jocund scenes of her girlish life receded swiftly. At this moment her desk and the little sitting-room where the men lounged seemed a haven of peace and plenty, and the car, rocking and plunging through the night, was like a ship rising and falling on wild seas under unknown stars.

The clear light of the mountain dawn was burnishing brass into gold as the locomotive with its tolling bell slid up the level track at the end of its run, and came to a stealthy halt beside the small station.

"Here we are!" called Johnson from his turret, and Bertha rose, stiff and sore with the long night's ride, her resolution cooled to a kind of passive endurance. "I'm ready!" she called back.

Williams met her at the step. "It's all right, sis. Mart's still here – and waiting for you."

Instantly, at sight of his ugly, familiar, friendly face, she became alert, clear-brained. "How is he?"

"Pretty bad."

"What's it all about? How did it happen?"

"I'll clear that up as we go," he replied, and led the way to a carriage.

Once inside, she turned her keen gaze upon him. "Now go ahead – straight."

He did so in the blunt terms of a man whose life had been always on the border, and who has no nice shading in act or word.

"Is he dying?" she asked at the first pause.

"I'm afraid he is, sister," he replied, gently. "That's what's made the night seem long to us; but you're here and it's all right now."

That she was to look on him dying had been persistently in her mind, but that she was to see him mangled by an assassin added horror to her dread. In spite of her intrepid manner, she was still girl enough to shudder at the sight of blood.

Williams went on. "He's weak, too weak to talk much, and so I'm going to tell you what he wants. He wants you to marry him before he dies."

The girl drew away. "Not this minute – to-night?"

"Yes; he wants to give you legal rights to all he has, and you've got to do it quick. No tellin' what may happen." His voice choked as he said this.

Bertha's blood chilled with dismay. Her throat filled and her bosom swelled with the effort she made at self-control, and Williams, watching her with bright eyes of admiration, hurried on to the end. "Everything is ready. There is a priest, if you want him, and Judge Brady with a civil ceremony, if that will please you better, or we'll get a Protestant minister; it's for you to say. Only the knot must be tied good and tight. I told the boys you'd take a priest for Mart's sake. He says: 'Make it water-proof.' He means so that no will-breaking brothers or cousins can stack the cards

agin you. And now it's up to you, little sister. He has only a few hours anyway, and I don't see that you can refuse, specially as it makes his dying – " He stopped there.

The street was silent as they drew up to the saloon door, and only Slater and one or two of his friends were present when Bertha walked into the bar-room, erect as a boy, her calm, sweet face ashen white in the electric light. For an instant; she stood there in the middle of the floor alone, her big dark eyes searching every face. Then Judge Brady, a kindly, gray-haired man, advanced, and took her hand. "We're very glad to see you," he gravely said, introducing himself. Williams, who had entered the inner room, returned instantly to say: "Come, he's waiting."

Without a word the bride entered the presence of her groom, and the doctor, bending low to the gambler, said: "Be careful now, Mart. Don't try to rise. Be perfectly still. Bertie has come."

Haney turned with a smile – a tender, humorous smile – and whispered: "Bertie, acushla mavourneen, come to me!"

Then the watchers withdrew, leaving them alone, and the girl, bending above him, kissed him. "Oh, Captain, can't I do something? I *must* do something."

"Yes, darlin', ye can. You can marry me this minute, and ye shall. I'm dyin', girl – so the doctor says. I don't feel it that way; but, anyhow, we take no chances. All I have is for you, and so – "

She put her hand ever his lips. "You must be quiet. I understand, and I will do it – but only to make you well." She turned to the door, and her voice was clear as she said to those who waited: "I am ready."

"Will you have Father Kearney?" asked Williams.

She turned towards Haney. "Just as he says."

The stricken miner, ghastly with the pain brought on by movement, responded to the doctor's question, only by a whisper: "The priest – first."

The girl heard, and her fine, clear glance rested upon the face of the priest. Tears were on her cheeks, but a kind of exultation was in her tone as she said: "I am willing, father."

With a look which denoted his appreciation of the girl's courage, the priest stepped forward and led her to her place beside her bridegroom. She took Haney's big nerveless hand in her firm grasp, and together they listened to the solemn words which made them husband and wife. It seemed that the gambler was passing into the shadow during the opening prayer, but his whispered responses came at the proper pauses, and only when the final benediction was given, and the priest and the judge fell back before the rush of the young doctor, did the wounded man's eyes close in final collapse. He had indeed reached the end of his endurance.

The young wife spoke then, imperiously, almost fiercely, asking: "Why is he lying here? This is no place for him."

The doctor explained. "We were afraid to move him – till you came. In fact, he wouldn't let me move him. If you say so now, we will take him up." With these words the watchers shifted their responsibility to her shoulders, uttering sighs of deep relief. Whatever happened now, Mart's will had been secured. At her command they lifted the table on which her husband lay, and the wife walked beside it, unheeding the throngs of silent men walling her path. Every one made way for her, waited upon her, eager to serve her, partly because she was Marshall Haney's wife, but more because of her youth and the brave heart which looked from her clear and candid eyes.

She showed no hesitation now, gave out no word of weakness; on the contrary, she commanded with certainty and precision, calling to her aid all that the city afforded. Not till she had summoned the best surgeons and was sure that everything had been done that could be done did she permit herself to relax – or to think of rest or her mother.

When she had sunk to sleep upon a couch beside her husband's bed, Williams, with a note of deep admiration, demanded of the surgeon: "Ain't she a little Captain? Mart can't die now, can he? He's got too much to live for."

CHAPTER VI

THE HANEY PALACE

One day early in the following summer a tall, thin man, with one helpless side, entered the big luminous hall of the Antlers Hotel at the Springs, upheld by a stalwart attendant, and accompanied by a sweet-faced, calm-lipped young woman. This was Marshall Haney and his young wife Bertha, down from the mountain for the first time since his illness, and those who knew their story and recognized them, stood aside with a thrill of pity for the man and a look of admiration for the girl, whose bravery and devotion had done so much to bring her husband back to life and to a growing measure of his former strength.

Marshall Haney was, indeed, but a poor hulk of his stalwart self. One lung had been deeply torn, his left shoulder was almost wholly disabled, and he walked with a stoop and shuffle; but his physical weakening was not more marked than his mental mellowing. He was softened – "gentled," as the horsemen say. His eyes were larger, and his face, once so stern and masterful, gave out an appealing expression by reason of the deep horizontal wrinkles which had developed in his brow. He had grown a mustache, and this being gray gave him an older look – older and more military. It was plain, also, that he leaned upon his keen-eyed, impassive little wife, who never for one moment lost her hold upon herself or her surroundings. Her flashing glances took note of everything about her, and her lips were close-set and firm.

Williams, ugly and wordless as ever, followed them with a proud smile till they entered the handsome suite of rooms which had been reserved for them. "There's nothing too good for Marshall Haney and his side-partner," he exulted to the bell-boy.

Thereupon, Mart, with a look of reverence at his young bride, replied: "She's airned it – and more!"

A sigh was in his voice and a singular appeal in his big eyes as he sank into an easy-chair. "I believe I do feel better down here; my heart seems to work aisier. I'm going to get well now, darlin'."

"Of course you are," she answered, in the tone of a daughter; then added, with a smile: "I like it here. Why not settle?"

To her Colorado Springs was a dazzling social centre. The beauty of the homes along its wide streets, the splendor of its private carriages, affected her almost as deeply as the magnitude and glory of Denver itself; but she was not of those who display their weaknesses and diffidence. She ate her first dinner in the lofty Antlers dining-hall with quiet dignity, and would not have been particularly noticed but for Haney, who was well-known to the waiters of the hotel. Her association with him had made her a marked figure in their mountain towns, and she was accustomed to comment.

She met the men who addressed her with entire fearlessness and candor (she was afraid only of women in good clothes), speaking with the easy slanginess of a herder, using naturally and unconsciously the most picturesque phrases of the West. Her speech was incisive and unhesitating, yet not swift. She never chattered, but "you bet" and "all right" were authorized English so far as she was concerned. "They say you can't beat this town anywhere for society, and I sure like the looks of what we've seen. Suppose we hang around this hotel for a while – not too long, for it's mighty expensive." Here she smiled – a quick, flashing smile. "You see, I can't get used to spending money – I'm afraid all the time I'll wake up. It's just like a dream I used to have of finding chink – I always came to before I had a chance to handle it and see if it was real."

Haney answered, indulgently: "'Tis all real, Bertie. I'll show you that when I'm meself again."

"Oh, I believe it – at least, part of the time," she retorted. "But I'll have to flash a roll to do it – checks are no good. I could sign a million checks and not have 'em seem like real money. I'm from Missouri when it comes to cash."

Mrs. Gilman, who had always stood in bewilderment and wonder of her daughter, was entirely subject now. She and Williams usually moved in silence, like adoring subjects in the presence of their sovereigns. They had no doubts whatsoever concerning the power and primacy of gold; and as for Haney himself, his unquestioning confidence in his little wife's judgment had come to be like an article of religious faith.

After breakfast on the second day of her stay Bertha ordered a carriage, and they drove about the town in the brilliant morning sunshine, looking for a place to build. She resembled a little home-seeking sparrow. Every cosy cottage was to her an almost irresistible allurements. "There's a dandy place, Captain," she called several times. "Wouldn't you like a house like that?"

He, with larger notions, shook his head each time. "Too small, Bertie. We've the right to a fine big place – like that, now." He nodded towards a stately gray-stone mansion, with the sign "For Sale" planted on its lawn.

She was aghast. "Gee! what would we do with a state-house like that?"

"Live in it, sure."

"It would need four chamber-maids and two hired men to take care of a place like that. And think of the money it would spoil to stock it with furniture!" Nevertheless, she gazed at it longingly. "I'd sure like that big garden and that porch. You could sit on that porch and see the mountains, couldn't you? But my ears and whiskers, the expense of keeping it!"

They passed on to other and less palatial possibilities, and returned to the hotel undecided. The two women, bewildered and weary, diverged and discussed the matter of dress till the mid-day meal.

"I like being rich," remarked the young wife, as they took their seats in the lovely dining-room, and looked about at the tables so shining, so dainty. "It would be fun to run a house like this, don't you think?" She addressed her mother.

"Good gracious, no! Think of the bill for help and the worry of looking after all this silver! No, it's too splendid for us."

Haney still retained enough of his ancient humor to smile at them. "I'd rather see you manage that big stone house with the porch which I'm going to buy."

"You don't mean it?" said Bertha, while Mrs. Gilman stared at him over her soup.

He went on quietly. "Sure! My mind's made up. You want the garden and I like the porch; so 'phone the agent after dinner, and we'll go up and see to it this very afternoon."

Bertha's bosom heaved with excitement, and her eyes expanded. "I'd like just once to see the *inside* of a house like that. It must be half as big as this hotel – but to own it! You're crazy, Captain."

The remote possibility of walking through that wonderful mansion took away the young wife's appetite, and she became silent and reflective in the face of a delicious fried chicken. The magic of her husband's wealth began to make itself most potently felt.

Haney insisted on smoking a cigar in the lobby. Bertha took her mother away to talk over the tremendous decision which was about to be thrust upon them. "We want a house," said she, decisively, "but not a palace like that. What would we do with it? It scares me up a tree to think of it."

"I guess he was only joking," Mrs. Gilman agreed.

"I can see the porch would be fine for him," Bertha went on. "But, jiminy spelter, we'd all be lost in the place!"

Haney called Williams to his side, and told him of the house. "It's a big place, but I want it. Go you and see the agent. My little girl needs a roof, and why not the best?"

"Sure!" replied Williams, with conviction. "She's entitled to a castle. You round up the women, and I'll do the rest."

The house proved to be even more splendid and spacious than its exterior indicated, and Bertha walked its wide halls with breathless delight. After a hurried survey of the interior, they came out upon the broad veranda, and lingered long in awe and wonder of the outlook. To the west lay a glorious garden of fruits and flowers; a fountain was playing over the rich green grass; high above the tops of the pear and peach trees (which made a little copse) rose the purple peaks of the Rampart range.

"Oh, isn't it great!" exclaimed Bertha.

Haney turned to the agent with a tense look on his pale face – a look of exultant power.

"Make out your papers," said he, quietly. "We take the place – as it stands."

Bertha was overwhelmed by this flourish of the enchanter's wand – but only for a moment. No sooner was the contract signed than she roused herself as to a new business venture. "Well, now, the first thing is furniture. Let's see! There is some carpets and curtains in the place, isn't there? And a steel range. It's up to me to rustle the balance of the outfit together right lively."

And so she set to work quite as she would have done in outfitting a new hotel – so many beds, so many chairs in a room, so many dressers, and soon had a long list made out and the order placed.

She spent every available moment of her time for the next two days getting the kitchen and dining-room in running order, and when she had two beds ready insisted on moving in. "We can kind o' camp out in the place till we get stocked up. I'm crazy to be under our own roof."

Haney, almost as eager as she, consented, and on the third day they drove up to the door, dismissed their hired coachman, and stepped inside the gate – master and mistress of an American chateau.

Mart turned, and, with misty eyes and a voice choked with happiness, said: "Well, darlin', we have it now – the palace of the fairy stories."

"It's great," she repeated, musingly; "but I can't make it seem like a home – mebbe it'll change when I get it filled with furniture, but the garden is sure all right."

They took their first meal on the porch overlooking the mountains, listening to the breeze in the vines. It was heavenly sweet after the barren squalor of their Cripple Creek home, and they did little but gaze and dream.

"We need a team," Bertha said, at last.

"Buy one," replied Haney.

So Bertha bought a carriage and a fine black span. This expenditure involved a coachman, and to fill that position an old friend of Williams' – a talkative and officious old miner – was employed. She next secured a Chinese cook, the best to be had, and a girl to do the chamber-work. They were all busy as hornets, and Bertha lived in a glow of excitement every waking hour of the day – though she did not show it.

Haney's check-book was quite as wonderful in its way as Aladdin's lamp, and little by little the women permitted themselves to draw upon its magic. The shining span of blacks, with flowing manes and champing bits, became a feature of the avenue as the women drove up and down on their never-ending quest for household luxuries – they had gone beyond mere necessities. Mart usually went with them, sitting in the carriage while they "visited" with the grocery clerks and furniture dealers. They were very popular with these people, as was natural.

"Little Mrs. Haney" became at once the subject of endless comment – mostly unfavorable; for Mart's saloon-made reputation was well-known, and the current notion of a woman who would marry him was not high. She was reported, in the alien circles of the town, to be a vulgar little chamber-maid who had taken a gambler for his money at a time when he was supposed to be on his death-bed, and her elevation to the management of a palatial residence was pointed out as being "peculiarly Western-American."

The men, however, were much more tolerant of judgment than their women. They had become more or less hardened to seeing crude miners luxuriating in sudden, accidental wealth;

therefore, they nodded good-humoredly at Haney and tipped their hats to his pretty wife with smiles. As bankers, tradesmen, and taxpayers generally they could not afford to neglect a citizen possessed of so much wealth and circumstance.

Mrs. Gilman presented a letter of introduction to the nearest church of her own persuasion, and went to service quite as unassumingly as in Sibley, and was greeted by a few of the ladies there cordially and without hint of her son-in-law's connections. Two or three, including the pastor's wife, made special effort to cultivate her acquaintance by calling immediately, but they were not of those who attracted Bertha; and though she showed them about the house and answered their questions, she did not promise to call. "We're too busy," she explained. "I haven't got more than half the rooms into shape, and, besides, we're to have my brother's folks down from the Junction – we're on the hustle all day long."

This was true. She had been quite besieged by her former neighbors in Sibley, who found it convenient to "put up with the Haney's" while visiting the town. They were, in fact, very curious to study her in her new and splendid setting; and though some of them peeked and peered amid the beds, and thumped the mattresses in vulgar curiosity, the young housewife merely laughed. All her life had been spent among folk of this directly inquisitive sort. She expected them to act as they did, and, being a hearty and generous soul, as well as a very democratic one, she sent them away happy.

Indeed, she won praise from all who came to know her. But that small part of the Springs – alien and exclusive – which considered itself higher if not better than the rest of the Western world, looked askance at "the gambler's wife and her freak friends," and Mrs. Crego, who was inclined to be very censorious, alluded to the Haney's as "beggars on horseback" as she met them on the boulevard.

Of all this critical comment Bertha remained, happily, unconscious, and it is probable that she would soon have won her way to a decent circle of friends had not Charles Haney descended upon them like a plague. Mart had been receiving letters from this brother, but had said nothing to Bertha of his demands. "Charles despised me when he met me in Denver," he explained to Williams. "I was busted at the time, ye mind." He winked. "And now when he reads in the papers that Mart Haney is rich, he comes down on me like a hawk on a June bug. 'Tis no matter. He may come – I'll not cast him out. But he does not play with me double-eagles – not he!"

Charles Haney was not fitted to raise his brother's wife in the social scale, for he belonged to that marked, insistent variety of actor to be distinguished on trains and in the lobbies of hotels – a fat, sleek, loud-voiced comedian, who enacted scenes from his unwritten plays while ladling his soup, and who staggered and fell across chairs in illustration of highly emotional lines and, what was worse, he was of those who regard every unescorted woman as fair game. Bold of glance and brassy of smile, he began to make eyes at his sister-in-law from their first meeting.

She amazed him. He had expected a woman of his own class – an adventuress, painted, designing; and to find this sweet little girl – "why, she's too good for Mart," he concluded, and shifted his hollow pretensions of sympathy from his brother to his sister-in-law. Before the first evening of his visit closed he sought opportunity to tell her, in hypocritic sadness, that Mart was a doomed man, and that she would soon be free of him. Bertha was disturbed by his gaze and repelled by his touch, but tried to like him on Mart's account. His mouthing disgusted her, and the good-will with which Haney greeted his brother turned into bitterness as the boaster and low wit began to display himself.

"We all grew up in the street or in the saloon," Haney sadly remarked, "and you finished your education in the variety theatre, I'm thinking."

The actor took this as a joke, and with a grin retorted: "That's better than running a faro-layout."

"I dunno; a good quiet game has its power to educate a man," replied the gambler.

That night, as she was preparing the Captain for bed, he remarked, with a sigh: "Life is a quare game! I mind Charley well as a cute little yellow-haired divil, always laughing, always in mischief, and me chasin' after him – a big slob of a boy. I used to carry him up an' down the tenement stairs. I learned him to skate – and now here he is drinkin' himself puffy, whilst I am an old broken-down hack at forty-five." He looked up at her with a sheen of tears in his eyes. "Darlin', 'tis a shame to be leanin' on you."

She put her arm around his big grizzled head and drew it to her.

"You can lean hard, Mart. I'm standin' by."

"No, I'll not lean too hard," he answered. "I don't want your fine, straight back to stoop. I make no demands. I'll not spoil your young life. I'm not worth it. You're free to go when you can't stand me any longer."

"Now, now, no more of that!" she warned. "When I have cause to knock, you won't need no ear-trumpet. Put up your hoof." He obeyed, and, stooping swiftly, she began to unlace the shoe which he could no longer reach. Her manner was that of a daughter who tyrannizes over an indulgent father. Her admiration and gratitude, so boyish once, were now replaced by an affection in which the element of sex had small place, and his love for her sprang also from a source far removed from the fierce instinct which first led him to seek her subduing.

CHAPTER VII

BERTHA REPULSES AN ENEMY

Charles Haney had no scruples. From the moment of his first meeting with his brother's young wife he determined to make himself "solid" with her. Convinced that Mart was not long for this world, he set to work to win Bertha's favor, for this was the only way to harvest the golden fortune she controlled.

"Mart is just fool enough and contrary enough to leave every cent of his money to her." Here he placed one finger against his brow. "Carlos, here is where you get busy. It's us to the haberdasher. We shine."

Notwithstanding all his boasting, he was not only an actor out of an engagement, but flat broke, badly dressed, and in sorry disrepute with managers. "I've been playing in a stock company in San Francisco," he had explained, "and I'm now on my way to New York to produce a play of my own. Hence these tears. I need an 'angel.'"

He distinctly said "the first of the month" in this announcement, but as the days went by he only settled deeper into the snug corners of the Haney home, making no further mention of his triumphal eastward progress. On the contrary, he had the air of a regular boarder, and turned up promptly for meals, rotund and glowing in the opulence of his brother's hospitality.

On the strength of his name he found favor with the tailors, and bourgeoned forth a few days later in the best cloth the shops afforded, and strutted and plumed himself like a turkey-cock before Bertha, keeping up meanwhile a pretension of sympathy and good-fellowship with Mart.

In this he miscalculated; for Bertha, youthful as she seemed, was accustomed, as she would say, to "standing off mashers," and her impassive face and keen, steady eyes fairly disconcerted the libertine. "For Mart's sake, we'll put up with him," she said to her mother. "He's a loafer; but I can see the Captain kind o' likes to have him around – for old times' sake, I reckon."

This was true. When alone with his brother, Charles dropped his egotistic brag and dramatic bluster, and touched craftily upon the dare-devil, boyish life they had led together. He was shrewd enough to see and understand that this was his most ingratiating rôle, and he played it "to the limit," as Bertha would have said.

And yet no one in the house realized how his presence reacted against Bertha.

"What are we to think of a girl so obtuse that she permits a man like this fat, disgusting actor to dangle about her?" asked Mrs. Crego of her husband, who was Haney's legal adviser.

"He's her husband's brother, you know," argued Crego.

"All the same, I can't understand her. She looks nice and sweet, and you say she is so; and yet here she is married to a notorious gambler, and associating with mountebanks and all sorts of malodorous people. Why, I've seen her riding down the street with the upholsterer, and Mrs. Congdon told me that she saw her stop her carriage in front of a cigar store and talk with a barber in a white jacket for at least ten minutes."

Crego laughed. "What infamy! However, I can't believe even the upholsterer will finally corrupt her. The fact is, my dear, we're all getting to be what some of my clients call 'too aristocratic.' Bertha Haney is sprung from good average American stock, and has associated with the kind of people you abhor all her life. She hasn't begun to draw any of your artificial distinctions. I hope she never will. Her barber friend is on the same level with the clerks and grocery-men of the town. They're all human, you know. She's the true democrat. I confess I like the girl. Her ability is astonishing. Williams and Haney both take her opinion quite as weightily as my own."

Mrs. Crego was impressed. "Well, I'll call on her if you really think I *ought* to do so."

"I don't. I withdraw my suggestion. I deprecate your calling – in that spirit. I doubt if she expects you to call. I hardly think she has awakened to any slights put upon her by your set. Indeed, she seems quite happy in the society of Thomas, Richard, and Harry."

"Don't be brutal, Allen."

"I'm not. The girl is now serene – that's the main thing; and you might raise up doubts and discontents in her mind."

"I certainly shall not go near her so long as that odious actor is hanging about. His smirk at me the other day made me ill."

This conversation was typical of many others in homes of equal culture, for Bertha's position as well as her face and manner piqued curiosity. After all, the town was a small place – just large enough to give gossip room to play in – and the sheen of Mrs. Haney's wealth made her conspicuous from afar, while her youth and boyish beauty had been the subject of admiring club talk from the very first. Haney was only an old and wounded animal, whose mate was free to choose anew.

"It makes me ache to see the girl go wrong," said Mrs. Frank Congdon, wife of a resident portrait-painter, also in delicate health (she was speaking to Mrs. Crego). "Think of that great house – Frank says she runs it admirably – filled with tinkers and tailors and candlestick-makers, not to mention touts and gamblers – when she might be entertaining – well, us, for example!" She laughed at the unbending face of her friend; then went on: "Dr. Cronk says the mother is a sweet old lady and of good New England family – a constitutional Methodist, he calls her. I wish she kept better company."

"But what can you expect of a girl brought up in a pigsty. Her mother was mistress of a little miners' hotel in Junction City, Allen says, and the girl boasts of it."

Mrs. Congdon smiled. "I'm dying to talk with her. She's far and away the most interesting of our newly rich, and I like her face. Frank has called, you know?"

"Has he?"

"On business, of course. She has decided to have him paint her husband's picture. She's taken her first step upward, you see."

"I should think she'd be content to have her saloon-keeper husband's face fade out of her memory."

"Frank is enthusiastic. I'm not a bit sure that he didn't suggest the portrait. He is shameless when he takes a fancy to a face. He's wild to paint them both and call it 'The Lion Tamer and the Lion.' He considers Haney a great character. It seems he saw him in Cripple Creek once, and was vastly taken by his pose. His being old and sad now – his face is one of the saddest I ever saw – makes it all the more interesting to Frank. So I'm going to call – in fact, we're going to lunch there soon."

"Oh, well, yes. You artists can do anything, and it's all right. You must come over immediately afterwards and tell me all about it, won't you?"

At this Mrs. Congdon laughed, but, being of generous mind, consented.

Crego was right. Bertha had not yet begun to take on trouble about her social position. She had carried to her big house in the Springs all the ideas and usages of Sibley Junction – that was all. She acknowledged her obligations as a householder, carrying forward the New England democratic traditions. To be next door made any one a neighbor, with the right to run in to inspect your house and furniture and to give advice. The fact that near-at-hand residents did not avail themselves of this privilege troubled her very little at first, so busy was she with her own affairs; but it was inevitable that the talk of her mother's church associates should sooner or later open her eyes to the truth that the distinctions which she had read about as existing in New York and Chicago were present in her own little city. "Mrs. Crego and her set are too stuck up to associate with common folks," was the form in which the revelation came to her.

From one loose-tongued sister she learned, also, that she and the Captain were subjects of earnest prayer in the sewing-circle, and that her husband's Catholicism was a source of deep anxiety, not to say proselyting hostility, on the part of the pastor and his wife, while from another of these officious souls she learned that the Springs, beautiful as it was, so sunlit, so pure of air, was a centre of marital infelicity, wherein the devil reigned supreme.

Her mother's pastor called, and was very outspoken as to Mart and Charles – both of whom needed the Lord's grace badly. He expressed great concern for Bertha's spiritual welfare, and openly prayed for her husband, whose nominal submission to the Catholic Church seemed not merely blindness to his own sin, but a danger to the young wife.

Haney, however, though wounded and suffering, was still a lion in resolution, and his glance checked the exhortation which the minister one day nerved himself to utter. "I do not interfere with any man's faith," said he, "and I do not intend to be put to school by you nor any other livin'. I was raised a Catholic, and for the sake of me mother I call meself wan to this day, and as I am so I shall die." And the finality of his voice won him freedom from further molestation.

Bertha's concern for her creed was hardly more poignant than Haney's, and they never argued; but she did begin to give puzzled thought to the social complications which opened out day by day before her. Charles, embittered by his failures, enlightened her still more profoundly. He had a certain shrewdness of comment at times which bit. "Wouldn't it jar you," said he one day, "to see this little town sporting a 'Smart Set' and quoting *Town Topics* like a Bible? Why, some of these dinky little two-spot four-flushers draw the line on me because I'm an actor! What d'y'e think o' that? I don't mind your Methodist sistern walking wide of me, but it's another punch when these dubs who are smoking my cigars at the club fail to invite me to their houses."

Bertha looked at him reflectively throughout this speech, putting a different interpretation on the neglect he complained of. She had gone beyond disliking him, she despised him (for he was growing bolder each day in his addresses), and took every precaution that he should not be alone with her; and she rose one morning with the determination to tell Mart that she would not endure his brother's presence another day. But his pleasure in Charles' company was too genuine to be disturbed, and so she endured.

The actor's talk was largely concerned with the scandal-mongery of the town, and very soon the young wife knew that Mrs. May, whose husband was "in the last stages," was in love with young Mr. June, and that Mr. Frost, whose wife was "weakly," was going about shamelessly with Miss Bloom, and all this comment came to her ears freighted with its worst significance. Vile suggestion dripped from Charles Haney's reckless tongue.

This was deep-laid policy with him. His purpose was to undermine her loyalty as a wife. His approaches had no charm, no finesse. Presuming on his relationship, he caught at her hand as she passed, or took a seat beside her if he found her alone on a sofa. At such moments she was furious with him, and once she struck his hand away with such violence that she suffered acute pain for several hours afterwards.

His attentions – which were almost assaults – came at last to destroy a large part of her joy in her new home. Her drives, when he sat beside her, were a torture, and yet she could not bring herself to accuse him before the crippled man, who really suffered from loneliness whenever she was out of the house or busy in her household work. He had never been given to reading, and was therefore pathetically dependent upon conversation for news and amusement. He was much at home, too, for his maiming was still so fresh upon him that he shrank from exhibiting himself on the street or at the clubs (there are no saloons in the Springs). Crego, whom he liked exceedingly, was very busy, and Williams was away at the mines for the most part, and so, in spite of Bertha's care, he often sat alone on the porch, a pitiful shadow of the man who paid court to the clerk of the Golden Eagle.

Sometimes he followed the women around the house like a dog, watching them at their dusting and polishing. "You'll strain yourself, Captain," Bertha warningly cried out whenever he

laid hold of a chair or brush. And so each time he went back to his library to smoke, and wait until his wife's duties were ended. At such hours his brother was a comfort. He was not a fastidious man, even with the refinement which had come from his sickness and his marriage, and the actor (so long as he cast no imputations on any friend) could talk as freely as he pleased.

Slowly, day by day, Charles regained Mart's interest and a measure of his confidence. Having learned what to avoid and what to emphasize, he now deplored the drink habits of his brothers, and gently suggested that the old father needed help. They played cards occasionally during such times as household cares drew Bertha away, and held much discussion of mines and mining – though here Mart was singularly reticent, and afforded little information about his own affairs. His trust in Charles did not go so far as that. With Crego, however, he freely discussed his condition, for the lawyer had written his new will, and was in possession of it.

"I'm like a battered old tin can," he said once. "Did ye ever try to put a tin can back into shape? Ye cannot. If ye push it back here, it bulges there. The doctors are tryin' hard to take the kinks out o' me, but 'tis impossible – I see that – but I may live on for a long time. Already me mind misgives me about Bertie – she's too young to be tied up to a shoulder-shotten old plug like mesilf."

To this Crego soothingly responded. "I don't think you need to worry. She's as happy as a blackbird in spring."

Once he said to Bertha: "I niver intended to limp around like this. I niver thought to be the skate I am this day," and his despondency darkened his face as he spoke. "I could not blame you if you threw me out. I'm only a big nuisance."

"You will be if you talk like that," she briskly answered, and that is all she seemed to make of his protest. She had indeed been reared in an atmosphere of loyalty to marriage as well as of chastity, and she never for a moment considered her vows weakened by her husband's broken frame.

This fidelity Charles discovered to his own confusion one night as he came home inflamed by liquor and reckless of hand, to find her sitting alone in the library writing a letter. It was not late, but Mart, feeling tired, had gone to bed, and Mrs. Gilman was in Sibley.

Bertha looked up as he entered, and without observing that he was drunk, went on with her writing, which was ever a painful ceremony with her. Dropping his coat where he stood, and with his hat awry on the red globe of his head, the dastard staggered towards her, his eyes lit with a glare of reckless desire.

"Say," he began, "this is luck. I want 'o talk with you, Bertie. I want 'o find out why you run away from me? What's the matter with me, anyhow?"

She realized now the foul, satyr-like mood of the man, and sprang up tense and strong, silently confronting him.

He mumbled with a grin: "You're a peach! What's the matter? Why don't you like me? Ain't I all right? I'm a gentleman."

His words were babble, but the look in his eyes, the loose slaver of his lips, both scared and angered her, and as he pushed against her, clumsily trying to hook his arm about her waist, she struck him sharply with the full weight of her arm and shoulder, and he tottered and fell sprawling. With a curse in his teeth he caught at a chair, recovered his balance, and faced her with a look of fury that would have appalled one less experienced than she.

"You little fool," he snarled, "don't you do that again!"

"*Stop!*" She did not lift her voice, but the word arrested him. "Do you want to die?" The word *die* pierced the mist of his madness. "What do you think Mart will say to this?"

He shivered and grew pale under the force of his brother's name uttered in that tone. He began to melt, subsiding into a jelly-mass of fear.

"Don't tell Mart, for Christ's sake! I didn't mean nothing. Don't do it, I beg – I beg!"

She looked at him and seemed to grow in years as she searched his wretched body for its soul. "If you don't pull out of this house to-morrow I'll let him know just the kind of dead-head

boarder you are. You haven't fooled me any – not for a minute. I've put up with you for his sake, but to-night settles it. You go! I've stood a lot from you, but your meal-ticket is no good after to-morrow morning – you *sabe*? It's you to the outside to-morrow. Now get out, or I call Mart."

He turned and shuffled from the room, leaving his battered hat at her feet.

She waited till she heard him close his door; then, with a look of disgust on her face, picked up his hat and coat, and hung them on the rack in the hall. "I'm sorry for Mart," she said to herself. "He *was* company for him, but I can't stand the loafer a day longer. I hope I never see him again."

He did not get down to breakfast, and for this she was glad; but he sought opportunity a little later to plead for clemency. "Give me another chance. I was drunk. I didn't mean it."

She remained inexorable. "Not for a second," she succinctly replied. "I don't care how you fix it with Mart. Smooth it up as best you can, but fly this coop." And her face expressed such contempt that he crept away, flabby and faltering, to his brother.

"I've been telegraphed for, and must go," he said. "And, by the way, I need a little ready mon to carry me to the little old town. As soon as I get to work I'll send you a check."

Mart handed him the money in silence, and waited till he had folded and put away the bills. Then he said: "Charles, you was always the smart one of the family, and ye'd be all right now if ye'd pass the booze and get down to hard work. It's *time* ye were off, for ye've done nothin' but loaf and drink here. I've enjoyed your talk – part of the time; but I can see ye'd grow onto me here like a wart, and that's bad for you and bad for me, and so I'm glad ye're going."

"Can't you – " He was going to ask for a position – something easy with big pay – when he saw that such a request would make his telegram a lie.

As he hesitated Mart continued: "No, I'll back no play for ye. I'm a gambler, but I take no chances of that kind. If you see the old father, write and tell me how he is."

Charles, though filled with rising fury, was sober enough to know in what danger he stood, and forcing a smile to his face, shook hands and went out to his carriage – alone.

As Mart met Bertha a few minutes later he remarked, with calm directness: "There goes a cheap rounder and a sponge. I've been a gambler and a saloon-keeper, but I never got the notion that I could live without doin' something. Charles was a smart lad, but the divil has him by the neck, and to give money is to give him drink."

Bertha remained silent, her own indictment was so much more severe.

CHAPTER VIII

BERTHA RECEIVES AN INVITATION

Colorado Springs lies in a shallow valley, under a genial sun, at almost the exact level of the summit of Mt. Washington. From the railway train, as it crawls over the hills to the east, it looks like a toy village, but is, in fact, a busy little city. To ride along its wide and leafy streets in summer, to breathe its crystalline airs in winter, is to lose belief in the necessity of disease. The grave seems afar off.

And yet it was built, and is now supported, by those who, fearing death, fled the lower, miasmatic levels of the world, and who, having abandoned all hope (or desire) of return, are loyally developing and adorning their adopted home. These fugitives are for the most part contented exiles – men as well as women – who have come to enjoy their enforced stay here beside the peaks; and their devotion to the town and its surroundings is unmistakably sincere, for they believe that the climate and the water have prolonged their lives.

Not all even of these seekers for health are ill, or even weakly, at present; on the contrary, many of them are stalwart hands at golf, and others are seasoned horsemen. In addition to those who are resident in their own behalf are many husbands attendant upon ailing wives, and blooming wives called to the care of weazened and querulous husbands, and parents who came bringing a son or daughter on whom the pale shadow of the White Death had fallen. But, after all, these Easterners color but they do not dominate the life of the town, which is a market-place for a wide region, and a place of comfort for well-to-do miners. It is, also, a Western town, with all a Western town's customary activities, and the traveller would hardly know it for a health resort, so cheerful and lively is the aspect of its streets, where everything denotes comfort and content.

In addition to the elements denoted above, it is also taken to be a desirable social centre and a charming place of residence for men like Marshall Haney, who, having made their pile in the mountain camps, have a reasonable desire to put their gold in evidence – "to get some good of their dust," as Williams might say. Here and there along the principal avenues are luxurious homes – absurdly pretentious in some instances – which are pointed out to visitors as the residences of the big miners. They are especially given to good horses also, and ride or drive industriously, mixing very little with the more cultured and sophisticated of their neighbors, for whom they furnish a never-ending comedy of manners. "A beautiful mixture for a novelist," Congdon often said.

Yes, the town has its restricted "Smart Set," in imitation of New York city, and its literary and artistic groups (small, of course), and its staid circle of wealth and privilege, and within defined limits and at certain formal civic functions these various elements meet and interfuse genially if not sincerely. However, the bitter fact remains that the microcosm is already divided into classes and masses in a way which would be humorous if it were not so deeply significant of a deplorable change in American life. Squire Crego, in discussing this very matter with Frank Congdon, the portrait-painter, put it thus: "This division of interest is inevitable. What can you do? The wife of the man who cobbles my shoes or the daughter of the grocer who supplies my sugar is, in the eyes of God, undoubtedly of the same value as my own wife, but they don't *interest* me. As a social democrat, I may wish sincerely to do them good, but, confound it, to wish to do them good is an impertinence. And when I've tried to bring these elements together in my house I have always failed. Mrs. Crego, while being most gracious and cordial, has, nevertheless, managed to make the upholsterer chilly, and to freeze the grocer's wife entirely out of the picture."

"There's one comfort: it isn't a matter of money. If it were, where would the Congdons be?"

"No, it isn't really a matter of money, and in a certain sense it isn't a matter of brains. It's a question of –"

"*Savoir faire*."

"Precisely. You haven't a cent, so you say frequently – " Congdon stopped him, gravely.

"I owe you fifty – I was just going down into my jeans to pay it, when I suddenly recalled – "

"Don't interrupt the court. You haven't a cent, we'll say, but you go everywhere and are welcome. Why?"

"That's just it. Why? If you really want to know, I'll tell you. It's all on account of Lee. Lee is a mighty smart girl. She has a cinch on the gray matter of this family."

"You do yourself an injustice."

"Thank you."

Crego pursued his argument. "There isn't any place that a man of your type can't go if you want to, because you take something with you. You mix. And Haney, for example – to return to the concrete again – Haney would make a most interesting guest at one's dinner-table, but the wife, clever as she is, is impossible – or, at least, Mrs. Crego thinks she is."

Congdon fixed a finger pistol-wise and impressively said: "That little Mrs. Haney is a wonder. Don't make any mistake about her. She'll climb."

"I'm not making the mistake, it's Mrs. Crego. I've asked her to call on the girl, but she evades the issue by asking: 'What's the use? Her interests are not ours, and I don't intend to cultivate her as a freak.' So there we stand."

Congdon looked thoughtful. "She may be right, but I don't think so. The girl interests me, because I think I see in her great possibilities."

"Her abilities certainly are remarkable. She needs but one statement of a point in law. She seems never to forget a word I say. Sometimes this realization is embarrassing. When she fixes those big wistful eyes on me I feel bound to give her my choicest diction and my soundest judgments. Haney, too, for all his wild career, attaches my sympathy. You're painting his portrait – why don't you and Lee give them a dinner?"

"Good thought! I told Lee this morning that it was a shame to draw the line on that little girl just because that rotten, bad brother-in-law of hers was base enough to slur her at the club. But, as you say, women can't be driv. However, I think Lee can manage a dinner if anybody can. As you say, we're only artists, and artists can do anything – except borrow money. However, if you want to know, Lee says that this barber lover of Mrs. Haney's has done more to queer her with our set than anything else. They think her tastes are low."

"That incident is easily explained. Winchell knew her in Sibley, and though he has undoubtedly followed her over here for love of her, he seems a decent fellow, and I don't believe intends any harm. I will admit her stopping outside his door to talk with him was unconventional, but I can't believe that she was aware of any impropriety in the act. Nevertheless, that did settle the matter with Helen. 'You can dine with them any day if you wish,' she says, 'but – ' And there the argument rests."

"Of course, you and I can put the matter on a basis of trade courtesy," said Congdon; "but I confess they interest me enormously, and I would like to do them some little favor for their own sakes. Poor Haney will never be more of a man than he is to-day, and that little girl is going to earn all the money she gets before she is done with him."

And so they parted, and Congdon went home to renew the discussion with his wife. "You must call. It's only the decent thing to do, now that the portrait is nearly done," he said.

"I don't mind the calling, Frank," she briskly replied, "and I don't much mind giving a little dinner, but I don't want to get the girl on my mind. She has so much to learn, and I haven't the time nor energy to teach her."

Congdon waved his finger. "Don't you grow pale over that," said he. "That girl's no fool – she's capable of development. She will amaze you yet."

"Well, consider it settled. I'll call this afternoon and ask her to dinner; but don't expect me to advise her and follow her up. Now, who'll we ask to meet her – the Cregos?"

"Yes, I'd thought of them."

"Oh, I know all about it. You needn't stammer. You and Allen are getting a good deal out of the Haney's, and want to be decent in return. Well, I think well of you for it, and I'll do my mite. I'll have young Fordyce in, and Alice; being Quakers and 'plain people,' they won't mind. Ben is crazy to see the rough side of Western life, anyway. Now run away, little boy, and leave the whole business to me."

As Crego had said, the Congdons were privileged characters in the Springs. They were at once haughty with the pride of esthetic cleverness, and humble with the sense of their unworthiness in the wide old-world of art. Lee was contemptuous of wealth when they had a pot of beans in the house, and Frank was imperiously truculent when borrowing ten dollars from a friend or demanding an advance of cash from a prospective patron. They both came of long lines of native American ancestry, and not only felt themselves as good as anybody, but a little better than most. They gave wit for champagne, art instruction for automobile rides, and never-failing good humor for house-room and the blazing fires of roomy hearths.

Mrs. Congdon, of direct Virginian ancestry, was named Lee by a state's-rights mother, who sent her abroad to "study art." She ended by pretending to be a sculptor – and she still did occasionally model a figurine of her friends or her friends' babies; mainly, she was the aider and abettor of her husband, a really clever portrait-painter, whose ill health had driven him from New York to Colorado, and who was making a precarious living in the Springs – precarious for the reason that on bright days he would rather play golf than handle a brush, and on dark days he *couldn't* see to paint (so he said). In truth, he was not well, and his slender store of strength did not permit him to do as he would. To cover the real seriousness of his case he loudly admitted his laziness and incompetency.

Lee was a devoted wife, and when she realized that his interest in the Haney's was deep and genuine her slight opposition gave way. It meant a couple of thousand dollars to Frank, but money was the least of their troubles – credit seemed to come along when they needed it most, and each of them had become "trustful to the point of idiocy," Mrs. Crego was accustomed to say. Mrs. Crego really took charge of their affairs, and when they needed food helped them to it.

Starting for the Haney's on the street-car that very afternoon, Lee reached the gate just as Bertie was helping Mart into his carriage. There was something so genuine and so touching in this picture of the slender young wife supporting her big and crippled husband that Mrs. Congdon's nerves thrilled and her face softened. Plainly this consideration on the part of Mrs. Haney was habitual and ungrudging.

Bertie, as she faced her caller, saw only a pale little woman with flashing eyes and smiling mouth, whose dress was as neat as a man's and almost as plain (Lee prided herself on not being "artistic" in dress), and so waited for further information.

"How do you do, Mrs. Haney?" Lee began. "I'm Mrs. Congdon."

Bertha threw the rug over Mart's knees before turning to offer her hand. "I'm glad to meet you," she responded, with gravity. "I've seen you on the street."

Lee couldn't quite make out whether this remark was intended for reproach or not, but she went on, quickly: "I was just about to call. Indeed, I came to ask you and Mr. Haney to dine with us on Thursday." She nodded and smiled at Mart, who sat with impassive countenance listening with attention – his piercing eyes making her rather uncomfortable. "We dine at seven. I hope you can come."

Bertha looked up at her husband. "What do you say, Captain?"

"I don't see any objection," he answered, without warmth.

Bertha turned, with still passive countenance. "All right," she said, "we'll be there. Won't you jump in and take a ride with us?"

Lee, burning with mingled flames of resentment and humor, replied: "Thank you, I have another call to make – Thursday, then, at seven o'clock."

"We'll connect. Much obliged," replied Bertha, and sprang into the carriage. "Go ahead, Dan. Good-day, Mrs. Congdon."

Lee stood for an instant in amazement at this easy, not to say indifferent, acceptance of her tremendous offering. "Well, if that isn't cool!" she gasped, and walked on thoughtfully.

Humor dominated her at last, and when she entered Mrs. Crego's house she was flushed with laughter, and recounted the words of the interview with so many subtle interpretations of her own that Mrs. Crego was delighted.

Mrs. Congdon did not spare herself. "Helen, she made me feel like a bill-collector! 'All right,' said she, 'I'll be there,' and left me standing in the middle of the street. You've got to come now, Helen, to preserve my dignity."

"I'm wild to come, really. I want to see what she'll do to us 'professional people.' Maybe she will patronize us too."

When Lee told Frank about it at night he failed to laugh as heartily as she had expected. "That's all very funny, the way you tell it, but as a matter of fact the girl did all she knew. She accepted your invitation and civilly asked you to take a ride. What more could mortal woman proffer?"

"She might have invited me into the house."

"Not at the moment. It was Mart's hour for a drive, and you were interfering with one of her duties. I think she treated you very well."

"Anyhow, she's coming, and so is Helen. It tickled Helen nearly into fits, of course, and she's coming – just to see me 'put to it to manage these wet valley bronchos.'"

"The girl may look like a bronk, but she's got good blood in her. She'll hold her own anywhere," replied Congdon, with conviction.

CHAPTER IX

BERTHA MEETS BEN FORDYCE

For all her impassivity, Bertha was really elated by this invitation, for she liked Congdon, and had a very high opinion of his powers. She experienced no special dread of the dinner, for it appeared to her at the moment to be a simple sitting down to eat with some friendly people. She was not in awe of Mrs. Congdon, however much she might admire her husband's skill, and she knew their home. It was a small house on a side street, and did not compare for a moment with her own establishment, in which she had begun to take a settled pride.

As they rode away she was mentally casting up in her mind a choice of clothes, when Haney remarked: "Bertie, I don't believe I'll go to that dinner."

"Why not?"

"Well, I'm not as handy with a cold deck as I used to be, and I don't think I ought to put me lame foot into another man's lap."

"You're all right, Captain, and, besides, I'll be close by to help out in case you run up against a hard knock in the steak. Course you'll go – I want you to get out and see the people. Why, you haven't taken a meal out of the house since we moved, except that one at the Casino. You need more doin'."

Haney was in a dejected mood. "So do you. I'm a heavy handicap to you, Bertie, sure I am. As I see ye settin' there bloomin' as a rose and feel me own age a-creepin' on me, I know I should be takin' me *congé* out of self-respect – just to give you open road."

"Stop that!" she warningly cried. "Hello, there's Ed! He seems in a rush. Wonder what's eating him?"

Winchell, dressed in a new suit of clothes, darted from the sidewalk to the carriage, his face shining. "Say, folks, I'm called East. Old man died yesterday, and I've got to go home." He was breathing hard with excitement.

"Get in and tell us about it," commanded Bertha.

He climbed up beside the driver, and turned on his seat to continue. "Yes, I've got to go; and, say, the old man was well off. I don't do no more barberin', I tell you that. I'm goin' to study law. I'm comin' back here just as soon as things are settled up. I've been talking with a fellow here – Lawyer Hansall; he says he'll take me in and give me a chance. No more barberin' for me, you hear me!"

"'Tis a poor business, but a necessary," remarked Haney.

Bertha was sympathetic. "I'm glad you're goin' to get a raise. Of course, I'm sorry about your father."

"I understand – so am I. But he's gone, and it's up to me to think of myself. I know you always despised my trade."

"No, I didn't. Men have to be shaved and clipped. It's like dish-washin', somebody has to do it. We can't all sit in the parlor."

Winchell acknowledged the force of this. "Well, I always felt sneakin' about it, I'll admit, but that was because I was raised a farmer, and barbers were always cheap skates with us. We didn't use 'em much, in fact. Well, it's all up now, and when I come back I want you to forget I ever cut hair. A third of the old farm is mine, and that will pay my board while I study."

Neither Haney nor his young wife was surprised by this movement on his part any more than he was surprised at their rise to wealth and luxury; both were in accordance with the American tradition. But as they rode down the street certain scornful Easterners (schooled in European conventions) smiled to see the wife of an Irish millionaire gambler in earnest conversation with a barber.

Mrs. Crego, driving down-town with Mrs. Congdon, stared in astonishment, then turned to Lee. "And you ask me to meet such a woman at dinner!" she exclaimed, and her tone expressed a kind of bewilderment.

Lee laughed. "You can't fail me now. Don't be hasty. Trust in Frank."

"I'd hate to have my dinner partners selected by Frank Congdon. I draw the line at barbers."

"You're a snob, Helen. If you were really as narrow as you sound I'd cut you dead! Furthermore, the barber isn't invited."

"I can't understand such people."

"I can. She don't know any better. You impute a low motive where there is nothing worse than ignorance. As Frank says, the girl is a perfectly natural outgrowth of a little town. I hope our dinner won't spoil her."

Mrs. Congdon had put the dinner-hour early, and when the Haney's drove up in their glittering new carriage, drawn by two splendid black horses, she too had a moment of bewilderment, but her sense of humor prevailed. "Frank," she said, "you can't patronize a turnout like that – not in my presence."

"To-night art's name is mud," he replied, with conviction, and hastened down the steps to help Haney up.

The gambler waved his proffered arm aside. "I'm not so bad as all that," said he. "I let me little Corporal help me – sometimes for love of it, not because I nade it."

He was still gaunt and pale, but his eyes were of unconquerable fire, and the lift of his head from the shoulders was still leopard-like. He was dressed in a black frock-coat, with a cream-colored vest and gray trousers, and looked very well indeed – quite irreproachable.

Bertha was clad in black also – a close-fitting, high-necked gown which made her fair skin shine like fire-flushed ivory, and her big serious eyes and vivid lips completed the charm of her singular beauty. Her bosom had lost some of its girlish flatness, but the lines of her hips and thighs still resembled those of a boy, and the pose of her head was like that of an athlete.

"Won't you come in and take off your hat?" asked Mrs. Congdon. And she followed without reply, leaving the two men on the porch.

Without appearing to do so she saw everything in the house, which was hardly more than an artistic camp, so far as the first floor was concerned. Navajo rugs were on the floor, Moqui plaques starred the walls, and Acoma ollas perched upon book-shelves of thick plank. The chairs were rude, rough, and bolted at the joints. The room made a pleasant impression on Bertha, though she could not have told why. The ceiling was dark, the walls green, the woodwork stained pine, and yet it had charm.

Mrs. Congdon explained meanwhile that Frank had made the big centre-table of plank, and the book-shelves as well. "He likes to tinker at such things," she said. "Whenever he gets blue or cross I set him to shifting the dresser or making a book-shelf, and he cheers up like mad. He's a regular kid anyway – always doing the things he ought not to do."

In this way she tried to put her guest at her ease, while Bertha sat looking at her in an absent-minded way, apparently neither frightened nor embarrassed – on the contrary, she seemed to be thinking of something else. At last, to force a reply, Mrs. Congdon asked: "How do you like my husband's portrait of Mr. Haney?"

"I don't know," she slowly replied. "It looks like him, and then again it don't. I guess I'm not up to hand paintin's. Enlarged photographs are about my size."

"You're disappointed, then?"

"Well, yes, I don't know but I am. I didn't think it was going to look just that way. Mr. Congdon says blue shadows are under anybody's ears in the light, but I can't see 'em on the Captain, and I do see 'em in the picture; that's what gets me twisted. When I look at the picture I can't see nothin' else."

Her hostess laughed. "I know just how you feel, but that's the insolence of the painter – he puts on canvas what *he* sees, not what his patron sees. The more money you pay for a portrait the more insolent the artist."

At this moment Mrs. Crego came in, and (as she said afterwards) was presented to the gambler's wife "as though I were a nobody and she a visiting countess." Bertha rose, offered her hand, like a boy, in silence; she stood very straight, with very cold and unmistakably suspicious face. And Alice Heath, who entered with Mrs. Crego, shared this chill reception.

Bertha, in truth, instantly and cordially hated Mrs. Crego; but she pitied the younger woman, in whom she detected another fugitive fighting a losing battle with disease. Miss Heath was very fair and very frail, with burning deep-blue eyes and a lovely mouth. She greeted Bertha with such sincere pleasure that the girl inclined to her instantly, and they went out on the porch together. Alice put her hand on Bertha's arm, saying: "I've wanted to meet you, Mr. Congdon has told us so much of you. Your life seems very romantic to me."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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