

ceive such a perfect position—but that's its trouble," he remarked.

"What's that?" I asked, sensing the big difficulty without grasping it.

"How's he going to get out with his gold?"

"He's a right smart man," I said weakly.

"It's a right smart fortress," Huntoon answered.

And all this time I was staring down into Tropicana. A strange pastoral—such was the view to my eyes in the long afternoon shadows. The stamp of centuries was upon it,—save for the mining machinery, the dredge and the glistening tin roofs which were new as Nome. The rest had the look of eternal enduring—the whitish face of the far canyon wall, and the gray ruins of an ancient city, which lay like a stony incrustation upon the green slope of the seaward mountain-sides. The stillness of rock and ruin, the darkening river, the temperature which seemed almost as hot as the human blood—all had an unearthly appeal to me, so that for the moment, Mary Romany's father and his gold endeavor had a little and laughable look.

Where was the old race that cut the ledge and played with mighty rocks in his valley? Was there any consciousness left of it—a thought, or an eye somewhere, in the shade of the ruins—to laugh, from some viewpoint beyond the reach of time, at these modern galvanisms? In this queer moment, it seemed to me that there was nothing worth while in the world but loving a woman well, loving the children she might bring to the world, and from a long habit of loving—to learn at the last to love all men.

And thus we entered the valley, Huntoon speaking no word and I out of the present, world-straying, among thoughts too big for me. I heard the voices of my own countrymen, saw the few natives moving to and fro bare-legged and hungry-looking, a strange ashen texture to the brown of their faces—the same weathered look that lay upon the fallen city. At last we were among the ruins. A lean giant of years came forth. His was an emperor's nose, and cheeks that were sunken and transparent. His dark eyes pierced my mind—and flitted to Huntoon. He spoke to our escort, which dissolved. So intensely was I watching the father of Mary Romany, that I did not comprehend his words, until he said a second time:

"Come in, gentlemen."

4

The old Master was not as I had pictured him. The profile which had passed the door of the International music-room at Hong Kong; and the gigantic rifleman in the prow of the junk before Liu chuan had made a different image. The lion was gentle; the eagle, low-voiced. All the hints of character from his daughter had not given me a remote suggestion of this gentleness and forbearance; this eager listening of an elder, to a young man's restless story.

I had looked for a man with the hard taint of gold upon him—a man who had hungered and thirsted, fought and contrived for gold, with such passion that he had desolated the hearts of a woman and child. It is true, some inner devil had kept him abroad in the ruck of new gold lands, but the finer spirit of the man was not dead. I tried to hold the thought that there must be something of truth in the old picture as well as the new.

He was glad to find me well again. That was the nearest approach to Liu chuan at first, and I was grateful. He was older and whiter than I had believed. He was glad we had come. There was much to do. His was an extraordinary but lonely service. He remembered seeing Huntoon in China, and smiled at mention of the mines up the River.

"I did well, not to go back," he added. "There was a fortune in Hsi tin lin—but a greater one here. It won't be safe for whites so deep in China for a long time. White men have given China the worst of it too many times. When the war popped up, I felt greatly in luck that my big machinery investment hadn't been installed up the river. I have known of this valley for years. I was fortunate to land here all in one ship-load. We were more or less es-



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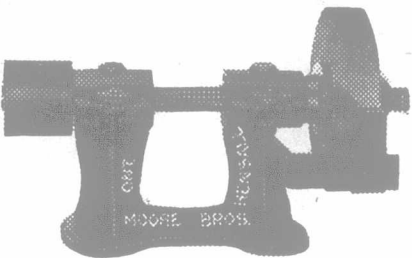
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established before Ecuador or Peru knew what was on. The steel draw-bridge was over the canyon before we really stopped to cook coffee—"

Thus he talked, lightly—apparently withholding no fact that would build a picture, and seeming to have not the slightest suspicion of our fidelity to his cause. And this was a man who throughout a long life had had every chance to observe the devilry and chicanery of human dealings. Moreover, he had pumped four rifle-balls into my body, and had known Huntoon for a remittance man in China. The latter was shattered at this moment, his ego whipped in the direct and finished fashion that alcohol manages in reaction.

Food was brought of the best. Her father poured wine for us. As the moments drew on, his trust and a certain warming culture was more and more evidenced—a culture rarely encountered out on the far chances. Huntoon was as deeply appealed to as I. If in a drunken moment, he had promised Orion to commit depredations upon the mining outfit, I could see plainly that there was a moral obstacle in the way of a host who graciously served him. It would have been much simpler for Huntoon, had he been treated like a stowaway.

The settlement was a stretch of canvas, new boards and tin roofs along the Calderon; its main street, the golden river; its center and hall, the smoking dredge. The quarters in which we now sat were high on the slopes, and well apart among the ruins. Only one of these structures of the far past remained in a state of entire preservation; and this was the largest and farthest from the river. The miners had dubbed it the "Vatican." The old Master pointed it out in the early dusk, as supper was being brought.

"It's backed up against the mountain, as you see," he explained. "In fact, the back-wall is the mountain itself. The walls are three feet thick, and could withstand any mountain gun Orion could get over the Pass. It's our arsenal and store-house. If we lost the Pass, we could still make a stand in the Vatican—the whole command. I built a new iron door. That was the task—after the draw-bridge."

I rather resented the idea of being penned, even in that eminent ruin, protruding from the base of the mountain.

Headquarters was the length of four or five freight-cars from the Vatican, and twice the distance from the river. Only the walls remained of this latter ruin. Canvas and tin replaced the roof, and the interior was divided into two large compartments. A sizable squad of calvary might have halted for shelter in the outer of the two rooms which we now occupied. The opening faced the East—like the main orifices of every ruin in the valley. The floor was of stone; the inner surface of the walls had been worn by rains and winds of ages to the rock itself. In the rear section were canvas partitions and cots for the leader and others; and in the front was the office and dining-table. At the door, we sat down for more talk after supper. I recall the red-lit forges, far to the right, working overtime; and how the voices of the women finally reached me—after the deep darkness.

"They're at Dole's place—that row of lights in the center," Romany remarked. "You never hear, and seldom see them in the day time. A man named Wesley runs the faro lay-out in Dole's. Seems like a good gambler. Dole himself is a rascal. He operates the bar, general store, tables for ladies and all that. I took him on for a sutler, and will have to squash him before long. Dole is a New Yorker—calls his place the Riverside Drive Inn. Strange how the girls came. Wherever you start a gold camp—faro and the girls turn up. This party came down from Guayaquil and over the Pass before the bridge was finished—before Orion organized to cut us off from Libertad."

Romany reflected a moment. A long slender oval of golden tobacco, loosely rolled into a cheroot, was usually in his hand or mouth, mostly unlit. I found these cheroots superlative—aged, yet so moist that they would bend double without breaking. Romany frequently chose a fresh one, lighting it but once. "The flavor is Vuelta," he said, "but the yellow leaf, I suspect, is Chinese. I have obtained them for years from