

"I'm hired, in a way, to advise. You must know, Mr. Jones, that you're jeopardizing our future by refusing to re-locate that claim."

"No, I don't!" shouted Rimrock, jumping fiercely to his feet, while Mary Fortune turned pale. "It's just the other way. That claim is good—I know it's good—and I'll fight for it every time. Your courts are nothing, you can hire a lawyer to take any side of any case, but you can't hire one to go up against this!" He patted a lump that bulged at his hip and shook a clenched fist in the air. "No, sir! No law for me! Don't you ever think that I'll stand for re-locating that claim. That would be just the chance that these law-sharps are looking for, to start a contest and tie up the mine. No, leave it to me. I'll be my own law and, believe me, I'll never be jumped. There are some people yet that remember Andrew McBain—"

He stopped, for Mary had risen from her place and stood facing him with blazing eyes.

"What's the matter?" he asked, like a man bewildered; and then he understood. Mary Fortune had worked for Andrew McBain, she had heard him threaten his life; and, since his acquittal, this was the first time his name had been mentioned. And he remembered with a start that after he came back from the killing she had refused to take his hand.

"What's the matter?" he repeated, but she set her lips and moved away down the hill. Rimrock stood and watched her, then he turned to Jepson and his voice was hoarse with hate.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied!" he said, and strode savagely off down the trail.

CHAPTER XIV.

Rimrock Explains.

IT had not taken long, after his triumphant homecoming, for Rimrock to wreck his own happiness. That old rift between them, regarding the law, had been opened the very first day; and it was not a difference that could be explained and adjusted for neither would concede they were wrong. As the daughter of a judge, conservatively brought up in a community where an outlaw was abhorred, Mary Fortune could no more agree to his programme than he could agree to hers. She respected the law and she turned to the law, instinctively, to right every wrong; but he, from sad experience, knew what a broken reed it was, compared to his gun and his good right hand.

The return to Gunsight was a gloomy affair, but nothing was said of the Old Juan. Abercrombie Jepson guessed, and rightly, that his company was not desired; and they who had set out with the joy of lovers rode back absent-minded and distraught. But the question of the Old Juan was a vital problem, involving other interests beside theirs, and in the morning there was a telegram from Whitney H. Stoddard requesting that the matter be cleared up. Rimrock read it in the office where Mary sat at work and threw it carelessly down on her desk.

"Well, it's come to a showdown," he said, as she glanced at it. "The question is—who's running this mine?"

"And the answer?" she enquired in that impersonal way she had; and Rimrock started as he sensed the subtle challenge.

"Why—we are!" he said, bluffly. "You and me, of course. You wouldn't quit me on a proposition like this?"

"Yes, I think I would," she answered, unhesitatingly. "I think Mr. Stoddard is right. That claim should be located in such a manner as to guarantee that it won't be jumped."

"Uh! You think so, eh? Well, what do you know about it? Can't you take my word for anything?"

"Why, yes, I can. In most matters at the mine I think you're entitled to have your way. But if you elect me as a Director in this coming stockholders' meeting and this question comes before the Board, unless you can make me see it differently I'm likely to vote against you."

RIMROCK shoved his big hat to the back of his head and stood gazing at her fixedly.

"Well, if that's the case," he suggested at last, and then stopped as she caught his meaning.

"Very well," she said, "it isn't too late. You can get you another dummy."

"Will you vote for him?" demanded Rimrock, after an instant's thought, and she nodded her head in assent.

"Well, dang my heart!" muttered Rimrock, impatiently, pacing up and down the room. "Here I frame it all up for us two to get together and run the old Company right and the first thing comes up we split right there and pull off a quarrel to boot. I don't like this, Mary; I want to agree with you; I want to get where we can understand. Now let me explain to you why it is I'm holding out; and then you can have you say-so, too. When I was in jail I sent for Juan Soto and it's true—he was born in Mexico. But his parents, so he says, were born south of Tucson, and that makes them American citizens. Now, according to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, if any citizen of Mexico moves to the United States, unless he moves back or gives notice within five years of his intention of returning to Mexico, he becomes automatically an American citizen. Do you get the idea? Even if Juan was born in Mexico, he's never considered himself a Mexican citizen. He moved back with his folks when he was a little baby, took the oath when he came of age and has been voting the Democratic ticket ever since. But here's another point—even if he is a Mexican, no private citizen can jump his claim. The Federal Government can, but I happen to know that no ordinary citizen can take possession of a foreigner's claim. It's been done, of course, but that lawyer I consulted told me it wasn't according to Hoyle. And here's another point—but what are you laughing at? Ain't I laying the law down right?"

"Why, yes, certainly," conceded Mary, "but with all this behind you what's the excuse for defying the law? Why don't you tell Mr. Jepson, or Mr. Stoddard, that the Old Juan is a perfectly good claim?"

"Well, I declare," gasped Mary, "you are certainly convincing! Why didn't you tell me about it yesterday?"

"Well," began Rimrock, and then he hesitated, "I knew it would bring up—well, another matter, and I don't want to talk about that, yet."

"Yes, I understand," said Mary, very hastily, "but—why didn't you tell Jepson this? I may do you an injustice, but it seemed to me you were seeking a quarrel. But if you had explained the case—"

"What? To Stoddard's man? Why, you must think I'm crazy. Jepson has hired a lawyer and looked up that claim to the last infinitesimal hickey; he knows more about the Old Juan than I do. And speaking about quarrels, don't you know that fellow deliberately framed the whole thing? He wanted to know just where I stood on the Old Juan—and he wanted to get me in bad with you."

"With me?"

"Yes, with you! Why, can't you see his game? If he can get you to throw your vote against me he can knock me out of my control. Add your stock to Stoddard's and it makes us fifty-fifty—a deadlock, with Jepson in charge. And if he thought for a minute that I couldn't fire him he'd thumb his nose in my face."

Mary smiled at this picture of primitive defiance in a battle of grown-up men and yet she saw dimly that Rimrock was right in his estimate of Jepson's motives. Jepson did have a way that was subtly provocative and his little eyes were shifty, like a boxer's. As the two men faced each other she could feel the antagonism in every word that they said; and, looking at it as he did, it seemed increasingly reasonable that Rimrock's way was the best. It was better just to fight back without showing his hand and let Jepson guess what he could.

"BUT if we'd stand together—" she began, at last, and Rimrock's face lit up.

"That's it!" he said, leaping forward with his hand out, "will you shake on it? You know I'm all right!"

"But not always right," she answered, smiling, and put her hand in his. "But you're honest, anyway; and I like you for that. It's agreed, then; we stand together!"

"No-ow, that's the talk!" grinned Rimrock, approvingly, "and besides, I need you, little Mary."

He held on to her hand, but she wrested it away and turned blushing to her work.

"Don't be foolish!" she said, but her feelings were not hurt, for she was smiling again in a minute. "Don't you know," she confided, "I feel utterly helpless when it comes to this matter of the mine. Everything about it seems so absolutely preposterous that I'm glad I'm not going to be a Director."

"But you are!" came back Rimrock, "now don't tell me different; because you're bull-headed, once you've put yourself on record. There ain't another living soul that I can trust to take that directorship. Even Old Hassayamp down here—and I'd trust him anywhere—might get drunk and vote the wrong way."

But you—

"You don't know me yet," she replied, with decision. "I won't get drunk, but I've got to be convinced. And if you can't convince me that your way is right—and reasonable and just, as well—I give you notice that I'll vote against you. Now! What are you going to say?"

"All right!" he answered, promptly, "that's all I ask of you. If you think I'm wrong you're welcome to vote against me; but believe me, this is no Sunday-school job. There's a big fight coming on, I can feel it in my bones, and the best two-handed scrapper wins. Old W. H. Stoddard, when he had me in jail

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"I'm against it," declared Rimrock, promptly. "I'm against any form of reorganization."

"I did!" defended Rimrock. "I told Jepson so yesterday. I used those very same words!"

"Yes, but with another implication. You let it be understood that the reason it was good was that you were there, with your gun!"

"STOP right there!" commanded Rimrock. "That's the last, ultimate reason that holds in a court of law! The code is nothing, the Federal law is nothing, even treaties are nothing! The big thing that counts is—possession. Until that claim is recorded it's the only reason. The man that holds the ground, owns it. And that's why I say, and I stand pat on it yet, that my gun outweighs all the law!"