

Cullum Ridgwell

The Twins of Suffering Creek



Ridgwell Cullum

The Twins of Suffering Creek

«Public Domain»

Cullum R.

The Twins of Suffering Creek / R. Cullum — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	11
CHAPTER III	18
CHAPTER IV	26
CHAPTER V	33
CHAPTER VI	41
CHAPTER VII	44
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	45

Ridgwell Cullum

The Twins of Suffering Creek

CHAPTER I

POTTER'S CLAY

Scipio moved about the room uncertainly. It was characteristic of him. Nature had given him an expression that suggested bewilderment, and, somehow, this expression had got into his movements.

He was swabbing the floor with a rag mop; a voluntary task, undertaken to relieve his wife, who was lounging over the glowing cookstove, reading a cheap story book. Once or twice he paused in his labors, and his mild, questioning blue eyes sought the woman's intent face. His stubby, work-soiled fingers would rake their way through his straw-colored hair, which grew sparsely and defiantly, standing out at every possible unnatural angle, and the mop would again flap into the muddy water, and continue its process of smearing the rough boarded floor.

Now and again the sound of children's voices floated in through the open doorway, and at each shrill piping the man's pale eyes lit into a smile of parental tenderness. But his work went on steadily, for such was the deliberateness of his purpose.

The room was small, and already three-quarters of it had been satisfactorily smeared, and the dirt spread to the necessary consistency. Now he was nearing the cookstove where the woman sat.

"I'd hate to worry you any, Jess," he said, in a gentle, apologetic voice, "but I'm right up to this patch. If you'd kind of lift your feet, an' tuck your skirts around you some, guess you could go right on reading your fiction."

The woman looked up with a peevish frown. Then something like a pitying smile warmed her expression. She was a handsome creature, of a large, somewhat bold type, with a passionate glow of strong youth and health in every feature of her well-shaped face. She was taller than her diminutive husband, and, in every detail of expression, his antithesis. She wore a dress with some pretensions to display, and suggesting a considerable personal vanity. But it was of the tawdry order that was unconvincing, and lacked both refinement and tidiness.

Scipio followed up his words with a glance of smiling amiability.

"I'm real sorry—" he began again.

But she cut him short.

"Oh, bother!" she exclaimed; and, thrusting her slippered feet upon the stove, tucked her skirts about her. Then, utterly ignoring him, she buried herself once more in her book.

The mop flapped about her chair legs, the water splashed the stove. Scipio was hurrying, and consequently floundering. It was his endeavor not to disturb his wife more than was necessary.

Finally he wrung out his mop and stood it outside the door in the sun. He emptied his bucket upon the few anæmic cabbages which grew in an untidy patch at the side of the hut, and returned once more to the room.

He glanced round it with feeble appreciation. It was a hopeless sort of place, yet he could not detect its shortcomings. The rough, log-built walls, smeared with a mud plaster, were quite unadorned. There was one solitary opening for a window, and in the center of the room was a roughly manufactured table, laden with the remains of several repasts. Breakfast was the latest, and the smell of coffee and fried pork still hung about the room. There were two Windsor chairs, one of which his wife was occupying, and a ramshackle food cupboard. Then there were the cookstove and a fuel box, and two or three iron pots hanging about the walls.

Out of this opened a bedroom, and the rough bedstead, with its tumbled blankets, was in full view where Scipio stood. Although the morning was well advanced the bed was still unmade. Poor as the place was, it might, in the hands of a busy housewife, have presented a very different appearance. But Jessie was not a good housewife. She hated the care of her little home. She was not a bad woman, but she had no sympathy with the harshnesses of life. She yearned for the amplitude to which she had been brought up, and detested bitterly the pass to which her husband's incapacity had brought her.

When she had married Scipio he had money—money that had been left to him for the purpose of embarking in business, a purpose he had faithfully carried out. But his knowledge of business was limited to the signing of checks in favor of anyone who wanted one, and, as a consequence, by the time their twins were three years old he had received an intimation from the bank that he must forthwith put them in credit for the last check he had drawn.

Thus it was that, six months later, the thirty or forty inhabitants of Job's Flat on Suffering Creek—a little mining camp stowed away in the southwest corner of Montana, almost hidden amongst the broken foothills of the Rocky Mountains—basking in the sunshine of a Sunday afternoon haze, were suddenly startled by the apparition of a small wagon, driven by a smaller man with yellow hair, bearing down upon them. But that which stirred them most surely was the additional sight of a handsome girl, sitting at his side, and, crowded between them on the seat, a pair of small children.

Scipio, in a desperate effort to restore his fortunes, and set his precious family once more on a sound financial basis, had come in search of the gold which report said was to be had on Suffering Creek for the trouble of picking it up.

This vision startled Suffering Creek, which, metaphorically, sat up and rubbed its eyes. Here was something quite unaccustomed. The yellow-haired fragment of humanity at the end of the reins was like nothing they had ever seen; the children were a source of wondering astonishment; but the woman—ah! There was one woman, and one woman only, on Suffering Creek until Jessie's arrival, and she was only the "hash-slinger" at Minky's store.

The newcomer's face pleased them. Her eyes were fine, and full of coquetry. Her figure was all that a woman's should be. Yes, the camp liked the look of her, and so it set out to give Scipio a hearty welcome.

Now a mining camp can be very cordial in its rough way. It can be otherwise, too. But in this case we have only to do with its cordiality. The men of Suffering Creek were drawn from all sorts and conditions of society. The majority of them lived like various grades of princes when money was plentiful, and starved when Fortune frowned. There were men amongst them who had never felt the softer side of life, and men who had been ruthlessly kicked from that downy couch. There were good men and scoundrels, workers and loafers; there were men who had few scruples, and certainly no morals whatever. But they had met on a common ground with the common purpose of spinning fortune's wheel, and the sight of a woman's handsome face set them tumbling over each other to extend the hand of friendship to her husband.

And the simple-minded Scipio quickly fell into the fold. Nor was it long before his innocence, his mildness, his never-failing good-nature got hold of this cluster of ruffians. They laughed at him—he was a source of endless amusement to them—but they liked him. And in such men liking meant a great deal.

But from the first Scipio's peculiar nature, and it was peculiar, led him into many grievous mistakes. His mind was full of active purpose. He had an enormous sense of responsibility and duty to those who belonged to him. But somehow he seemed to lack any due sense of proportion in those things which were vital to their best interests. Ponderous thought had the effect of turning his ideas upside down, leaving him with but one clear inspiration. He must do. He must act—and at once.

Thus it was he gave much consideration to the selection of the site of his house. He wanted a southern aspect, it must be high up, it must not be crowded amongst the other houses. The twins needed air. Then the nearer he was to the creek, where the gold was to be found, the better. And again his prospecting must tap a part of it where the diggers had not yet "claimed." There were a dozen and one things to be considered, and he thought of them all until his gentle mind became confused and his sense of proportion completely submerged.

The result was, he settled desperately upon the one site that common sense should have made him avoid. Nor was it until the foundations of the house had been laid, and the walls were already half their full height, that he realized, from the desolation of refuse and garbage strewn everywhere about him, that his home was overlooking the camp "dumps."

However, it was too late to make any change, and, with characteristic persistence, he completed his work and went into residence with his wife and the twins.

The pressure of work lessened, he had a moment in which to look around. And with the thought of his twins on his mind, and all his wife had once been accustomed to, he quickly realized the necessity of green vegetables in his *ménage*. So he promptly flew to the task of arranging a cabbage patch. The result was a foregone conclusion. He dug and planted his patch. Nor was it until the work was completed that it filtered through to his comprehension that he had selected the only patch in the neighborhood with a heavy underlay of gravel and lime stone.

But his crowning effort was his search for gold. There are well-established geological laws governing the prospector's craft which no experienced gold-seeker ever departs from. These were all carefully explained to him by willing tongues. Then, after poring over all he had learned, and thought and searched for two days and two nights, he finally discovered a spot where no other prospector had staked the ground.

It was a curious, gloomy sort of patch, nearly half-a-mile up the creek from the camp, and further in towards the mountains. Just at this spot the banks of the creek were high, there was an unusual blackness about the soil, and it gave out a faint but unrecognizable odor, that, in the bright mountain air, was quite pleasant. For several hundred yards the ground of this flat was rankly spongy, with an oozy surface. Then, beyond, lay a black greasy-looking marsh, and further on again the hills rose abruptly with the facets of auriferous-looking soil, such as the prospector loves to contemplate.

Scipio pondered. And though the conditions outraged all he had been told of the craft he was embarking upon, he plunged his pick into this flat, and set to work with characteristic good-will.

The men of the camp when they discovered his venture shook their heads and laughed. Then their laugh died out and their hard eyes grew serious. But no one interfered. They were all seeking gold.

This was Scipio's position on Suffering Creek, but it does not tell half of what lay somewhere in the back of his quaintly-poised mind. No one who knew him failed to realize his worship for his wife. His was a love such as rarely falls to the lot of woman. And his devotion to his girl and boy twins was something quite beyond words. These things were the mainspring of his life, and drove him to such superlative degrees of self-sacrifice that could surely only have been endured by a man of his peculiar mind.

No matter what the toil of his claim, he always seemed to find leisure and delight in saving his wife from the domestic cares of their home. And though weary to the breaking-point with his toil, and consumed by a hunger that was well-nigh painful, when food was short he never seemed to realize his needs until Jessie and the children had eaten heartily. And afterwards no power on earth could rob him of an hour's romp with the little tyrants who ruled and worshiped him.

Now, as he stood before the littered table, he glanced out at the sun. The morning was advancing all too rapidly. His eyes drifted across to his wife. She was still reading. A light sigh

escaped him. He felt he should be out on his claim. However, without further thought he took the boiler of hot water off the stove and began to wash up.

It was the clatter of the plates that made Jessie look up.

"For goodness' sake!" she exclaimed, with exasperation. "You'll be bathing the children next. Say, you can just leave those things alone. I've only got a bit more to read to the end of the chapter."

"I thought maybe it 'ud help you out some. I—"

"You give me a pain, you sure do," Jessie broke in. "You get right out and hustle gold, and leave things of that sort to others."

"But I don't mind doing it, truth I don't," Scipio expostulated mildly. "I just thought it would save you—"

Jessie gave an artificial sigh.

"You tire me. Do you think I don't know my work? I'm here to do the chores—and well I know it. You're here to do a man's work, same as any other man. You get out and find the gold, I can look after the house—if you can call it a house," she added contemptuously.

Her eyes were quite hopeless as she let them wander over the frowsiness in the midst of which she sat. She was particularly discontented this morning. Not only had her thoughts been rudely dragged back from the seductive contemplation of the doings of the wealthy ones as the dime fiction-writer sees them, but there was a feeling of something more personal. It was something which she hugged to her bosom as a priceless pearl of enjoyment in the midst of a barren, rock-bound life of squalor.

The sight of him meandering about the room recalled these things. Thoughts, while they troubled her, yet had power to stimulate and excite her; thoughts which she almost dreaded, but which caused her exquisite delight. She must get rid of him.

But as she looked about the room something very like dismay assailed her. There were the hated household duties confronting her; duties she was longing to be free of, duties which she was tempted to abandon altogether, with everything else that concerned her present sordid life.

But Scipio knew none of this. His unsuspecting nature left him utterly blinded to the inner workings of her indolent, selfish spirit, and was always ready to accept blame for her ill-humors. Now he hurriedly endeavored to make amends.

"Of course you can, Jess," he said eagerly. "I don't guess there's another woman around who can manage things like you. You don't never grumble at things, and goodness knows I couldn't blame you any, if you did. But—but ther' seems such a heap to be done—for you to do," he went on, glancing with mild vengefulness at the litter. "Say," he cried, with a sudden lightening and inspiration, "maybe I could buck some wood for you before I go. You'll need a good fire to dry the kiddies by after you washened 'em. It sure wouldn't kep me long."

But the only effect of his persistent kindness was to further exasperate his wife. Every word, every gentle intention on his part made her realize her own shortcomings more fully. In her innermost heart she knew that she had no desire to do the work; she hated it, she was lazy. She knew that he was far better than she; good, even noble, in spite of his mental powers being so lamentably at fault. All this she knew, and it weakly maddened her because she could not rise above herself and show him all the woman that was so deeply hidden under her cloak of selfishness.

Then there was that other thought, that something that was her secret. She had that instinct of good that made it a guilty secret. Yet she knew that, as the world sees things, she had as yet done no great harm.

And therein lay the mischief. Had she been a vicious woman nothing would have troubled her, but she was not vicious. She was not even less than good in her moral instincts. Only she was weak, hopelessly weak, and so all these things drove her to a shrewish discontent and peevishness.

"Oh, there's no peace where you are," she cried, passionately flinging her book aside and springing to her feet. "Do you think I can't look to this miserable home you've given me? I hate

it. Yes, I hate it all. Why I married you I'm sure I don't know. Look at it. Look round you, and if you have any idea of things at all what can you see but a miserable hog pen? Yes, that's it, a hog pen. And we are the hogs. You and me, and—and the little ones. Why haven't you got some 'get up' about you? Why don't you earn some money, get some somehow so we can live as we've been used to living? Why don't you do something, instead of pottering around here trying to do chores that aren't your work, an' you can't do right anyway? You make me mad—you do indeed. But there! There's no use talking to you, none whatever!"

"I'm sorry, Jess. I'm real sorry you feel like this."

Scipio left the table and moved to the cupboard, into which he mechanically began to stow the provender. It was an unconscious action and almost pathetic in its display of that kindly purpose, which, where his wife was concerned, was never-failing. Jessie saw, angry as she was, and her fine eyes softened. Perhaps it was the maternal instinct underlying the selfishness that made her feel something akin to a pitying affection for her little husband.

She glanced down at the boiler of water, and mechanically gathered some of the tin plates together and proceeded to wash them.

"I'm kind of sorry, Zip," she said. "I just didn't mean all that. Only—only it makes me feel bad seeing all this around, and you—you always trying to do both a man's and a woman's work. Things are bad with us, so bad they seem hopeless. We're right here with two kiddies and—and ourselves, and there's practically no money and no prospects of there being any. It makes me want to cry. It makes me want to do something desperate. It makes me hate things—even those things I've no right to hate. No, no," as the man tried to stop her, "don't you say anything. Not a word till I've done. You see, I mayn't feel like talking of these things again. Maybe I shan't never have a chance of talking them again."

She sighed and stared out of window.

"I want you to understand things as I see them, and maybe you'll not blame me if I see them wrong. You're too good for me, and I—I don't seem grateful for your goodness. You work and think of others as no other man would do. You don't know what it is to think of yourself. It's me, and the children first with you, and, Zip—and you've no call to think much of me. Yes, I know what you'd say. I'm the most perfect woman on earth. I'm not. I'm not even good. If I were I'd be glad of all you try to do; I'd help you. But I don't, and—and I just don't seem able to. I'm always sort of longing and longing for the old days. I long for those things we can never have. I think—think always of folks with money, their automobiles, their grand houses, with lots and lots of good things to eat. And it makes me hate—all—all this. Oh, Zip, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm not good. But I'm not, and I—I—"

She broke off and dashed the back of her hand across her eyes in time to wipe away the great tears that threatened to roll down her rounded cheeks. In a moment Scipio was at her side, and one arm was thrust about her waist, and he seized one of her hands.

"You mustn't to cry," he said tenderly, as though she were a child. "You mustn't, Jess—truth. You ain't what you're saying. You ain't nothing like it. You're dear and good, and it's 'cause you're that good and honest you're saying all these things. Do you think I don't know just how you're suffering? Do you? Why, Jess, I know just everything about you, and it nigh breaks my heart to think of all I've brought you to. It ain't you, Jess, it's me who's bad. It's me who's a fool. I hain't no more sense than a buck rabbit, and I ain't sure a new-littered pup couldn't put me to sleep for savvee. Now don't you go to crying. Don't you indeed. I just can't bear to see those beautiful eyes o' yours all red and running tears. And, say, we sure have got better prospects than you're figgering. You see, I've got a claim there's no one else working on. And sure there's minerals on it. Copper—or leastways it looks like copper, and there's mica, an' lots—an' lots of stuff. I'll sure find gold in that claim. It's just a matter of keepin' on. And I'm going to. And then, when we find it, what a blow-out we'll have. We'll get automobiles and houses, and—and we'll have a bunch of sweet corn for supper, same as we had at a hotel once, and then—"

But the woman had suddenly drawn away from his embrace. She could stand no more of her little husband's pathetic hopes. She knew. She knew, with the rest of the camp, the hopelessness of his quest, and even in her worst moments she had not the heart to destroy his illusions. It was no good, the hopelessness of it all came more than ever upon her.

"Zip dear," she said, with a sudden, unwonted tenderness that had something strangely nervous in it, "don't you get staying around here or I'll keep right on crying. You get out to your work. I'm feeling better now, and you've—you've made things look kind of brighter," she lied.

She glanced out of window, and the height of the sun seemed suddenly to startle her. Her more gentle look suddenly vanished and one of irritability swiftly replaced it.

"Now, won't you let me help you with all these things?" Scipio coaxed.

But Jessie had seemingly quite forgotten her moment of tenderness.

"No," she said sharply. "You get right out to work." Then after a pause, with a sudden warming in her tone, "Think of Jamie and Vada. Think of them, and not of me. Their little lives are just beginning. They are quite helpless. You must work for them, and work as you've never done before. They are ours, and we love them. I love them. Yes"—with a harsh laugh—"better than myself. Don't you think of me, Zip. Think of them, and work for them. Now be off. I don't want you here."

Scipio reluctantly enough accepted his dismissal. His wife's sudden nervousness of manner was not hidden from him. He believed that she was seriously upset, and it pained and alarmed his gentle heart. But the cause of her condition did not enter into his calculations. How should it? The reason of things seemed to be something which his mind could neither grasp nor even inquire into. She was troubled, and he—well, it made him unhappy. She said go and work, work for the children. Ah, yes, her thoughts were for the children, womanly, unselfish thoughts just such as a good mother should have. So he went, full of a fresh enthusiasm for his work and for his object.

Meanwhile Jessie went on with her work. And strangely enough her nervousness increased as the moments went by, and a vague feeling of apprehension took hold of her. She hurried desperately. To get the table cleared was her chief concern. How she hated it. The water grew cold and greasy, and every time she dipped her cloth into it she shuddered. Again and again her eyes turned upon the window surveying the bright sunlight outside. The children playing somewhere beyond the door were ignored. She was even trying to forget them. She heard their voices, and they set her nerves jangling with each fresh peal of laughter, or shrill piping cry.

At last the last plate and enameled cup was washed and dried. The boiler was emptied and hung upon the wall. She swabbed the table carelessly and left it to dry. Then, with a rush, she vanished into the inner room.

The moments passed rapidly. There was no sound beyond the merry games of the twins squatting out in the sun, digging up the dusty soil with their fat little fingers. Jessie did not reappear.

At last a light, decided step sounded on the creek side of the house. It drew nearer. A moment or two later a shadow flitted across the window. Then suddenly a man's head and shoulders filled up the opening. The head bent forward, craning into the room, and a pair of handsome eyes peered curiously round.

"Hi!" he cried in a suppressed tone. "Hi! Jessie!"

The bedroom curtain was flung aside, and Jessie, arrayed carefully in her best shirtwaist and skirt, suddenly appeared in the doorway. Her eyes were glowing with excitement and fear. But her rich coloring was alight with warmth, and the man stared in admiration. Yes, she was very good to look upon.

CHAPTER II

THE HARVEST OF PASSION

For one passionate moment the woman's radiant face held the gaze of the man. He was swayed with an unwholesome hunger at the sight of her splendid womanhood. The beautiful, terrified eyes, so full of that allurements which ever claims all that is vital in man; the warm coloring of her delicately rounded cheeks, so soft, so downy; the perfect undulations of her strong young figure—these things caught him anew, and again set raging the fire of a reckless, vicious passion. In a flash he had mounted to the sill of the window-opening, and dropped inside the room.

“Say—Jessie,” he breathed hotly. “You’re—you’re fine.”

His words were almost involuntary. It was as though they were a mere verbal expression of what was passing through his mind, and made without thought of addressing her. He was almost powerless in his self-control before her beauty. And Jessie's conscience in its weakly life could not hold out before the ardor of his assault. Her eyelids lowered. She stood waiting, and in a moment the bold invader held her crushed in his arms.

She lay passive, yielding to his caresses for some moments. Then of a sudden she stirred restlessly. She struggled weakly to free herself. Then, as his torrential kisses continued, sweeping her lips, her eyes, her cheeks, her hair, something like fear took hold of her. Her struggles suddenly became real, and at last she stood back panting, but with her young heart mutely stirred to a passionate response.

Nor was it difficult, as they stood thus, to understand how nature rose dominant over all that belonged to the higher spiritual side of the woman. The wonderful virility in her demanded life in the full flood of its tide, and here, standing before her, was the embodiment of all her natural, if baser, ideals.

The man was a handsome, picturesque creature bred on lines of the purer strains. He had little enough about him of the rough camp in which she lived. He brought with him an atmosphere of cities, an atmosphere she yearned for. It was in his dress, in his speech, in the bold daring of his handsome eyes. She saw in his face the high breeding of an ancient lineage. There was such a refinement in the delicate chiseling of his well-molded features. His brows were widely expressive of a strong intellect. His nose possessed that wonderful aquilinity associated with the highest type of Indian. His cheeks were smooth, and of a delicacy which threw into relief the perfect model of the frame beneath them. His clean-shaven mouth and chin suggested all that which a woman most desires to behold in a man. His figure was tall and muscular, straight-limbed and spare; while in his glowing eyes shone an irresistible courage, a fire of passion, and such a purpose as few women could withstand. And so the wife of Scipio admitted her defeat and yielded the play of all her puny arts, that she might appear slightly in his eyes.

But she only saw him as he wished her to see him. He showed her the outward man. The inner man was something not yet for her to probe. He was one of Nature's anachronisms. She had covered a spirit which was of the hideous stock from which he sprang with a gilding of superlative manhood.

His name was James, a name which, in years long past, the Western world of America had learned to hate with a bitterness rarely equaled. But all that was almost forgotten, and this man, by reason of his manner, which was genial, open-handed, even somewhat magnificent, rarely failed, at first, to obtain the good-will of those with whom he came into contact.

It was nearly nine months since he first appeared on Suffering Creek. Apparently he had just drifted there in much the same way that most of the miners had drifted, possibly drawn thither out of curiosity at the reports of the gold strike. So unobtrusive had been his coming that even in that

small community he at first passed almost unobserved. Yet he was full of interest in the place, and contrived to learn much of its affairs and prospects. Having acquired all the information he desired, he suddenly set out to make himself popular. And his popularity was brought about by a free-handed dispensation of a liberal supply of money. Furthermore, he became a prominent devotee at the poker table in Minky's store, and, by reason of the fact that he usually lost, as most men did who joined in a game in which Wild Bill was taking a hand, his popularity increased rapidly, and the simple-minded diggers dubbed him with the dazzling sobriquet of "Lord James."

It was during this time that he made the acquaintance of Jessie and her husband, and it was astonishing how swiftly his friendship for the unsuspecting little man ripened.

This first visit lasted just three weeks. Then, without warning, and in the same unobtrusive way as he had come, he vanished from the scene. For the moment Suffering Creek wondered; then, as is the way of such places, it ceased to wonder. It was too busy with its own affairs to concern itself to any great extent with the flotsam that drifted its way. Scipio wondered a little more than the rest, but his twins and his labors occupied him so closely that he, too, dismissed the matter from his mind. As for Jessie, she said not a word, and gave no sign except that her discontent with her lot became more pronounced.

But Suffering Creek was not done with James yet. The next time he came was nearly a month later, just as the monthly gold stage was preparing for the road, carrying with it a shipment of gold-dust bound for Spawn City, the nearest banking town, eighty miles distant.

He at once took up his old position in the place, stayed two weeks, staked out a claim for himself, and pursued his intimacy with Scipio and his wife with redoubled ardor.

Before those two weeks were over somehow his popularity began to wane. This intimacy with Scipio began to carry an ill-flavor with the men of the place. Somehow it did not ring pleasantly. Besides, he showed a fresh side to his character. He drank heavily, and when under the influence of spirits abandoned his well-polished manners, and displayed a coarseness, a savage truculence, such as he had been careful never to show before. Then, too, his claim remained unworked.

The change in public opinion was subtle, and no one spoke of it. But there was no regret when, finally, he vanished again from their midst in the same quiet manner in which he had gone before.

Then came the catastrophe. Two weeks later a gold stage set out on its monthly journey. Sixty miles out it was held up and plundered. Its two guards were shot dead, and the driver mortally wounded. But fortunately the latter lived long enough to tell his story. He had been attacked by a gang of eight well-armed horsemen. They were all masked, and got clear away with nearly thirty thousand dollars' worth of gold.

In the first rush of despairing rage Suffering Creek was unable to even surmise at the identity of the authors of the outrage. Then Wild Bill, the gambler, demanded an accounting for every man of the camp on the day of the tragedy. In a very short time this was done, and the process turned attention upon Lord James. Where was he? The question remained unanswered. Suspicions grew into swift conviction. Men asked each other who he was, and whence he came. There was no answer to any of their inquiries at first. Then, suddenly, news came to hand that the gang, no longer troubling at concealment, was riding roughshod over the country. It was a return to the régime of the "bad man," and stock-raiding and "hold-ups," of greater or less degree, were being carried on in many directions with absolute impunity; and the man James was at the head of it.

It was a rude awakening. All the old peace and security were gone. The camp was in a state of ferment. Every stranger that came to the place was eyed askance, and unless he could give a satisfactory account of himself he had a poor chance with the furious citizens. The future dispatch of gold became a problem that exercised every mind, and for two months none left the place. And this fact brought about a further anxiety. The gang of robbers was a large one. Was it possible they might attempt a raid on the place? And, if so, what were their chances of success?

Such was the position at Suffering Creek, and the nature of the threat which hung over it. One man's name was in everybody's mind. His personality and doings concerned them almost as nearly as their search for the elusive gold which was as the breath of life to them.

And yet Lord James was in no way deterred from visiting the neighborhood. He knew well enough the position he was in. He knew well enough all its possibilities. Yet he came again and again. His visits were paid in daylight, carefully calculated, even surreptitiously made. He sought the place secretly, but he came, careless of all consequences to himself. His contempt for the men of Suffering Creek was profound and unaffected. He probably feared no man.

And the reason of his visits was not far to seek. There was something infinitely more alluring to him at the house on the dumps than the gold which held the miners—an inducement which he had neither wish nor intention to resist. He reveled in the joy and excitement of pursuing this wife of another man, and had the camp bristled with an army of fighting men, and had the chances been a thousand to one against him, with him the call of the blood would just as surely have been obeyed. This was the man, savage, crude, of indomitable courage and passionate recklessness.

And Jessie was dazzled, even blinded. She was just a weak, erring woman, thrilling with strong youthful life, and his dominating nature played upon her vanity with an ease that was quite pitiful. She was only too ready to believe his denials of the accusations against him. She was only too ready to—love. The humility, devotion, the goodness of Scipio meant nothing to her. They were barren virtues, too unexciting and uninteresting to make any appeal. Her passionate heart demanded something more stimulating. And the stimulant she found in the savage wooing of his unscrupulous rival.

Now the man's eyes contemplated the girl's ripe beauty, while he struggled for that composure necessary to carry out all that was in his mind. He checked a further rising impulse, and his voice sounded almost harsh as he put a sharp question.

"Where's Zip?" he demanded.

The girl's eyelids slowly lifted. The warm glow of her eyes made them limpid and melting.

"Gone out to his claim," she said in a low voice.

The other nodded appreciatively.

"Good."

He turned to the window. Out across the refuse-heaps the rest of the camp was huddled together, a squalid collection of huts, uninspiring, unpicturesque. His glance satisfied him. There was not a living soul in view; not a sound except the prattle of the children who were still playing outside the hut. But the latter carried no meaning to him. In the heat of the moment even their mother was dead to the appeal of their piping voices.

"You're coming away now, Jess," the man went on, making a movement towards her.

But the girl drew back. The directness of his challenge was startling, and roused in her a belated defensiveness. Going away? It sounded suddenly terrible to her, and thrilled her with a rush of fear which set her shivering. And yet she knew that all along this—this was the end towards which she had been drifting. The rich color faded from her cheeks and her lips trembled.

"No, no," she whispered in a terrified tone. For the moment all that was best in her rose up and threatened to defeat his end.

But James saw his mistake. For a second a flash of anger lit his eyes, and hot resentment flew to his lips. But it found no expression. Instead, the anger died out of his eyes, and was replaced by a fire of passion such as had always won its way with this girl. He moved towards her again with something subtly seductive in his manner, and his arms closed about her unresisting form in a caress she was powerless to deny. Passive yet palpitating she lay pressed in his arms, all her woman's softness, all her subtle perfume, maddening him to a frenzy.

"Won't you? I love you, Jessie, so that nothing else on earth counts. I can't do without you—I can't—I can't!"

His hot lips crushed against hers, which yielded themselves all too willingly. Presently he raised his head, and his eyes held hers. "Won't you come, Jess? There's nothing here for you. See, I can give you all you wish for: money, a fine home, as homes go hereabouts. My ranch is a dandy place, and," with a curious laugh, "stocked with some of the best cattle in the country. You'll have horses to ride, and dresses—See! You can have all you want. What is there here? Nothing. Say, you don't even get enough to eat. Scipio hasn't got more backbone in him than to gather five cents when it's raining dollars." He kissed her upturned face again, and the warm responsive movement of her lips told him how easy his task really was.

But again she pressed him back, so that he held her only at arms' length. Her swimming eyes gazed long and ardently into his.

"It isn't that, Jim," she said earnestly; "it isn't that. Those things don't count. It's—it's you. I—I don't want dresses. I don't want the money. I—I—want you."

Then she started, terrified again.

"But, Jim, why did you come up to this hut?" she cried. "Why didn't you wait for me down in the bush at the river, as usual? Oh, Jim, if anybody sees you they'll shoot you down like a dog—"

"Dog, eh?" cried the man, with a ringing laugh. "Let 'em try. But don't you worry, Jess. No one saw me. Anyway, I don't care a curse if they did."

"Oh, Jim!"

Then she nestled closer to him for a moment of passionate silence, while he kissed her, prolonging the embrace with all the fire with which he was consumed. And after that she spoke again. But now it was the mother that would no longer be denied, even in the midst of her storm of emotion.

"But I—I can't leave them—the little ones. I can't, I can't!" she cried piteously. "Jim, I love you. God knows how badly I love you, but I—I love them, too. They are mine. They are part of me, and—and I can't do without them. No—no. I can't go—I won't go," she hurried on, without conviction. "I can't. I want my babies—my little boy and girl. You say you love me. I know you love me. Then take them with us, and—and I'll do as you wish. Oh, I'm wicked, I know. I'm wicked, and cruel, and vile to leave Scipio. And I don't want to, but—but—oh, Jim, say you'll take them, too. I can never be happy without them. You can never understand. You are a man, and so strong." He drew her to him again, and she nestled close in his arms. "You don't know what it is to hear a child's voice, and know that it is part of you, your life, one little tiny atom beginning all over again. No, no—I must have them."

She slowly drew herself away, watching his handsome face, half fearfully, half eagerly. She knew in her heart that she was waiting for his verdict, and, whatever it might be, she would have to abide by it. She knew she must do as he wished, and that very knowledge gladdened her, even in spite of her maternal dread of being parted from her babies.

She saw his expression change. She saw the look of perplexity in the sudden drawing together of his finely marked brows, she saw the half-angry impatience flash into his eyes, she saw this again replaced with a half-derisive smile. And each emotion she read in her own way, molding it to suit and fall in with her own desires, yet with a willing feeling that his decision should be paramount, that she was there to obey him.

He slowly shook his head, and a curious hardness set itself about his strong mouth.

"Not now," he said. "I would, but it can't be done. See here, Jess, I've got two horses hidden away down there in the bush beside the creek—one for you, and one for me. We can't fetch those kiddies along with us now. It wouldn't be safe, anyhow. We've got sixty-odd miles to ride through the foothills. But see, I'll fetch 'em one day, after, if you must have 'em. How's that?"

"But they'll never let you," cried Jessie. "The whole camp will be up in arms when they know I've gone. You don't know them, Jim. They're fond of Zip, and they'll stand by him."

James laughed contemptuously.

“Say, Jess,” he cried, “you come right along with me now. And if you need those kiddies, not all Suffering Creek—no, nor hell itself—shall stop me bringing ’em along to you.” Then he chuckled in an unpleasant manner. “Say, it would tickle me to death to set these mutton-headed gophers jumping around. You’ll get those kiddies if you need ’em, if I have to blow hell into this mud-heap of a city.”

Jessie’s eyes glowed at the man’s note of savage strength and confidence. She knew he could and would do as he said, and this very fact yielded her to him more surely than any other display could have done. It was this wonderful daring, this reckless, savage manhood that had originally won her. He was so different from all others, from her puny husband. He swept her along and dazzled her. Her own virility cried out for such a mate, and no moral scruples could hope to stay so strong a tide of nature.

“You’ll do it?” she cried fervently. Then she nodded joyously. “Yes, yes, you’ll do it. I know it. Oh, how good you are to me. I love you, Jim.”

Again she was in his arms. Again his kisses fell hot and fast upon her glowing face. Nature was rushing a strong flood tide. It was a moment that could have no repetition in their lives.

They stood thus, locked in each other’s arms, borne along by a passion that was beyond their control—lost to all the world, lost to all those things which should have mattered to them. It was the fervid outpouring of two natures which had nothing that was spiritual in them. They demanded the life of the senses, and so strong was the desire that they were lost to all else.

Then suddenly in the midst of their dream came the disturbing patter of small feet and the joyous, innocent laughter of infantile glee. Two tiny mud-stained figures rushed at the doorway and fell sprawling into the hut. They were on their feet again in a moment, laughing and crowing out their delight. Then, as the man and woman sprang apart, they stood round-eyed, wondering and gaping.

Jamie and Vada paused only till the grown-up eyes were turned in their direction, then their chorus broke out in one breath.

“We got fi’ ’piders—”

“An’ two bugs!”

The important information was fairly shrieked, to the accompaniment of dancing eyes and flushed cheeks.

Jessie gasped. But her emotion was not at the news so rudely broken. It was the breaking of the spell which had held her. Just for one horrific moment she stood staring helplessly at the innocent picture of her four-year-old twins, beautiful in spite of their grimy exterior, beautiful as a Heaven-inspired picture to the mother.

The man smiled. Nor was it an unpleasant smile. Perhaps, somewhere in his savage composition, he had a grain of humor; perhaps it was only the foolish smile of a man whose wits are not equal to so incongruous a situation.

“They’re most ev’ry color,” piped Vada, with added excitement.

“Uh!” grunted Jamie in agreement. “An’ the bugs has horns.”

But the man had recovered himself. The interruption had brought with it a realization of the time he had spent in the hut.

“You’d best go and find more,” he said. “There’s heaps outside.” Then he turned to Jessie. “Come on. We must be going. Have you got the things you need ready?”

But the mother’s eyes were on the small intruders. Something was gripping at her heart, and somehow it felt like four small and dirty hands.

“Wher’ you goin’?” demanded Vada, her childish curiosity roused, and all her beautiful spiders forgotten for the moment.

Her question remained unanswered, leaving the room in ominous silence. Then Jamie’s treble blundered into its midst, dutifully echoing his sister’s inquiry.

“‘Es, wher’ you doin’?”

The man’s eyes were narrowly watching the woman’s face. He noted the tremulous lips, the yearning light in her eyes. In a moment he was answering the children, lest their innocent words should upset his plans.

“Say, your mamma’s going for a horse-ride. She’s just going right out, and I’m going to show her a dandy place where she can fetch you, so you can catch heaps an’ heaps of bugs and spiders. She’s just wanting you to stop right here and catch more bugs, till I come along and fetch you.”

“O—oh!” cried Vada, prolonging her exclamation gleefully. “Say, can’t us go now?”

“Me do too,” murmured her faithful shadow.

One quick glance at the mother’s face and the man spoke again.

“Not now, kiddies. I’ll come and fetch you. Run along.” Then he turned swiftly upon Jessie. “Where’s your bundle?” he asked in his usual masterful manner.

And her reply came in a tone of almost heart-broken submission.

“In there,” she said, with a glance at the inner room.

The man gave her no time to add anything more. He felt the ground he was treading was more than shaky. He knew that with the coming of these children a tremendous power was militating against him—a power which would need all his wits to combat. He passed into the inner room, and returned in a moment with the girl’s bundle. And with his return one glance showed him how nearly his plans were upset. Jessie was clasping Jamie in her arms, kissing him hungrily, tears streaming down her cheeks, while, out of sheer sympathy, little Vada was clinging to her mother’s skirts, her small face buried in amongst them, sobbing as though her heart would break.

In a moment he was at her side. This was not a time when any drastic methods could serve him, and he adopted the only course which his shrewd sense told him would be likely to avail. Gently but firmly he took the boy out of her arms.

“You want him to go with us?” he said kindly. “Very well. Maybe we’re doing wrong—I mean, for his sake. Anyhow, I’ll carry him, and then I’ll come back for Vada. It’s not good. It’s too hard on him, carrying him all that distance—too dangerous. Still, I want you to be happy, Jess. I’d do anything for that, even—even at his expense. So—”

“No—no!” cried the mother, carried away by the fear he expressed so subtly, and warmed by his carefully expressed sympathy. “Don’t take any notice of me. I’m foolish—silly. You’re right—he—he couldn’t make the journey with us. No, no, we—won’t—take him now. Set him down, Jim. I’ll go now, and you’ll—you’ll come back for them. Yes, yes, let’s go now. I—I can’t stay any—longer. I’ve left a letter for Zip. Swear I shall have them both. You’ll never—never break your word? I think I’d—die without them.”

“You shall have them. I swear it.” The man spoke readily enough. It was so easy to promise anything, so long as he got her.

But his oath brought neither expression of gratitude nor comment. The woman was beyond mere words. She felt that only flight could save her from breaking down altogether. And, thus impelled, she tore herself from the presence of the children and rushed out of the hut. The horses were down at the creek, and thither she sped, lest her purpose should fail her.

James followed her. He felt that she must not be left by herself to think. But at the door he paused and glanced keenly around him. Then he breathed a sigh of relief. Not a living soul was to be seen anywhere. It was good; his plans had worked out perfectly.

He set Jamie down, and, all unconscious of the little drama being played round his young life, the child stretched out a chubby hand in the direction of the soap-box he and his sister had been playing with.

“‘Piders,” he observed laconically.

Vada rushed past him to inspect their treasures, her tears already dried into streaks on her dirty little cheeks.

“An’ bugs,” she cried gleefully, squatting beside the box.

They had forgotten.

The man hurried away down towards the creek, bearing the pitiful bundle of woman’s raiment. The girl was ahead, and, as she again came into his view, one thought, and one thought only, occupied his mind. Jessie was his whole world—at that moment.

He, too, had forgotten.

“They’ve runned away,” cried Vada, peering into the box.

“Me don’t like ’piders,” murmured Jamie definitely.

Vada’s great brown eyes filled with tears. Fresh rivulets began to run down the muddy channels on her downy cheeks. Her disappointment found vent in great sobbing gulps.

Jamie stared at her in silent speculation. Then one little fat hand reached out and pushed her. She rolled over and buried her wet face in the dusty ground and howled heart-brokenly. Then Jamie crawled close up beside her, and, stretching himself out, wept his sympathy into the back of her gaping frock.

CHAPTER III

THE AWAKENING OF SCIPIO

At noon the camp began to rouse. The heavy eyes, the languid stretch, the unmeaning contemplation of the noontide sunlight, the slow struggles of a somnolent brain. These things were suggested in the gradual stirring of the place to a ponderous activity. The heavy movement of weary diggers as they lounged into camp for their dinner had no suggestion of the greedy passion which possessed them. They had no lightness. Whatever the lust for gold that consumed them, all their methods were characterized by a dogged endeavor which took from them every particle of that nervous activity which belongs to the finely tempered business man.

The camp was a single row of egregious dwellings, squat, uncouth, stretching away on either side of the veranda-fronted store and “gambling hell” which formed a sort of center-piece around which revolved the whole life of the village. It was a poor, mean place, shapeless, evil-smelling in that pure mountain air. It was a mere shelter, a rough perch for the human carrion lusting for the orgy of gold which the time-worn carcass of earth should yield. What had these people to do with comfort or refinement? What had they to do with those things calculated to raise the human mind to a higher spiritual plane? Nothing. All that might come later, when, their desires satisfied, the weary body sick and aching, sends fearful thoughts ahead towards the drab sunset awaiting them. For the moment the full tide of youth is still running strong. Sickness and death have no terrors. The fine strength of powerful bodies will not allow the mind to focus such things.

Out of the rugged hills backing the camp the gold-seekers struggle to their resting-place. Here, one man comes clambering over the rough boulder-strewn path at the base of a forest-clad hill. Here, an atom of humanity emerges from the depths of a vast woodland that dwarfs all but the towering hills. Another toils up a steep hillside from the sluggish creek. Another slouches along a vague, unmade trail. Yet another scrambles his way through a low, dense-growing scrub which lines the sides of a vast ravine, the favored locality of the gold-seeker.

So they come, one by one, from every direction radiating about the building, which is Minky’s store. Their faces are hard. Their skin is tanned to a leathery hue, and is of a texture akin to hide. They are silent, thoughtful men, too. But their silence is of the vast world in which they delve, and their thought is the thought of men absorbed in their quest. No, there is no lightness, even in their happiest moments. To be light, an intelligent swiftness of brain is needed. And these derelicts have little of such. Although, when Minky’s spirit has circulated its poison through their veins, they are sometimes apt to assume a burlesque of it.

Now the camp is wide awake. But it is only the wakefulness of the mother who is roused by the hungry crying of her infant. It will slumber again when appetites have been duly appeased.

The milk of human kindness is soured by the intense summer heat. The men are “grouchy.” They jostle harshly as they push up to Minky’s counter for the “appetizers” they do not need. Their greetings are few, and mostly confined to the abrupt demand, “Any luck?” Then, their noon-day drink gulped down, they slouch off into the long, frowsy dining-room at the back of the store, and coarsely devour the rough fare provided by the buxom Birdie Mason, who is at once the kindest and worst caterer imaginable.

This good-natured soul’s position was not as enviable as one might reasonably have supposed. The only woman in a camp of men, any one of whom might reasonably strike a fortune in five minutes. The situation suggests possibilities. But, alas, Birdie was just a woman, and, in consequence, from a worldly point of view, her drawbacks were many. She was attractive—a drawback. She was given to a natural desire to stand first with all men—another drawback. She was eminently sentimental—a still greater drawback. But greatest of all she was a sort of public servant

in her position as caterer, and, as such, of less than no account from the moment the “beast” had been satisfied.

She had her moments, moments when the rising good-nature of her customers flattered her, when she was fussed over, and petted, as men are ever ready to treat an attractive member of the opposite sex. But these things led nowhither, from a point of view of worldly advantage, and, being just a woman, warm-hearted, uncalculating and profoundly illogical, she failed to realize the pitfalls that lay before her, the end which, all unsuspecting, she was steadily forging towards.

Scipio, like the rest, came into camp for his dinner. His way lay along the bank of the creek. It was cooler here, and, until he neared his home, there were no hills up which to drag his weary limbs. He had had, as usual, an utterly unprofitable morning amidst the greasy ooze of his claim. Yet the glitter of the mica-studded quartz on the hillside, the bright-green and red-brown shading of the milky-white stone still dazzled his mental sight. There was no wavering in his belief. These toilsome days were merely the necessary probation for the culminating achievement. He assured himself that gold lay hidden there. And it was only waiting for the lucky strike of his pick. He would find it. It was just a matter of keeping on.

In his simple mind he saw wonderful visions of all that final discovery. He dreamt of the day when he should be able to install his beautiful Jessie in one of those up-town palaces in New York; when an army of servants should anticipate her every desire; when the twins should be launched upon the finest academies the country possessed, to gorge their young minds to the full with all that which the minds of the children of earth’s most fortunate must be stored. He saw his Jessie clad in gowns which displayed and enhanced all those beauties with which his devoted mind endowed her. She should not only be his queen, but the queen of a social world, which, to his mind, had no rival. And the happiness of such dreams was beyond compare. His labor became the work of a love which stimulated his puny muscles to a pitch which carried him beyond the feeling of any weariness. For himself he wanted nothing. For Jessie and the twins the world was not great enough as a possession.

And was she not worth it? Were they not worth it? Look at her, so splendid! How she bore with him and all his petty, annoying ways! Her disposition was not of this earth, he told himself. Would any other woman put up with his ill-humors, his shortcomings? He realized how very trying he must be to any bright, clever woman. He was not clever, and he knew it, and it made him pity Jessie for the lot he had brought her to.

And the twins. Vada was the image of her mother. The big, round, brown eyes, the soft, childish mouth, the waving brown hair. And Jamie. He had her eyes, too, and her nose, and her beautiful coloring. What a mercy of Providence neither of them resembled him. But, then, how could they, with such a mother? How it delighted him to think that he was working for them, for her. A thrill of delight swept over him, and added a spring to his jaded step. What mattered anything else in the world. He was to give them all that which the world counted as good. He, alone.

But it was not yet. For a moment a shadow crossed his radiant face as he toiled up the hill to his hut. It was gone in a moment, however. How could it stay there with his thought gilded with such high hopes? It was not yet, but it would come—must come. His purpose was invincible. He must conquer and wrench this wealth which he demanded from the bosom of the hard old earth. And then—and then—

“Hello, kiddies,” he cried cheerily, as his head rose above the hilltop and his hut and the two children, playing outside it, came into his view.

“Pop-pa!” shrieked Vada, dropping a paper full of loose dirt and stones upon her sprawling brother’s back, in her haste to reach her diminutive parent.

“Uh!” grunted Jamie, scrambling to his feet and tottering heavily in the same direction.

There was a curious difference in the size and growth of these twins. Probably it utterly escaped the adoring eyes of their father. He only saw the reflected glory of their mother in them.

Their resemblance to her was all that really mattered to him, but, as a matter of fact, this resemblance lay chiefly in Vada. She was like her mother in an extraordinary degree. She was well-grown, strong, and quite in advance of her years, in her speech and brightness of intellect. Little Jamie, while he possessed much of his mother in his face, in body was under-sized and weakly, and his mind and speech, backward of development, smacked of his father. He was absolutely dominated by his sister, and followed her lead in everything with adoring rapture.

Vada reached her father and scrambled agilely up into his work-soiled arms. She impulsively hugged his yellow head to her cheeks with both her arms, so that when Jamie came up he had to content himself by similarly hugging the little man's left knee, and kissing the mud-stains on his trousers into liquid patches.

But Scipio was impartial. He sat Vada down and picked her brother up. Then, taking the former's hand in his horny clasp, bore the boy towards the house.

"You found any gold?" inquired Vada, repeating a question she had so often heard her mother put.

"Es any-dold?" echoed Jamie, from his height above Scipio's head.

"No, kiddies," the man replied, with a slight sigh.

"Oh," said Vada. But his answer had little significance for her.

"Where's your momma?" inquired Scipio, after a pause.

"Momma do hoss-ridin'," replied Jamie, forestalling his sister for once.

"Yes," added Vada. "She gone ridin'. An' they'll come an' take us wher' ther's heaps an' heaps o' 'piders, an'-an' bugs an' things. He said so-sure."

"He? Who?"

They had reached the hut and Scipio set Jamie on the ground as he put his question.

"The dark man," said Vada readily, but wrinkling her forehead struggling for the name.

"Uh!" agreed Jamie. "Mister Dames."

Just for a moment a sharp question lit Scipio's pale eyes. But the little ones had no understanding of it. And the next moment, as their father passed in through the doorway, they turned to the sand and stone castle they had been laboriously and futilely attempting to mold into some shape.

"Now you bring up more stones," cried Vada authoritatively. "Run along, dear," she added patronizingly, as the boy stood with his small hands on his hips, staring vacantly after his father.

Scipio gazed stupidly about the living-room. The slop-stained table was empty. The cookstove fire was out. And, just for a second, the thought flashed through his mind—had he returned too early for his dinner? No, he knew he had not. It was dinner-time all right. His appetite told him that.

For the moment he had forgotten what the children had told him. His simple nature was not easily open to suspicion, therefore, like all people of slow brain, this startling break in the routine of his daily life simply set him wondering. He moved round the room, and, without being aware of his purpose, lifted the curtain of turkey red, which served as a door to the rough larder, and peered in. Then, as he let the curtain fall again, something stirred within him. He turned towards the inner room, and his mild voice called—

"Jess."

His answer was a hollow echo that somehow jarred his nerves. But he called again—

"Jess."

Again came the echo. Then Vada's small face appeared round the door-casing.

"Mom-ma gone hoss-ridin'," she reminded him.

For an instant Scipio's face flushed. Then it paled icily under its tan. His brain was struggling to grasp something which seemed to be slowly enveloping him, but which his honest heart would not let him believe. He stared stupidly at Vada's dirty face. Then, as the child withdrew to her

play, he suddenly crossed the room to the curtained bedroom doorway. He passed through, and the flimsy covering fell to behind him.

For a space the music of childish voices was the only sound to break the stillness. The hum of buzzing insects seemed to intensify the summer heat. For minutes no movement came from the bedroom. It was like the dread silence before a storm.

A strange sound came at last. It was something between a moan and the pained cry of some mild-spirited animal stricken to death. It had no human semblance, and yet—it came from behind the dingy print curtain over the bedroom doorway.

A moment later the curtain stirred and the ghastly face of Scipio suddenly appeared. He moved out into the living-room and almost fell into the Windsor chair which had last been occupied by his wife. A sheet of notepaper was in his shaking hand, and his pale eyes were staring vacantly at it. He was not reading. He had read. And that which he had read had left him dazed and scarcely comprehending. He sat thus for many minutes. And not once did he stir a muscle, or lift his eyes from their fixed contemplation.

A light breeze set the larder curtain fluttering. Scipio started. He stared round apprehensively. Then, as though drawn by a magnet, his eyes came back to the letter in his hand, and once more fixed themselves upon the bold handwriting. But this time there was intelligence in his gaze. There was intelligence, fear, despair, horror; every painful emotion was struggling for uppermost place in mind and heart. He read again carefully, slowly, as though trying to discover some loophole from the horror of what was written there. The note was short—so short—there was not one spark of hope in it for the man who was reading it, not one expression of feeling other than selfishness. It was the death-blow to all his dreams, all his desire.

“I’ve gone away. I shall never come back. I can’t stand this life here any longer. Don’t try to find me, for it’s no use. Maybe what I’m doing is wicked, but I’m glad I’m doing it. It’s not your fault—it’s just me. I haven’t your courage, I haven’t any courage at all. I just can’t face the life we’re living. I’d have gone before when he first asked me but for my babies, but I just couldn’t part with them. Zip, I want to take them with me now, but I don’t know what Jim’s arrangements are going to be. I must have them. I can’t live without them. And if they don’t go with us now you’ll let them come to me after, won’t you? Oh, Zip, I know I’m a wicked woman, but I feel I must go. You won’t keep them from me? Let me have them. I love them so bad. I do. I do. Good-by forever.
“*Jessie.*”

Mechanically Scipio folded the paper again and sat grasping it tightly in one clenched hand. His eyes were raised and gazing through the doorway at the golden sunlight beyond. His lips were parted, and there was a strange dropping of his lower jaw. The tanning of his russet face looked like a layer of dirt upon a super-whited skin. He scarcely seemed to breathe, so still he sat. As yet his despair was so terrible that his mind and heart were numbed to a sort of stupefaction, deadening the horror of his pain.

He sat on for many minutes. Then, at last, his eyes dropped again to the crushed paper, and a quivering sigh escaped him. He half rose from his seat, but fell back in it again. Then a sudden spasm seized him, and flinging himself round he reached out his slight, tanned arms upon the dirty table, and, his head dropping upon them, he moaned out the full force of his despair.

“I want her!” he cried. “Oh, God, I want her!”

But now his slight body was no longer still. His back heaved with mute sobs that had no tears. All his gentle soul was torn and bleeding. He had not that iron in his composition with which another man might have crushed down his feelings and stirred himself to a harsh defense. He was

just a warm, loving creature of no great strength beyond his capacity for human affection and self-sacrifice. And for the time at least, his sufferings were beyond his control.

In the midst of his grief two little faces, and two pairs of round, wondering eyes appeared in the doorway. Two small infantile minds worked hard at the sight they beheld. Vada, whose quickness of perception was so much in advance of her brother's, murmured in his ear—

“Sleep.”

“Uh, seep,” nodded the faithful boy.

Then four little bare feet began to creep into the room. Four big brown eyes shone with gleeful anticipation. Four chubby arms were outstretched as though claiming the victim of their childish prank. Vada led, but Jamie was close behind. They stole in, their small feet making not the slightest sound as they tiptoed towards the stricken man. Each, thrilling with excitement, was desperately intent upon frightening him.

“Boo-h!” cried Vada, her round eyes sparkling as she reached Scipio's side.

“Bo-oh!” echoed Jamie a second later, chuckling and gurgling a delight he had no other means of expressing at the moment.

Scipio raised his haggard face. His unsmiling eyes, so pale and unmeaning, stared stupidly at the children. And suddenly the merry smile died out of the young faces, and an odd contraction of their brows suggested a dawning sympathy which came wholly from the heart.

“You'se cryin', poppa,” cried Vada impulsively.

“Uh,” nodded the boy.

And thereupon great tears welled up into their sympathetic eyes, and the twins wept in chorus. And somehow the tears, which had thus far been denied the man, now slowly and painfully flooded his eyes. He groped the two children into his arms, and buried his face in the soft wavy hair which fell in a tangle about the girl's head.

For some moments he sat thus, something of his grief easing in the flood of almost womanish tears. Until, finally, it was Jamie who saved the situation. His sobs died out abruptly, and the boy in him stirred.

“Me want t' eat,” he protested, without preamble.

The man looked up.

“Eat?” he echoed vaguely.

“Yes. Dinner,” explained Vada, whose tears were still flowing, but who never failed as her little brother's interpreter.

There was a moment's pause while Scipio stared down at the two faces lifted so appealingly to his. Then a change came into his expressionless eyes. A smoldering fire began to burn, which seemed to deepen their weakly coloring. His drawn face seemed to gather strength. And somehow even his straw-colored hair, so scanty, ill-grown and disheveled, looked less like the stubble it so much resembled. It was almost as though a latent, unsuspected strength were rousing within him, lifting him from the slough of despair by which he was so nearly submerged. It was as though the presence of his twins had drawn from him an acknowledgment of his duty, a sense which was so strongly and incongruously developed in his otherwise uncertain character, and demanded of him a sacrifice of all personal inclination. They were her children. Yes, and they were his. Her children—her children. And she was gone. They had no one to look to, no one to care for them now, but—him.

He sprang to his feet.

“Why, yes, kiddies,” he said, with a painful assumption of lightness. “You're needing food sure. Say, I guess we won't wait for your momma. We'll just hand her an elegant surprise. We'll get dinner ourselves.”

Jamie gurgled his joyous approval, but Vada was more intelligible.

“Bully!” she cried. “We’ll give her a surprise.” Then she turned to Jamie. “Surprise is when folks do things that other folks don’t guess you’re going to, dear,” she explained, to his utter confusion.

Scipio went to the larder and gathered various scraps of food, and plates, and anything that seemed to him as being of any possible use in a meal. He re-kindled the fire in the cookstove and made some coffee. That he understood. There was no sign of his despair about him now. Perhaps he was more than usually silent, but otherwise, for the time at least, he had buried his trouble sufficiently deeply out of sight, so that at any rate the inquiring eyes of the happy children could see nothing of it.

They, too, busied themselves in the preparation. Vada dictated to her father with never flagging tongue, and Jamie carried everything he could lift to and fro, regardless of whether he was bringing or taking away. Vada chided him in her childish superior way, but her efforts were quite lost on his delicious self-importance. Nor could there be any doubt that, in his infantile mind, he was quite assured that his services were indispensable.

At last the meal was ready. There was nearly everything of which the household consisted upon the table or in close proximity to it. Then, when at last they sat down, and Scipio glanced over the strange conglomeration, his conscience was smitten.

“Seems to me you kiddies need bread and milk,” he said ruefully. “But I don’t guess there’s any milk.”

Vada promptly threw herself into the breach.

“On’y Jamie has bread an’ milk, pop-pa. Y’see his new teeth ain’t through. Mine is. You best cut his up into wee bits.”

“Sure, of course,” agreed Scipio in relief. “I’ll get along down to Minky’s for milk after,” he added, while he obediently proceeded to cut up the boy’s meat.

It was a strange meal. There was something even tragic in it. The children were wildly happy in the thought that they had shared in this wonderful surprise for their mother. That they had assisted in those things which childhood ever yearns to share in—the domestic doings of their elders.

The man ate mechanically. His body told him to eat, and so he ate without knowing or caring what. His distraught mind was traveling swiftly through the barren paths of hopelessness and despair, while yet he had to keep his children in countenance under their fire of childish prattle. Many times he could have flung aside his mask and given up, but the babyish laughter held him to an effort such as he had never before been called upon to make.

When the meal was finished Scipio was about to get up from his chair, but Vada’s imperious tongue stayed him.

“We ain’t said grace,” she declared complainingly.

And the man promptly dropped back into his seat.

“Sure,” he agreed helplessly.

At once the girl put her finger-tips together before her nose and closed her eyes.

“Thank God for my good dinner, Amen, and may we help fix up after?” she rattled off.

“Ess,” added Jamie, “tank Dod for my dood dinner, Amen, me fix up, too.”

And with this last word both children tumbled almost headlong from the bench which they were sharing. Nor had their diminutive parent the heart to deny their request.

The next hour was perhaps one of the hardest in Scipio’s life. Nothing could have impressed his hopeless position upon him more than the enthusiastic assistance so cordially afforded him. While the children had no understanding of their father’s grief, while with every heart-beat they glowed with a loving desire to be his help, their every act was an unconscious stab which drove him until he could have cried aloud in agony.

And it was a period of catastrophe. Little Vada scalded her hand and had to be petted back to her normal condition of sunny smiles. Jamie broke one of the few plates, and his tears had to be

banished by assurances that it did not matter, and that he had done his father a kindness by ridding him of such an ugly plate. Then Vada stumbled into the garbage pail and had to be carefully wiped, while Jamie smeared his sparse hair with rancid dripping and insisted he was “Injun,” vociferously proclaiming his desire to “talp” his sister.

But the crowning disaster came when he attempted to put his threat into execution. He seized a bunch of her hair in his two chubby hands and began to drag her round the room. Her howls drew Scipio’s attention from his work, and he turned to find them a struggling heap upon the floor. He dashed to part them, kicked over a bucket of drinking water in his well-meant hurry, and, finally, had to rescue them, both drenched to the skin, from the untimely bath.

There was nothing for it but to strip off all their clothes and dress them up in their nightgowns, for as yet he had no knowledge of their wardrobe, and send them out to get warm in the sun, while he dried their day-clothes at the cookstove.

It was the climax. The man flung himself into a chair and buried his face in his hands. The mask had dropped from him. There was no longer any need for pretense. Once more the grief and horror of his disaster broke through his guard and left him helpless. The whole world, his life, everything was engulfed in an abyss of black despair.

He was dry-eyed and desperate. But now somehow his feelings contained an emotion that the first shock of his loss had not brought him. He was no longer a prey to a weak, unresisting submission, the grief of a tortured gentle heart. There was another feeling. A feeling of anger and resentment which slowly grew with each moment, and sent the hot blood surging furiously to his brain. Nor was this feeling directed against Jessie. How could it be? He loved her so that her cruel desertion of him appeared to be a matter for which he was chiefly to blame. Yes, he understood. He was not the husband for her. How could it be otherwise? He had no cleverness. He had always been a failure. No, his anger was not against Jessie. It was the other. It was the man who had robbed him of all he cared for in the world.

His anger grew hotter and hotter. And with this growing passion there came an absolute revulsion of the motive force that had always governed him. He wanted to hurt. He wanted to hurt this man, Lord James. And his simple mind groped for a means to carry out his desire. He began to think more quickly and clearly, and the process brought him a sort of cold calmness. Again his grief was thrust out of his focus, and all his mental energy was concentrated upon his desire. And he conjured up a succession of pictures of the tortures and sufferings he desired for this villain who had so wronged him.

But the pictures were too feeble and wholly inadequate to satisfy. So gentle was his nature, that, even stirred as he was, he could not conceive a fitting punishment for so great an offense. He felt his own inadequacy, his own feebleness to cope with the problem before him, and so he sat brooding impotently.

It was all useless. And as the minutes slipped by his anger began to die out, merging once more into the all-absorbing grief that underlay it. He was alone. Alone! He would never see her again. The thought chilled him to a sudden nervous dread. No, no, it was not possible. She would come back. She must come back. Yes, yes. She was his Jessie. His beautiful Jessie. She belonged to him. And the children. She loved them. How she loved them. They were theirs. Yes, she would come back. Maybe she would come back at supper-time. She would understand by then. Because she was good, and—and kind, and—No, no, Fate could never be so cruel as to take her from him.

He rose and paced the floor with nervous, uneven strides. He plunged his hand into his coat pocket and drew out the letter again. He re-read it, with hot eyes and straining thought. Every word seemed to sear itself upon his poor brain, and drive him to the verge of distraction. Why? Why? And he raised his bloodshot eyes to the roof of his hut, and crushed the paper in one desperate hand.

Then suddenly he started. His pale eyes took on a furtive frightened expression. He glanced fearfully round the room as though someone was in hiding to surprise his inspiration. Yes, that was

it. Why not? He was not afraid. He was afraid of no one. Yes, yes, he had the means. He must make the opportunity. She was his. No one else had a right to her. It was justifiable. It was no more than justice.

He moved towards the inner room. He was less furtive now. His purpose had startled him at first, but now he was convinced it was right. To a man of his character his resolve once taken there was only one thing to do—to carry it out.

He passed into the bedroom, and, in a few moments, reappeared. Now he was bearing something in his hand. He held it carefully, and in his eyes was something like terror of what he held. The thing he carried was an old-fashioned revolver. It was rusty. But it had a merciless look about it. He turned it up gingerly. Then he opened the breach, and loaded all the six chambers. Then he carefully bestowed it in his coat pocket, where it bulged obtrusively.

Now he moved to the open doorway, and somehow his original furtiveness had returned to him. Here he paused as the voice of the twins reached and held him. They were still playing in the sun, banking up the sand and stones in their futile attempt at castle building. He breathed hard, as though summoning up all his decision. Then he spoke.

“Say, kiddies,” he said firmly. “I’ll be right back at supper.”

And he moved out without another look in their direction, and walked off in the direction of Minky’s store.

CHAPTER IV

SCIPIO BORROWS A HORSE

Scipio found an almost deserted camp after floundering his way over the intricate paths amongst the refuse-heaps.

The miners had departed to their claims with a punctuality that suggested Trades Union principles. Such was their existence. They ate to live; they lived to work, ever tracking the elusive metal to the earth's most secret places. The camp claimed them only when their day's work was done; for the rest, it supported only their most urgent needs.

Sunny Oak, lounging on a rough bench in the shadiest part of the veranda facing Minky's store, raised a pair of heavy eyelids, to behold a dejected figure emerge from amidst the "dumps." The figure was bearing towards the store in a dusty cloud which his trailing feet raised at every step. His eyes opened wider, and interested thought stirred in his somnolent brain. He recognized the figure and wondered. Scipio should have been out on his claim by this time, like the rest.

The lean long figure of the loungee propped itself upon its elbow. Curiously enough, lazy as he was, the smallest matter interested him. Had he suddenly discovered a beetle moving on the veranda he would have found food for reflection in its doings. Such was his mind. A smile stole into his indolent eyes, a lazy smile which spoke of tolerant good-humor. He turned so that his voice might carry in through the window which was just behind him.

"Say, Bill," he cried, "here's Zip comin' down the trail."

As though his announcement were sufficient to rouse an equal interest in those inside the store, he returned again to his contemplation of the approaching figure.

"What's he doin' around camp this hour?" inquired a harsh voice from beyond the window.

"Guess I ain't a lightnin' calc'lator," observed Sunny, without withdrawing his gaze.

"Nope," came the prompt retort from the invisible speaker; "guess it 'ud keep you busy trackin' a fun'ral."

"Which don't need contradiction! I'm kind o' makin' holiday these times. Guess you ain't never heerd tell o' the 'rest cure'?"

A rough laugh broke on the drowsy atmosphere.

"Sunny's overworked just now," said another voice, amidst the rattle of poker chips.

"Wher' you bin workin', Sunny?" inquired the harsh voice of the man addressed as Bill.

"Workin'!" cried the loafer, with good-natured scorn. "Say, I don't never let a hobby interfere with the bizness of life."

A half-smothered laugh answered him. Even the exigencies of a poker hand could not quite crush out the natural humor of these men, who always followed on the golden trail of the pioneers.

"Say, what's your bizness?" demanded another voice presently.

"Restin'!" the man on the veranda answered easily.

The shuffle of cards and rattle of chips came with a snigger. And the answering lazy smile of Sunny Oak was good to see. It lit his unshaven face from his unwashed brow to his chin. And to an onlooker it might well have appeared a pity that an intense bodily indolence should so dominate his personality. He looked vastly capable, both mentally and physically.

But his eyes never left the on-coming Scipio. The little man moved with bowed head and trailing footsteps. The utter dispiritedness of his gait stirred even the self-centered watcher. But Scipio saw nothing of Sunny Oak. He saw nothing of anything but the despairing picture in his own mind. The ramshackle shanties which lined one side of the trail were passed unheeded. The yapping of the camp dogs at the unusual sight of so deplorable a figure at this hour of the day was quite unnoticed by him. The shelving rise of attenuated grassland which blocked the view of

Suffering Creek on his left never for a moment came into his focus. His eyes were on the trail ahead of him, and never more than a few feet from where he trod. And those eyes were hot and staring, aching with their concentration upon the hideous picture which filled his brain.

As Scipio drew near Sunny Oak further bestirred himself, which was a concession not often yielded by that individual to anyone. He sat up, and his smile broadened. Then it faded out as he beheld the usually mild expression of the yellow-haired prospector now so set and troubled.

“Gee!” he murmured in an undertone. Then, with an evident effort, he offered a greeting.

“Ho, you, Zip! Drawn a blank way up ther’ on your mudbank?”

Scipio looked up in a dazed fashion. Then he halted and seemed to pull himself together. Finally he spoke.

“Howdy?” he said in a mechanical sort of way.

“Guess I’m a heap better,” responded Sunny, with twinkling eyes.

Scipio gazed up at the store in a bewildered way. He saw the great letters in which Minky’s name and occupation were inscribed on its pretentious front, and it seemed to bring back his purpose to his distracted mind. Instantly the other’s words became intelligible to him, and his native kindness prompted him.

“You been sick?” he demanded.

“Wal, not rightly sick, but–ailin’.” Sunny’s smile broadened till a mouthful of fairly decent teeth showed through the fringe of his ragged mustache.

“Ailin’?”

“Yep. Guess I bin overdoin’ it.”

“It don’t do, working too hard in the heat,” said Scipio absently.

“Sure,” replied Sunny. “It’s been a hard job avoidin’ it. Ther’s allus folk ready to set me workin’. That’s just the way o’ things. What I need is rest. Say, you ain’t workin’?”

Scipio started.

“No. I’m looking for Wild Bill.”

Sunny Oak jerked his head backwards in the direction of the window.

“Guess he’s at work–in ther’.”

“Thanks.”

Scipio mounted the veranda and passed along to the door of the store. Sunny’s eyes followed him, but he displayed no other interest. With ears and brain alert, however, he waited. He knew that all he required to know would reach him through a channel that was quite effortless to himself. Again he stretched himself out on the bench, and his twinkling eyes closed luxuriously.

Minky’s store was very little different from other places of its kind. He sold everything that could possibly be needed in a newly started mining camp. He did not confine himself to hardware and clothing and canned goods, but carried a supply of drugs, stationery and general dry goods, besides liquor in ample quantities, if of limited quality. There was rye whisky, there was gin, and there was some sort of French brandy. The two latter were in the smallest quantities. Rye was the staple drink of the place.

The walls of the store were lined with shelves on every side, and the shelves were full, even overflowing to a piled-up confusion of goods which were stacked around on the floor. In the somewhat limited floor-space there were tables and benches which could be used for the dual purpose of drink and cards. But wherein Minky’s store was slightly out of the usual was the fact that he was not a Jew, and adopted no Jewish methods of trading. He was scrupulously honest with his customers, and fairly moderate in his charges, relying on this uncommon integrity and temperateness of disposition to make personal liking the basis of his commercial success.

It was perhaps a much further-sighted policy than one would suppose. Several men had endeavored to start in the store business in opposition to him, but in each case their enterprise had proved an utter failure. Not a man in the place would trade elsewhere. Minky was just “Minky,”

whom they liked and trusted. And, what was much more to the point, who was ever ready to “trust” them.

Wild Bill was at the poker table with Minky, Sandy Joyce and Toby Jenks when Scipio entered the place. He was a gambler out and out. It was his profession. He was known as Wild Bill of Abilene, a man whose past was never inquired into by even the most youthful newcomer, whose present was a thing that none ever saw sufficient reason to question, and whose future suggested nothing so much as the general uncertainty of things human. He was a man of harsh exterior and, apparently, harsh purpose. His eyes were steely and his tongue ironical; he possessed muscles of iron and a knowledge of poker and all its subtleties that had never yet failed him. He was a dead shot with a pistol, and, in consequence, fear and respect were laid at his feet by his fellow-townsmen. He was also Minky’s most treasured friend.

Sandy Joyce had to his credit a married past, which somehow gave him a certain authority in the place. He was expected to possess a fund of wisdom in matters worldly, and he did his best to live up to this demand. He was also, by the way, an ex-cowpuncher suffering from gold fever, and between whiles played poker with Wild Bill until he had lost the result of his more regular labors. He was a slight, tall, bright-eyed man of thirty, with an elaborate flow of picturesque language. He was afraid of no man, but all women.

Toby Jenks was as short and squat as his friends were long and thin. He was good-tempered, and spent large remittances which reached him at regular intervals in the lulls which occurred in his desultory search for gold.

Minky, a plain, large man of blunt speech and gruff manners, looked up swiftly as Scipio entered, and a moment later three more pairs of eyes were fixed inquiringly upon the newcomer.

“Struck color?” inquired Minky, with his gruffest cordiality.

“No.”

Scipio’s entire attitude had distinctly undergone a change since Sunny Oak’s lazy eyes first discovered his approach. Where before the hopelessness of despair had looked out from every line of his mild face, now his mouth was set obstinately, and a decided thrust to his usually retiring chin became remarkable. Even his wispy hair had an aggression in the manner in which it obtruded from under the brim of his slouch hat. His eyes were nearly defiant, yet there was pleading in them, too. It was as if he were sure of the rightness of his purpose, but needed encouragement in its execution.

For the moment the poker game was stopped, a fact which was wholly due to the interest of the steely eyes of Wild Bill.

“Layin’ off?” inquired the gambler, without a moment’s softening.

“Guess you’re passin’ on that mud lay-out of yours,” suggested Sandy, with a laugh.

Scipio shook his head, and his lips tightened.

“No. I want to borrow a good horse from Bill here.”

The gambler set down the cards he had been shuffling. The statement seemed to warrant his action. He sat back in his chair and bit a chew of tobacco off a black plug. Minky and the others sat round and stared at the little man with unfeigned interest.

“You’re needin’ a hoss?” demanded Bill, without attempting to disguise his surprise. “What for?”

Scipio drew a hand across his brow; a beady sweat had broken out upon it.

“Oh, nothing to bother folk with,” he said, with a painful attempt at indifference. “I’ve got to hunt around and find that feller, ‘Lord’ James.”

A swift glance flashed round the table from eye to eye. Then Sunny Oak’s voice reached them from beyond the window—

“Guess you’ve a goodish ways to travel.”

“Time enough,” said Scipio doggedly.

“What you need to find him for?” demanded Wild Bill, and there was a change in the glitter of his fierce eyes. It was not that they softened, only now they had the suggestion of an ironical smile, which, in him, implied curiosity.

Scipio shifted his feet uneasily. His pale eyes wandered to the sunlit window. One hand was thrust in his jacket pocket, and the fingers of it fidgeted with the rusty metal of the gun that bulged its sides. This pressure of interrogation was upsetting the restraint he was putting on himself. All his grief and anger were surging uppermost again. With a big effort, which was not lost upon his shrewd audience, he choked down his rising emotion.

“Oh, I—I’d like to pay him a ‘party call,’” he blurted out.

Minky was about to speak, but Wild Bill kept him silent with a sharp glance. An audible snigger came from beyond the window.

“Guess you know jest wher’ you’ll locate him?” inquired the gambler.

“No, but I’m going to find him, sure,” replied Scipio doggedly. Then he added, with his eyes averted, “Guess I shan’t let up till I do.”

There was a weak sparkle in the little man’s eyes.

“What’s your game?” rasped Bill curiously.

“Oh, just nothin’.”

The reply caused a brief embarrassed pause. Then the gambler broke it with characteristic force.

“An’ fer that reason you’re-carryin’ a gun,” he said, pointing at the man’s bulging pocket.

Sandy Joyce ceased stacking his “chips”; Toby squared his broad shoulders and drained an already empty glass. Minky blinked his astonishment, while Wild Bill thrust his long legs out and aggressively pushed his hat back on his head. It was at that moment that curiosity overcame Sunny Oak’s habitual indolence, and his face appeared over the window-sill.

“He’s stole from me,” said Scipio in a low tone.

“What’s he stole?” demanded the gambler savagely.

“My wife.”

The stillness of the room remained unbroken for some moments. Actions came far easier to these men than mere words. Scipio’s words had a paralyzing effect upon their powers of speech, and each was busy with thoughts which they were powerless to interpret into words. “Lord” James was a name they had reason to hate. It was a name synonymous with theft, and even worse—to them. He had stolen from their community, which was unforgivable, but this—this was something new to them, something which did not readily come into their focus. Wild Bill was the first to recover himself.

“How d’you know?” he asked.

“She wrote telling me.”

“She went ’cos she notioned it?” inquired Sandy.

“He’s stole her—he’s stole my Jessie,” said Scipio sullenly.

“An’ you’re goin’ to fetch her back?” Bill’s question whipped the still air.

“Sure—she’s mine.”

Scipio’s simplicity and single-mindedness brought forth a sigh of intense feeling from his hearers.

“How?” Wild Bill’s method of interrogation had a driving effect.

“She’s mine, an’—I’m going to get her back.” There was pity at the man’s obstinate assertion in every eye except Wild Bill’s.

“Say, Zip, he’ll kill you,” said the gambler, after a pause.

“She’s my wife. She’s mine,” retorted Scipio intensely. “An’ I’ll shoot him dead if he refuses to hand her over.”

“Say,” the gambler went on, ignoring the man’s protest—the idea of Scipio shooting a man like James was too ludicrous—“you’re up agin a bad proposition, sure. James has stole your—wife. He’s stole more. He’s a stage-robber.”

“A cattle-thief,” broke in Sandy.

“A ‘bad man’ of the worst,” nodded Minky.

“He’s all these, an’ more,” went on Bill, scowling. “He’s a low-down skunk, he’s a pestilence, he’s a murderer. You’re goin’ to hunt him back ther’ to his own shack in the foothills with his gang of toughs around him, an’ you’re goin’ to make him hand back your wife. Say, you’re sure crazy. He’ll kill you. He’ll blow your carkis to hell, an’ charge the devil freightage for doin’ it.”

There was a look of agreement in the eyes that watched Scipio’s mild face. There was more: there was sympathy and pity for him, feelings in these men for which there was no other means of expression.

But Scipio was unmoved from his purpose. His underlip protruded obstinately. His pale eyes were alight with purpose and misery.

“He’s stole my—Jessie,” he cried, “an’ I want her back.” Then, in a moment, his whole manner changed, and his words came with an irresistible pleading. Hard as was the gambler, the pathos of it struck a chord in him the existence of which, perhaps, even he was unaware.

“You’ll lend me a horse, Bill?” the little man cried. “You will, sure? I got fifty dollars saved for the kiddies’ clothes. Here it is,” he hurried on, pulling out a packet of bills from his hip pocket. “You take ’em and keep ’em against the horse. It ain’t sufficient, but it’s all I got. I’ll pay the rest when I’ve made it, if your horse gets hurt. I will, sure. Say,” he added, with a happy inspiration, “I’ll give you a note on my claim—ha’f of it. You’ll do it? You—”

Bill’s face went suddenly scarlet. Something made him lower his eyelids. It was as though he could not look on that eager face unmoved any longer. Somehow he felt in a vague sort of way that poor Scipio’s spirit was altogether too big for his body. Bigger by far than that of those sitting there ready to deride his purpose, and crush it to a weak yielding such as, in their minds, was the only possible thing for a man of his like.

“You set them bills right back in your dip,” he cried, with a savageness that was only a mask to his real feelings; “I don’t need ’em. You ken get right out to the barn an’ have your pick o’ my plugs, an’ anythin’ you need else. Guess you best take the black mare. She’ll carry you all day for a week, sure, an’ then laff at you. Get right on, an’—an’—good luck!”

There are actions performed in every man’s life for which he can never account, even to himself. Such was the act Wild Bill performed at that moment. Gambling was his living, but his horses were a passion with him. He possessed, perhaps, some of the finest in the country, and he worshiped them. He had never been known to lend a horse to his best friend, and no one but himself had ever been allowed to feed or groom them. He was prouder of them than a father might be of his firstborn son, and as careful of them as any doting mother. Therefore his assent to Scipio’s request was quite staggering to his companions. Nor did he know why he did it, and a furious anger followed immediately upon this unusual outburst of good-nature.

Scipio was profuse in his thanks. But he was cut short with a violence that seemed quite unnecessary. For the moment, at least, Bill hated the little man almost as much as he hated this “Lord” James he was setting out in search of.

After that no word passed until Scipio had left the store for the barn. Bill sat wrapt in moody thought, his fierce eyes lowered in contemplation of his well-shod feet. His cards were forgotten, the men around him were forgotten. Sandy and the storekeeper were watching his harsh face in wonder, while Toby’s head was turned in the direction of the departing man. It was Sunny Oak from his post at the window who finally broke the silence.

“Guess you gone plumb ‘bug,’ Bill,” he said, with an amiable grin. Then, as only a flicker of a smile from the others answered him, and Bill ignored his charge altogether, he hurried on,

“You’re helpin’ that misguided feller to a dose of lead he’ll never have time to digest. If ever Zip runs foul of James, he’ll blow him to hell as sure—as ther’s allus work for those as don’t need it. An’, wot’s more, you’ll never set eyes on your black mare agin, ’less it’s under James’ saddle. You’re sure ‘bug.’ You oughter be seen to.”

It was only Sunny Oak who would have dared to say so much to the gambler. But then, for some unstated reason, Sunny was a privileged person on Suffering Creek. Nobody paid much attention to the manner in which he allowed his tongue to run on, and, besides, he was too lazy to be afraid of anybody.

Bill looked round.

“You’re side-tracked,” he observed contemptuously. “James won’t shoot Jessie’s husband. Maybe he’ll kick him out, maybe he’ll roast him bad, and tongue-lash him. Anyways, every man’s got to play his own hand. An’—it’s good to see him playin’ hard, win or lose. But Zip’ll git back, sure. An’ he’ll bring my mare with him. Go to sleep, Sunny; your thinkin’-pan’s nigh hatched out.”

“I don’t guess he’ll ever get alongside James,” observed Minky thoughtfully. “We’ve all looked for him a piece. We know he’s got a shanty back in the foothills, but I don’t seem to remember hearin’ of anybody findin’ it. I don’t guess Zip’s wise to where it is.”

Bill’s eyes lit with a curious fire.

“Guess Zip’ll find him,” he said quietly. “Maybe it’ll take him time—”

“An’,” cried Sunny, “how’s them pore kiddies to live meanwhiles?”

The loafer fired his little bomb with the desired effect. The men had no answer for some moments. And gradually all eyes fixed themselves upon Bill’s face, as though acknowledging his leadership. He answered the challenge in characteristic fashion.

“Guess we’ll turn Sunny loose to wet-nurse ’em.”

An announcement which set Sunny plunging headlong to his own defense.

“Say, ain’t ther’ no sort o’ peace for a feller as needs rest? You’re all mighty smart settin’ folks to work. But this is your game, Bill, an’ it’s up to you to put it thro’. I ’low you’d make an elegant wet-nurse—so soft and motherish.”

But Bill had had enough, and turned upon the face at the window in his most savage manner.

“See here,” he cried, with fierce irony, “we’ve all know’d you since Sufferin’ Creek was Sufferin’ Creek, an’ nobody ain’t never kicked. But it’s kind o’ ne’ssary for every feller around these parts to justify ’emselves. Get me? You need ‘justifyin’.’ Wal, I guess you’ll see to them kiddies till Zip comes back. It’s going to be your work seein’ they don’t get fixed into any sort o’ trouble, an’ when Zip gets back you’ll hand ’em over clean an’ fixed right. Get that? I’m payin’ for their board, an’ I’m payin’ you a wage. An’ you’re goin’ to do it, or light right out o’ here so quick your own dust’ll choke you.”

“Here, here!” cried Toby, with a delighted laugh.

Sandy grinned into the loafer’s angry face, while Minky nodded an unsmiling approval.

“Gee, you beat hell for nerve!” cried Sunny.

“Guess I ken do better. I ken beat you,” retorted Bill contemptuously. “You’ll do it, or—you ken start gettin’ out now,” he added.

Sunny realized his position by the expression of the other men’s faces, and, quickly resuming his good-humored plaint, he acquiesced with a grumble.

“Gee! but it’s a tough world,” he complained, dropping back on to his bench hurriedly, lest fresh demands should be made upon him, and just in time to witness Scipio leading a beautiful black mare up to the tying-post.

The men in the store turned out at the sound of horse’s hoofs, and stood gathered on the veranda. Bill’s keen eyes were fixed regretfully on the shining sides of his favorite animal. She was a picture of lean muscle and bone, with a beautiful small head, and ears that looked little larger than well-polished mussel-shells. She stood pawing the ground impatiently while Scipio tied her

to the post, and she nuzzled his ribs playfully with her twitching lips in the most friendly spirit. But Bill's eyes were suddenly arrested by the manner in which she was saddled and bridled. Poor Scipio had blundered in a hopeless fashion.

Other eyes, too, had seen the blunder, and Sandy Joyce suddenly pointed.

"Mackinaw! Jest get that," he cried.

"By Gee!" laughed Sunny.

But Wild Bill cut them all short in a surprising manner.

"Say, guess you fellers ain't never made no sort o' mistakes—any o' you. You're laffin' a heap. Quit it, or—" His eyes flashed dangerously. Then, as the men became silent, he darted across to where Scipio was still fumbling with the neck rope.

The little man's attempt at saddling, under any other circumstances, would have brought forth Bill's most scathing contempt. The saddle was set awry upon an ill-folded blanket. It was so far back from the mare's withers that the twisted double cinchas were somewhere under her belly, instead of her girth. Then the bit was reversed in her mouth, and the curb-strap was hanging loose.

Bill came to his rescue in his own peculiar way.

"Say, Zip," he cried in a voice that nothing could soften, "I don't guess you altered them stirrups to fit you. I'll jest fix 'em." And the little man stood humbly by while he set to work. He quickly unfastened the cinchas, and set the blanket straight. Then he shifted the saddle, and refastened the cinchas. Then he altered the stirrups, and passed on to the mare's bridle—Scipio watching him all the while without a word. But when the gambler had finished he glanced up into his lean face with an almost dog-like gratitude.

"Thanks, Bill," he said. "I never done it before."

"So I guessed." And the gambler's words, though wholly harsh, had no other meaning in them. Then he went on, as Scipio scrambled into the saddle, "You don't need to worry any 'bout things here. Your kiddies'll be seen to proper till you get back, if you're on the trail a month."

Scipio was startled. He had forgotten his twins.

"Say—you—"

But Bill wanted no thanks or explanations.

"We're seein' to them things—us, an' that all-fired lazy slob, Sunny Oak. Ther' won't be no harm—" He flicked the restive mare, which bounded off with the spring of a gazelle. "Ease your hand to her," he called out, so as to drown Scipio's further protestations of gratitude, "ease your hand, you blamed little fule. That's it. Now let her go."

And the mare raced off in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER V

HUSBAND AND LOVER

Where all the trail-wise men of Suffering Creek and the district had failed, Scipio, the incompetent, succeeded. Such was the ironical pleasure of the jade Fortune. Scipio had not the vaguest idea of whither his quest would lead him. He had no ideas on the subject at all. Only had he his fixed purpose hard in his mind, and, like a loadstone, it drew him unerringly to his goal.

There was something absolutely ludicrous in the manner of his search. But fortunately there are few ready to laugh at disaster. Thus it was that wherever he went, wherever he paused amongst his fellows in search of information he was received perfectly seriously, even when he told the object of his search, and the story of its reason.

An ordinary man would probably have hugged such a story to himself. He would have resorted to covert probing and excuse in extracting information. But then it is doubtful if, under such circumstances, his purpose would have been so strong, so absolutely invincible as Scipio's. As it was, with single-minded simplicity, Scipio saw no reason for subterfuge, he saw no reason for disguising the tragedy which had befallen him. And so he shed his story broadcast amongst the settlers of the district until, by means of that wonderful prairie telegraphy, which needs no instruments to operate, it flew before him in every direction, either belittled or exaggerated as individual temperament prompted.

At one ranch the news was brought in from the trail by a hard-faced citizen who had little imagination, but much knowledge of the country.

"Say, fellers," he cried, as he swung out of the saddle at the bunkhouse door, "ther's a tow-headed sucker on the trail lookin' fer the James outfit. Guess he wants to shoot 'em up. He's a sawed-off mutt, an' don't look a heap like scarin' a jack-rabbit. I told him he best git back to hum, an' git busy fixin' his funeral right, so he wouldn't have no trouble later."

"Wher's he from?" someone asked.

"Sufferin' Creek," replied the cowpuncher, "an' seems to me he's got more grit than savvee."

And this opinion was more or less the general one. The little man rode like one possessed, and it was as well that of all his six treasured horses Wild Bill had lent him his black beauty, Gipsy. She was quite untiring, and, with her light weight burden, she traveled in a spirit of sheer delight.

At every homestead or ranch Scipio only paused to make inquiries and then hurried on. The information he received was of the vaguest. James or some of his gang were often seen in the remoter parts of the lower foothills, but this was all. At one farm he had a little better luck, however. Here he was told that the farmer had received an intimation that if he wished to escape being burnt out he must be prepared to hand over four hundred dollars when called upon by the writer to do so; and the message was signed "James."

"So ye see," said the farmer—a man named Nicholls—despondently, "he's som'eres skulkin' around hyar."

"Seems like it," acquiesced Scipio.

Then, of a sudden, a suspicion flashed through the other's mind, and the man-hunter spent an uncomfortable few seconds.

"Say, you're lookin' fer him?" the farmer questioned harshly. Then he leant forward, his eyes lighting with sudden anger. "If I tho't you was—"

But Scipio's mild blue eyes, and his simple reply had a pacific effect at once.

"I'm looking for him because he's stole my wife. And I'm goin' on chasin' till I find him."

There was such mild sincerity in his visitor's manner that it was impossible for the farmer to retain his suspicion.

“What you goin’ to do about that four hundred?” inquired Scipio later.

“He’ll get no dollars out o’ me. I ain’t got ’em,” replied Nicholls hopelessly. Then his temper rose. “But I’m just goin’ to sleep with a gun to my hand, an’ he’ll get it good an’ plenty, if he shoots the life out of me, an’ burns every stick I got, after.”

Scipio nodded sympathetically.

“I’d feel that ways,” he said. “Well, I guess I’ll be gettin’ on. My mare’ll be fed an’ rested by this. Thanks for the feed. Guess I’ll hunt around this district a piece. Maybe I’ll find—”

But suddenly the farmer awoke from the contemplation of his own troubles and eyed the diminutive figure of his guest wonderingly, as he stood up to go.

“Say,” he observed critically, “guess you must be bustin’ with grit chasin’ this feller.”

Scipio shook his head.

“No,” he said, with a wan smile. “But he’s got—my wife.”

“Ah.”

And there was a world of understanding in the man’s monosyllable.

Five minutes later the man-hunter was on the trail again. It was the afternoon of the second day of his quest. He was saddle-sore and weary, but his purpose knew no weakening. Gipsy was going fresh and strong, and though she had already traveled probably a hundred miles in her rider’s aimless wanderings, she moved as though she was out for a morning’s exercise on a liberal diet of oats.

True to his intention Scipio scoured the district with an excess of enthusiasm which carried him far, and sundown found him amongst the beehive hummocks which form the approach to the greater hills. Up and down these wonderful grassy dunes he roamed searching a resting-place for himself and his mare. There was nothing of the sort in sight, nothing but the endless series of grassy knolls, and the dividing hollows which might conceal anything, from a ranch house to an outlying cattle station. And finally he abandoned all hope of shelter.

He had certainly lost himself. But, even so, he was not greatly concerned. Why should he be? What did it matter? He knew that if the worst came to the worst his mare could eat her fill of grass, and, for himself, sleep in the open had no terrors. Of food for himself he had not even begun to think. So he rode on until the last blaze of the setting sun dropped behind the sky-line.

He was descending into a hollow, something deeper than usual. Hope ran high that it was one of those hidden breaks, which, at intervals, cross the sea of grassy dunes, and mark a mountain waterway. Nor was he disappointed. A few moments later, to his delight, he found himself gazing into the depths of one of the many rivulets trickling its shallow way between low cut banks. Promptly he made up his mind that it was the place for him to camp.

At the water’s edge he scrambled out of the saddle and began to seek a place where his mare could drink. It was a little difficult, for the banks were sharp, and the bushes plentiful, and he had wandered at least a hundred yards in his search for an opening when a human voice abruptly hailed him from the far side of the stream. He looked across without answering, and, to his intense surprise, beheld a horseman on the opposite bank. The man, judging by his appearance, was a cowpuncher, and, to Scipio’s simple mind, was, like himself, benighted.

“Hello,” he replied at last, after a thoughtful stare.

The man was eyeing the yellow-headed figure with no very friendly eyes, but this fact was lost upon Scipio, who saw in him only a fellow man in misfortune. He saw the lariat on the horn of the saddle, the man’s chapps, his hard-muscled broncho pony gazing longingly at the water. The guns at the man’s waist, the scowling brow and shifty eyes passed quite unobserved.

“Wher’ you from?” demanded the man sharply.

“Suffering Creek,” replied Scipio readily.

“Guess you’ve come quite a piece,” said the other, after a considering pause.

“I sure have.”

“What you doin’ here?”

The man’s inquiry rapped out smartly. But Scipio had no suspicion of anybody, and answered quite without hesitation.

“I’m huntin’ a man called James. You ain’t seen him?”

But the man countered his question with another.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Scipio—and yours?”

In the dying light the man’s saturnine features seemed to relax for a moment into something like a smile. But he spoke at once.

“Come right over,” he invited. “Guess my name’s Abe—Abe Conroy. I’m out chasin’ cattle.” And the fact that he finished up with a deliberate laugh had no meaning at all for his companion.

Scipio gladly accepted the invitation, and, in response to the man’s instructions, moved farther along the stream until he came to a shelving in the bank where his mare could climb down. He crossed over, letting his horse drink by the way, and a few moments later was at his new acquaintance’s side.

The stranger’s mood seemed to have entirely changed for the better by the time Scipio came up. His smile was almost amiable, and his manner of speech was comparatively jocular.

“So you’re chasin’ that crook, James,” he said easily. “Queer, ain’t it?”

“What?”

“Why, he’s run off a bunch of our stock. Leastways, that’s how I’m guessin’. I’m makin’ up to his place right now to spy out things. I was jest waitin’ fer the sun to go. Y’see we’re organizin’ a vigilance party to run—Say, I’d a notion fer a moment you was one of his gang.”

But Scipio disclaimed the honor promptly.

“No. I just need to find him. I’m needin’ it bad.”

“Wot fer?”

For once the man-hunter hesitated. A quite unaccountable feeling gave him a moment’s pause. But he finally answered frankly, as he always answered, with a simple directness that was just part of him.

“He’s stole my wife,” he said, his eyes directly gazing into the other’s face.

“Gee, he’s a low-down skunk,” declared the other, with a curse. But the ironical light in his eyes quite escaped his companion’s understanding.

Scipio was full of his good fortune in falling in with a man who knew of James’ whereabouts. A dozen questions sprang into his mind, but he contented himself with stating his intention.

“I’ll ride on with you,” he said.

“What, right up to James’ lay-out?”

“Sure. That’s wher’ I’m makin’.”

For a moment the man calling himself Conroy sat gazing out at the afterglow of the setting sun. His whole appearance was ill-favored enough to have aroused distrust in anybody but a man like Scipio. Now he seemed to be pondering a somewhat vexed question, and his brows were drawn together in a way that suggested anything but a clear purpose. But finally he seemed to make up his mind to a definite course. He spoke without turning to his companion, and perhaps it was for the purpose of hiding a lurking derisive smile.

“If you’re set on makin’ James’ shanty, you best come right along. Only”—he hesitated for the barest fraction of a second—“y’see, I’m out after this cattle racket, an’ I guess I owe it to my folks to git their bizness thro’ without no chance of upset. See?”

Scipio nodded. He saw the man’s drift, and thought it quite splendid of him.

“Now, I got to spy out things,” the man went on, “an’ if you get right up ther’ first it’ll likely upset things fer me—you goin’ ther’ to hold him up as it were.” His smile was more pronounced. “Now I guess I’ll show you where his lay-out is if you’ll sure give me your promise to let me hunt

around fer ha'f-an-hour around his corrals—'fore you butt in. Then I'll get right back to you an' you can go up, an'—shoot him to hell, if you notion that fancy."

Scipio almost beamed his thanks. The man's kindness seemed a noble thing to him.

"You're a real bully fellow," he said. "Guess we'll start right now?"

The man turned and his shrewd eyes fixed themselves piercingly on the little man's face.

"Yes," he said shortly, "we'll get on."

He led the way, his horse slightly in advance of the mare, and for some time he made no attempt to break the silence that had fallen. The twilight was rapidly passing into the deeper shadows of night, but he rode amongst the hills as though he were traveling a broad open trail. There was no hesitation, no questioning glance as to his direction. He might have been traveling a trail that he had been accustomed to all his life. At last, however, he glanced round at his companion.

"Say, what you goin' to do when—you get there?" he asked.

"Fetch my wife back," replied Scipio earnestly.

"What'll James be doin'?"

"He can't keep her—she's mine."

"That's so. But—if he notions to keep her?"

Scipio was silent for some moments. His pale eyes were staring straight ahead of him out into the growing darkness.

"Maybe, I'll have to shoot him," he said at last, as though there could be no question about the matter.

The man nodded.

"Got useful guns?" he inquired casually.

"Got one."

"Ah, what is it? Magazine?"

Scipio pulled his antique possession out of his pocket and handed it over for the man's inspection.

"It's all right," he said. "Guess the sights ain't good over a distance, but at close range it'll make a nasty hole."

Conroy took the weapon in his hand. His keen eyes noted the age of the pattern. He also saw the battered condition of the sights, and the clumsy, rusted, protruding hammer. It was six-chambered, and he knew that it must be all of forty years old. One of the earliest pattern revolvers. The sight of it filled him with cruel amusement, but he kept a serious face.

"I 'lows that should bring James to his senses," he observed, as he handed it back to its owner.

Scipio read his answer as approval, and warmed towards him.

"I'd say so," he said, returning his antiquity to his pocket. "You see, a gun's li'ble to rattle a feller like James. A man who can get around when a feller's back's turned, an' make love to his wife, ain't much of a man, is he? I mean he hasn't much grit. He's a coward sure. If he'd got grit he wouldn't do it. Well, that's how I figger 'bout this James. He's mean, an' a cowardly dog. I don't guess I'll have to use that gun, but I jest brought it along to scare him to his senses, if he needs it. Maybe though he won't need it when he sees me come along—y'see, I'm Jessie's husband—guess that'll fix him sure."

"Guess you got James sized up good," observed the man, with his eyes fixed ahead. "No, I don't see you'll need that gun."

They rode on, Scipio's spirits rising with every yard they traveled. He knew he was nearing his wife with every passing moment. He had no doubts, no fears. So long as he could reach her side he felt that all would be well. In spite of her letter it never entered his head that she cared for the man she had gone off with. He blamed James, and it was no mere figure of speech when he said that he believed he had "stolen" her. He believed such to be the case. He believed she had gone unwillingly. In his mind it was a case of abduction. Again and again he thanked Providence that

he had fallen in with this man, Conroy. He was a good fellow, he told himself, a good friend. And his ideas were so coincident with his own about James.

They were approaching the higher hills. Towering, broken crags loomed ahead darkly in the gathering gloom. The vast riven facets cut the sky-line, and black patches of pine forests, and spruce, gave a ghostly, threatening outlook. They must have been riding over two hours when Scipio realized they were passing over a narrow cattle track on the summit of a wooded hill. Then presently their horses began a steep shelving descent which required great caution to negotiate. And as they proceeded the darkness closed in upon them, until they appeared to be making an almost precipitate descent into a vast black pit. There was no light here at all except for the stars above, for the last glow of twilight was completely shut off by the great wall they were now leaving behind them.

No word was spoken. Each man was busy with his horse, and the animals themselves were stumbling and floundering as they picked their uncertain way. A quarter of an hour of this went by, then, suddenly, ahead, still farther down the slope, two or three dim lights shone up at them like will-o'-the-wisps. They seemed to dance about before Scipio's eyes as they rode. Nor, as he pointed them out to his companion, did he realize that this peculiarity was due to the motion of his mare under him.

"Yep," replied Conroy dryly. "Them's James' lights."

"He's got a large place," said Scipio, with some awe in his tone.

"He sure has," agreed Conroy, smiling in the darkness. "He's got the biggest an' best-stocked ranch in Montana."

"You say he's a-cattle thief?" Scipio was struggling to get things into proper focus.

"He sure is." And Conroy's tone of satisfaction had the effect of silencing further comment by his companion.

A few moments later the descent was completed, and the soft grass under her feet set Gipsy dancing to get on, but Conroy pulled up.

"Here," he said authoritatively, "you set right here while I get on an' get thro' with my business. I'll come along back for you."

Without demur Scipio waited, and his companion vanished in the darkness. The little man had entered into an agreement, and had no desire, in spite of his eagerness to be doing, of departing from the letter of it. So he possessed himself in what patience he could until Conroy's return.

The soft pad of the retiring horse's hoofs on the thick grass died away. And presently one of the twinkling lights ahead was abruptly shut out. The horseman had intervened on Scipio's line of vision. Then the yellow gleam as suddenly reappeared, and the last sign of Conroy passed. The waiting man watched with every faculty alert. His ears and eyes straining for the least unusual sound or sight. But there was none forthcoming.

Then he began to think. He began to consider the situation. He began to picture to himself something of the scene that he hoped would shortly take place between himself and the man James. It was the first time he had thought of the matter deliberately, or attempted to estimate its possibilities. Hitherto he had been too torn by his emotions to consider anything in detail. And, even now, so imbued was he with the right of his cause that he only saw his own point of view, which somehow made James a mere plaything in his hands.

He found himself dictating his will upon the thief in firm tones. He demanded his wife without heat, but with the knowledge of the power of his gun lying behind his words. He felt the restraint he would use. He would not bully. Who was he to bully after having had Jessie restored to him? James should be dealt with as gently as his feelings would permit him. Yes, thank God, he had no actual desire to hurt this man who had so wronged him. The man was foolish, and he could afford to be generous, having had Jessie restored to him. No, he would try hard to forgive him. It would

be a tremendous struggle, he knew, yet he felt, with Jessie restored to him, he ought to make the effort. Somehow, even now, he almost felt sorry for so misguided a—

But his reflections were suddenly cut short by the sound of horses' hoofs returning, and, a moment later, Conroy loomed up in the darkness. He came quite close up before he spoke, and then it was almost in a whisper.

"I've located things," he said, with an air of deep satisfaction. "Guess we'll make Mr. 'Lord' James hunt his hole 'fore we're thro' with him. I figger a rawhide fixed neat about his neck'll 'bout meet his case. An' say, I've news fer you. Ther's some o' his boys around. He's jest right in ther' wher' you ken see that biggish light," he went on, pointing at the illuminated square of a window. "I see him through an open door round back. He's lyin' on a heap o' blankets readin' a book. Ef you git along now you'll get him wher' you need him, an'—an' I wouldn't take no chances. Get a drop on him from outside the door, an'—wal, guess a feller like you'll know what to do after that. I'm gettin' back to home."

Scipio glowed. He felt he could have hugged this good-natured stranger. But he did not altogether agree with the man's suggestion of getting the drop on James. He felt it would hardly be playing the game. However, he intended to be guided by circumstances.

"Thanks, friend," he said, in his simple fashion. "You must let me call you that," he went on eagerly. "You see, you've done something for me to-night I can't never forget. Maybe you've got a wife of your own, and if so you'll sure understand."

"Can't rightly say I've got a—wife," the man replied, "but I ken understan' all right. James is low—doggone low," he added. And his face was turned well away so that he could grin comfortably without fear of the other seeing it.

"Well, so long," said Scipio hastily. "Seeing I shan't see you here when I get back, I'd just like to thank you again."

"So long," replied the other. "An' you needn't to thank me too much."

Scipio urged his mare forward, and the man sat looking after him. And somehow his face had lost something of its satisfied expression. However, he sat there only a moment. Presently he lifted his reins and set his horse at a canter in the direction of one of the more distant lights.

"He's a pore fule," he muttered, "but it's a lousy trick anyways." Thus he dismissed the matter from his mind with a callous shrug.

In the meantime Scipio neared the house from which shone the larger light. As he drew towards it he saw its outline against the starlight. It was a large, two-storied frame house of weatherboarding, with a veranda fronting it. There were several windows on the hither side of it, but light shone only in one of them. It was by this light the horseman saw a tie-post some yards from the house. And without hesitation he rode up to it, and, dismounting, secured his mare. Then, following Conroy's directions, he proceeded on foot to the back of the house where he was to find an open door. He turned the angle of the building. Yes, the door was there all right, but whereas Conroy had said that James was lying on his blankets reading, he now discovered that the doorway was filled by that handsome thief's presence.

Before he realized what had happened, Scipio found himself in the full glare of the light from the doorway, and James was smiling down upon his yellow head with a curious blending of insolence and curiosity.

"I was wondering when you'd get around," he said, without shifting his position. Then, as Scipio made no answer, he bestirred himself. "Come right in," he added, and, lounging out of the doorway, he dropped back into the room. "You'll find things a bit untidy," he went on calmly, "you see I'm making changes in my domestic arrangements. This is temporary, I guess. However, if you don't just mind that, why—come right in."

The man's whole manner was one of good-humored indifference. There was an unruffled assurance about him that was quite perfect, if studied. Scipio's presence there seemed the last

thing of concern to him. And the effect of his manner on his visitor entirely upset all the latter's preconceived intentions. Astonishment was his first feeling. Then a sudden diffidence seized him, a diffidence that was nearly akin to fear of his rival. But this passed in a moment, and was instantly replaced by a hot rush of blood through his small body. All his pictured interview died out of his recollections, and, in place of that calmness with which he had intended to meet the man, he found his pulses hammering and hot anger mounting to his head. The commonest of human passions stirred in him, and he felt it would be good to hurt this man who had so wronged him.

"Where's my wife?" he demanded, with a sudden fierceness.

"Oh—it's that. Say, come right in?"

James was still smiling pleasantly. This time Scipio accepted the invitation without thought of trap or anything else. He almost precipitated himself into the room.

Nor in his fury did he observe his surroundings. He had no eyes for the furnishings, the cheap comfort with which he was surrounded. And though, as James had said, the place was untidy, he saw nothing and none of it. His eyes were on the man; angry, bloodshot eyes, such eyes as those of a furiously goaded dog, driven into a corner by the cruel lash of a bully's whip.

"Yes, that's it. Wher's my wife?" Scipio demanded threateningly. "You've stole her, and taken her from me. I've come to take her back."

The force of his demands was tinged with the simplicity of a naturally gentle disposition. And maybe, in consequence, something of their sting was lost. The forceful bluster of an outraged man, determined upon enforcing his demands, would probably have stirred James to active protest, but, as it was, he only continued to smile his insolence upon one whom he regarded as little better than a harmless worm.

"One moment," he said, with an exasperating patience, "you say I stole her. To have stolen her suggests that she was not willing to come along. She came with me. Well, I guess she came because she fancied it. You say you're going to take her back. Well," with a shrug, "I kind of think she'll have something to say about going back."

For a moment Scipio stood aghast. He glanced about him helplessly. Then, in a flash, his pale-blue eyes came back to the other's face.

"She's mine, I tell you! Mine! Mine! Mine!" he cried, in a frenzy of rage and despair. "She's mine by the laws of God an' man. She's mine by the love that has brought our kiddies into the world. Do you hear? She's mine by every tie that can hold man and wife together. An' you've stole her. She's all I've got. She's all I want. She's just part of me, and I can't live without her. Ther's the kiddies to home waitin' for her, and she's theirs, same as they are hers—and mine. I tell you, you ain't going to keep her. She's got to come back." He drew a deep breath to choke down his fury. "Say," he went on, with a sudden moderating of his tone and his manner, taking on a pitiful pleading, "do you think you love her? You? Do you think you know what love is? You don't. You can't. You can't love her same as I do. I love her honest. I love her so I want to work for her till I drop. I love her so there's nothin' on earth I wouldn't do for her. My life is hers. All that's me is hers. I ain't got a thought without her. Man, you don't know what it is to love my Jessie. You can't, 'cos your love's not honest. You've taken her same as you'd take any woman for your pleasure. If I was dead, would you marry her? No, never, never, never. She's a pastime to you, and when you've done with her you'd turn her right out on this prairie to herd with the cattle, if ther' wasn't anywher' else for her to go." Then his voice suddenly rose and his fury supervened again. "God!" he cried fiercely. "Give me back my wife. You're a thief. Give her back to me, I say. She's mine, d'you understand—mine!"

Not for an instant did the smile on James' face relax. Maybe it became more set, and his lips, perhaps, tightened, but the smile was there, hard, unyielding in its very setness. And when Scipio's appeal came to an end he spoke with an underlying harshness that did not carry its way to the little man's distracted brain.

“She wouldn’t go back to you, even if I let her—which I won’t,” he said coldly.

The man’s words seemed to bite right into the heart of his hearer. Nothing could have been better calculated to goad him to extremity. In one short, harsh sentence he had dashed every hope that the other possessed. And with a rush the stricken man leapt at denial, which was heartrending in its impotence.

“You lie!” he shouted. The old revolver was dragged from his pocket and pointed shakily at his tormentor’s head. “Give her back to me! Give her back, or—”

James’ desperate courage never deserted him for an instant. And Scipio was never allowed to complete his sentence. The other’s hand suddenly reached out, and the pistol was twisted from his shaking grasp with as little apparent effort as though he had been a small child.

Scipio stared helpless and confused while James eyed the pattern of the gun. Then he heard the man’s contemptuous laugh and saw him pull the trigger. The hammer refused to move. It was so rusted that the weapon was quite useless. For a moment the desperado’s eyes sought the pale face of his would-be slayer. A devilish smile lurked in their depths. Then he held out the pistol for the other to take, while his whole manner underwent a hideous change.

“Here, take it, you wretched worm,” he cried, with sudden savagery. “Take it, you miserable fool,” he added, as Scipio remained unheeding. “It wouldn’t blow even your fool brains out. Take it!” he reiterated, with a command the other could no longer resist. “And now get out of here,” he went on mercilessly, as Scipio’s hand closed over the wretched weapon, “or I’ll hand you over to the boys. They’ll show you less mercy than I do. They’re waiting out there,” he cried, pointing at the door, “for my orders. One word from me and they’ll cut the liver out of you with rawhides, and Abe Conroy’ll see it’s done right. Get you right out of here, and if ever you come squealing around my quarters again I’ll have you strung up by your wretched neck till you’re dead—dead as a crushed worm—dead as is your wife, Jessie, to you from now out. Get out of here, you straw-headed sucker, get right out, quick!”

But the tide of the man’s fury seemed to utterly pass the little man by. He made no attempt to obey. The pistol hung in his tightly gripping hand, and his underlip protruded obstinately.

“She’s mine, you thief!” he cried. “Give her back to me.”

It was the cry of a beaten man whose spirit is unquenchable.

But James had finished. All that was worst in him was uppermost now. With eyes blazing he stepped to the door and whistled. He might have been whistling up his dogs. Perhaps those who responded were his dogs. Three men came in, and the foremost of them was Abe Conroy.

“Here,” cried James, his cruel eyes snapping, “take him out and set him on his horse, and send him racing to hell after m’squitoes. And don’t handle him too easy.”

What happened to him after that Scipio never fully understood. He had a vague memory of being seized and buffeted and kicked into a state of semi-unconsciousness. Nor did he rouse out of his stupor, until, sick and sore in every limb, his poor yellow head aching and confused, he found himself swaying dangerously about in the saddle, with Gipsy, racing like a mad thing, under his helpless legs.

CHAPTER VI

SUNNY OAK PROTESTS

Wild Bill was gazing out across the camp dumps. His expression suggested the contemplation of a problem of life and death, and a personal one at that. Sandy Joyce, too, bore traces suggestive of the weightiest moments of his life. Toby Jenks stood chewing the dirty flesh of a stubby forefinger, while the inevitable smile on Sunny Oak's face made one think of a bright spring morning under cover of a yellow fog.

"How am I to see to them pore kiddies?" the latter was complaining. "I've had to do with cattle, an' mules, an' even hogs in my time, but I sure don't guess you ken set them bits o' mites in a brandin' corral, nor feed 'em oats an' hay, nor even ladle 'em swill for supper, like hogs. Fer other things, I don't guess I could bile a bean right without a lib'ry o' cook-books, so how I'm to make 'em elegant pap for their suppers 'ud beat the Noo York p'lice force. An' as fer fixin' their clothes, an' bathing 'em, why, it 'ud set me feelin' that fulish you wouldn't know me from a patient in a bug-house. It makes me real mad, folks is allus astin' me to get busy doin' things. I'm that sick, the sight of a ha'f-washened kid 'ud turn my stummick to bile, an' set me cacklin' like a hen with a brood o' ducklings she can't no ways account fer. You'se fellers are a happy lot o' Jonahs to a man as needs rest."

"You're sure doing the cacklin' now," observed Bill contemptuously.

"Maybe he's layin' eggs," murmured Toby vaguely.

The men were standing on the veranda, gathered round the bench on which Sunny Oak was still resting his indolent body. And the subject of their discourse was Scipio's two children. The father had ridden off on his search for James, and the responsibility of his twins was weighing heavily on those left behind.

"Kind o' handy ladlin' it out to folks," said Sunny, grinning lazily. "But, with all your brightness, I don't guess any o' you could mother them kiddies. No, it's jest 'send Sunny along to see to 'em.' That bein' said, you'll git right back to your poker with a righteous feelin' which makes it come good to rob each other all you know. Psha! You ain't no better'n them lousy birds as lays eggs sizes too big, an' blames 'em on to some moultin' sparrer that ain't got feathers 'nuff to make it welcome at a scratchin' bee."

Sunny's flow was a little overwhelming, and perhaps there was just enough truth in his remarks to make it unadvisable for the others to measure wits with him. Anyway, he received no reply. Bill continued to gaze out at Scipio's hut in a way that suggested great absorption, while Toby had not yet lunched sufficiently off his tattered forefinger. Sandy was the only one of the three apparently alive to the true exigencies of the case, and Sunny addressed himself more exclusively to him.

"Say," he went on, his good-humored eyes smiling cunningly up into the widower's face, "I've heerd tell that you once did some pore unsuspecting female the dirty trick of marryin' her. Mebbe you'll sure hev' notions 'bout kiddies an' such things. Now, if Wild Bill had come along an' pushed a shootin'-iron into your map, an' said you'll handle Zip's kiddies—wal, I ask you, wot 'ud you ha' done?"

"Told him to git his head cooled some," retorted Sandy promptly.

"Ah, guess you bin saved a heap o' trouble," murmured Sunny. "But if you hadn't said that—which you said you would ha' said—an' you'd got busy as he suggested—wal, what then?"

Sandy cleared his throat, and, in his sudden interest, Toby deferred the rest of his meal.

"Wal, I'd ha' gone right up to the shack an' looked into things."

Sandy's first effort seemed to please him, and, hitching his moleskin trousers up deliberately, he proceeded with some unction—

"Y'see, ther' ain't nothin' like gettin' a look around. Then you kind o' know wher' you are. You sure need to know wher' you are 'fore you get busy proper. It's most like everything else. If you get on the wrong trail at the start, it's li'ble to lead you wher' you don't want to go. What I says is, hit the right trail at the start, then you got a chance o' gettin' thro' right, which, I take it, is an elegant way o' doin' most things. Wal, havin' located the right trail—"

"We're talkin' o' Zip's twins," murmured Sunny gently.

"Sure, that's where I'm gettin' to—"

"By trail?" inquired Toby seriously.

"Say, you make me tired," retorted Sandy angrily.

"Best quit the trail, then," said Sunny.

"Go to blazes!" cried Sandy, and promptly relapsed into moody silence.

At that moment Bill turned from his contemplation of the house beyond the dumps and fixed his fierce eyes on Sunny's grinning face.

"Here, you miser'ble hobo," he cried, "get right up out of that, and hump across to Zip's shack. You're doin' enough gassin' fer a female tattin' bee. Your hot air makes me want to sweat. Now, them kiddies'll need supper. You'll jest ast Minky fer all you need, an' I pay. An' you'll see things is fixed right for 'em."

Sunny lurched reluctantly to his feet. He knew the gambler far too well to debate the point further. He had made his protest, which had been utterly ineffective, so there was nothing left him but to obey the fiercely uttered mandate.

But Sandy Joyce felt that somehow his first effort on behalf of the children had missed fire, and it was his duty not to allow himself to be ousted from the council. So he stayed the loafer with a word.

"Say, you'll be knowin' how to feed 'em?" he inquired gravely.

Sunny's eyes twinkled.

"Wal, mebbe you ken give me pointers," he retorted, with apparent sincerity.

"That's how I was figgerin'," said Sandy cordially. He felt better now about his first effort. "Y'see, Minky's stock is limited some; ther' ain't a heap o' variety, like. An' kiddies do need variety. Y'see, they're kind o' delicate feeders, same as high-bred hosses, an' dogs an' things. Now, dogs need diff'rent meat every day, if you're goin' to bring 'em up right. A friend o' mine sure once told me that meat, good meat, was the best feed fer prize dogs, an' he was a feller that won a heap o' prizes. He had one, Boston bull, I—"

"'ll I need to git dog-biscuit for them kiddies?" inquired Sunny sarcastically.

"Say, you make me sick," cried Sandy, flushing angrily.

"Guess that's how you'll make them kiddies," interposed Toby.

Sandy glanced viciously from one to the other. Then, assuming a superiority that scarcely hid his chagrin, he ignored the interruptions.

"You best ast Minky fer some dandy canned truck," he said decisively, deliberately turning his back on Toby Jenks. "Mebbe a can o' lobster an' one o' them elegant tongues stewed in jelly stuff, an' set in a glass bowl. Y'see, they kids needs nourishin', an' that orte fix them 'bout right. I don't know 'bout them new sides o' sow-belly Minky's jest had in. Seems to me they'll likely need teeth eatin' that. Seein' you ain't a heap at fixin' beans right, we best cut that line right out—though I 'lows there's elegant nourishin' stuff in 'em for bosses. Best get a can o' crackers an' some cheese. I don't guess they'll need onions, nor pickles. But a bit o' butter to grease the crackers with, an' some molasses an' fancy candy, an' a pound o' his best tea seems to me 'bout right. After that—"

"Some hoss physic," broke in Toby, recommencing the chewing of his forefinger.

But Wild Bill's fierce eyes were on Sandy, and the erstwhile married man felt their contempt boring into his very soul. He was held silent, in spite of his anger against the broad-shouldered Toby, and was possessed of a feeling that somehow his second effort had been no more successful than his first. And forthwith the impression received confirmation in a sudden explosion from Wild Bill.

"Jumpin' mackinaw!" he cried, with a force calculated to crush entirely the remnants of Sandy's conceit. "You'd sure shame a crazy sheep fer intellect." Then he added, with withering sarcasm, "Say, don't you never leave your mouth open more'n two seconds at a time, or you'll get the flies in it, an'—they'll start nestin'."

Then without pause he turned on Sunny and delivered his ultimatum.

"Get busy," he ordered in a tone there was no denying.

And somehow Sunny found himself stirring far more rapidly than suited his indolent disposition.

Having thoroughly disturbed the atmosphere to his liking, Bill left the veranda without another look in his companions' direction, and his way took him to the barn at the back of the store.

The gambler was a man of so many and diverse peculiarities that it would be an impossibility to catalogue them with any degree of satisfactoriness. But, with the exception of his wholesale piratical methods at cards—indeed, at any kind of gambling—perhaps his most striking feature was his almost idolatrous worship for his horses. He simply lived for their well-being, and their evident affection for himself was something that he treasured far beyond the gold he so loved to take from his opponents in a gamble.

He possessed six of these horses, each in its way a jewel in the equine crown. Wherever the vagaries of his gambler's life took him his horses bore him thither, harnessed to a light spring cart of the speediest type. Each animal had cost him a small fortune, as the price of horses goes, and for breed and capacity, both in harness and under saddle, it would have been difficult to find their match anywhere in the State of Montana. He had broken and trained them himself in everything, and, wherever he was, whatever other claims there might be upon him, morning, noon and evening he was at the service of his charges. He gloried in them. He reveled in their satin coats, their well-nourished, muscular bodies, in their affection for himself.

Now he sat on an oat-bin contemplating Gipsy's empty stall, with a regret that took in him the form of fierce anger. It was the first time since she had come into his possession that she had been turned over to another, the first time another leg than his own had been thrown across her; and he mutely upbraided himself for his folly, and hated Scipio for having accepted her services. Why, he asked himself again and again, had he been such an unearthly fool? Then through his mind flashed a string of blasphemous invective against James, and with its coming his regret at having lent Gipsy lessened.

He sat for a long time steadily chewing his tobacco. And somehow he lost all desire to continue his poker game in the store. His whole mind had become absorbed by thoughts of this James, and though he, personally, had never suffered through the stage-robber's depredations, he found himself resenting the man's very existence. There were no ethical considerations in his mind. His inspiration was purely personal. And though he did not attempt to reduce his hatred to reason, nor to analyze it in any way, the truth of its existence lay in the fact of a deadly opposition to this sudden rise to notoriety of a man of strength, and force of character similar, in so many respects, to his own. Perhaps it was mere jealousy; perhaps, all unknown to himself, there was some deeper feeling underlying it. Whatever it was, he had a strong sympathy with Scipio, and an unconquerable desire to have a hand in the smoothing out of the little man's troubles.

He did not leave the barn, and scarcely even took his eyes off Gipsy's empty stall, until nearly sundown. Then, as he heard the voices of returning prospectors, he set to work on his evening task of grooming, feeding, watering and bedding down his children for the night.

CHAPTER VII

SUNNY OAK TRIES HIS HAND

In the meantime Sunny Oak was executing his orders with a care for detail quite remarkable in a man of his excessive indolence. It was a curious fact, and one that told a great deal of his own character, as well as that of the gambler. His implicit obedience to Wild Bill's orders was born of a deeper knowledge of that individual than was possessed by most of his comrades in Suffering Creek. Maybe Minky, who was Bill's most intimate friend, would have understood. But then Sunny Oak possessed no such privilege. He knew Bill through sheer observation, which had taught him to listen when the gambler spoke as he would listen to a man in high authority over him—or to a man who, without scruple, held him helpless under an irresistible threat. Which power it was inspired his obedience he did not pause to consider. He simply accepted the fact that when Bill ordered he preferred to obey—it was so much easier.

“Hoboe”—the local term for one suffering from his indolent malady—as he was, Sunny Oak was a man of some character. Originally this cloak of indolence in which he wrapped himself had been assumed for some subtle reason of his own. It was not the actual man. But so long had he worn it now that he had almost forgotten the real attributes enshrouded in its folds. As a matter of fact, he was very much a man, and a “live” man, too. He really possessed an extraordinary energy when he chose to exercise it. But it was generally his habit to push his interest aside for the easier course of indifference. However, his capacity was none the less there.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.