

"You won't? Then what are you offering it to me for? Haven't I got the advantage of control?"

"Well, perhaps you have," answered Stoddard, doubtfully, and turned and looked straight at Mary. "Miss Fortune," he said, "I don't know you intimately, but you seem to be a reasonable woman. May I ask at this time whether it is your present intention to hold your stock, or to sell?"

"I intend to hold my stock," replied Mary, very quietly, "and to vote it whichever way seems best."

"Then am I to understand that you don't follow Mr. Jones blindly, and that he has no control over your stock?"

MARY nodded, but as Stoddard leaned forward with an offer she hurried on to explain.

"But at the same time," she said, in her gentlest manner and with a reassuring glance at her lover, "when we think what hardships Mr. Jones had endured in order to find this mine, and all he has been through since, I think it is no more than right that he should remain in control."

"Aha! I see!" responded Stoddard, cynically, "may I enquire if you young people have an understanding?"

"That is none of your business," she answered, sharply, but the telltale blush was there.

"Ah, yes, excuse me," murmured Stoddard, playfully, "a lady might well hesitate—with him!"

He cast a teasing glance in the direction of Rimrock and perceived he had guessed right again. "Well, well," he hurried on, "that does make a difference—it's the most uncertain element in the game. But all this aside, may I ask you young people if you have a top price for your stock. I don't suppose I can meet it, but it's no harm to mention it. Don't be modest—whatever it is!"

"A hundred million dollars!" spoke up Rimrock, promptly, "that's what I value my share of the mine."

"And you?" began Stoddard, with a quizzical smile, but Mary seemed not to hear. It was a way she had, when a thing was to be avoided; but Stoddard raised his voice. "And you, Miss Fortune?" he called, insistently. "How much do you want for your stock?"

She glanced up, startled, then looked at Rimrock, and dropped her eyes to the table.

"I don't wish to sell," she answered quietly, and the two men glared at each other.

"Mr. Jones," began Stoddard, in the slow, measured tones of a priest who invokes the only god he knows, "I'm a man of few words—now, you can take this or leave it. I'll give you—fifty—million—dollars!"

"Nothing doing!" answered Rimrock. "I don't want to sell. Will you take fifty millions for yours?"

For a moment Stoddard hesitated, then his face became set and his voice rasped harshly in his throat.

"No!" he said. "I came here to buy. And you'll live to wish you had sold!"

"Like hell!" retorted Rimrock. "This has been my day. I'll know where I'm at, from now on."

Then he fell to watching Jepson and talking to the miners and snooping for some hidden scheme, but Jepson went ahead with his machine-like efficiency until the Tecolote began to turn out ore.

Day and night the low thunder of the powerful batteries told of the milling of hundreds of tons; and the great concentrator, sprawling down on the broad hillside, washed out the copper and separated it from the muck. Long trains of steel ore-cars received the precious concentrates and bore them off to the distant smelters, and at last there came the day when the steady outpay ceased and the money began to pile up in the bank. L. W.'s bank, of course; for since the fatal fight he had been Rimrock's banker and bosom friend. But that ended the long wait. At the sight of all that money Rimrock Jones began to spend.

For a year and more Rimrock had been careful and provident—that is, careful and provident for him. Six months of that time had been spent in the County Jail, and since then he had been watching Stoddard. But now Whitney H. Stoddard—and Jepson, too—were uniformly polite and considerate. There was no further question—whatever Rimrock ordered was done and charged up to the Company. That had been Stoddard's payment for his share of the mine, and now the money was pouring back. Rimrock watched it and wondered, then he simply watched it; and at last he began to spend.

His first big blow-out was a raid on The Mint, where Ike Bray still ran his games; and when Rimrock rose up from the faro table he owned the place, fixtures and all. It had been quite a brush, but Rimrock was lucky; and he had a check-book this time, for more luck. That turned the scales, for he out-held the bank; and, when he had won The Mint, he presented it to Old Hassayamp Hicks.

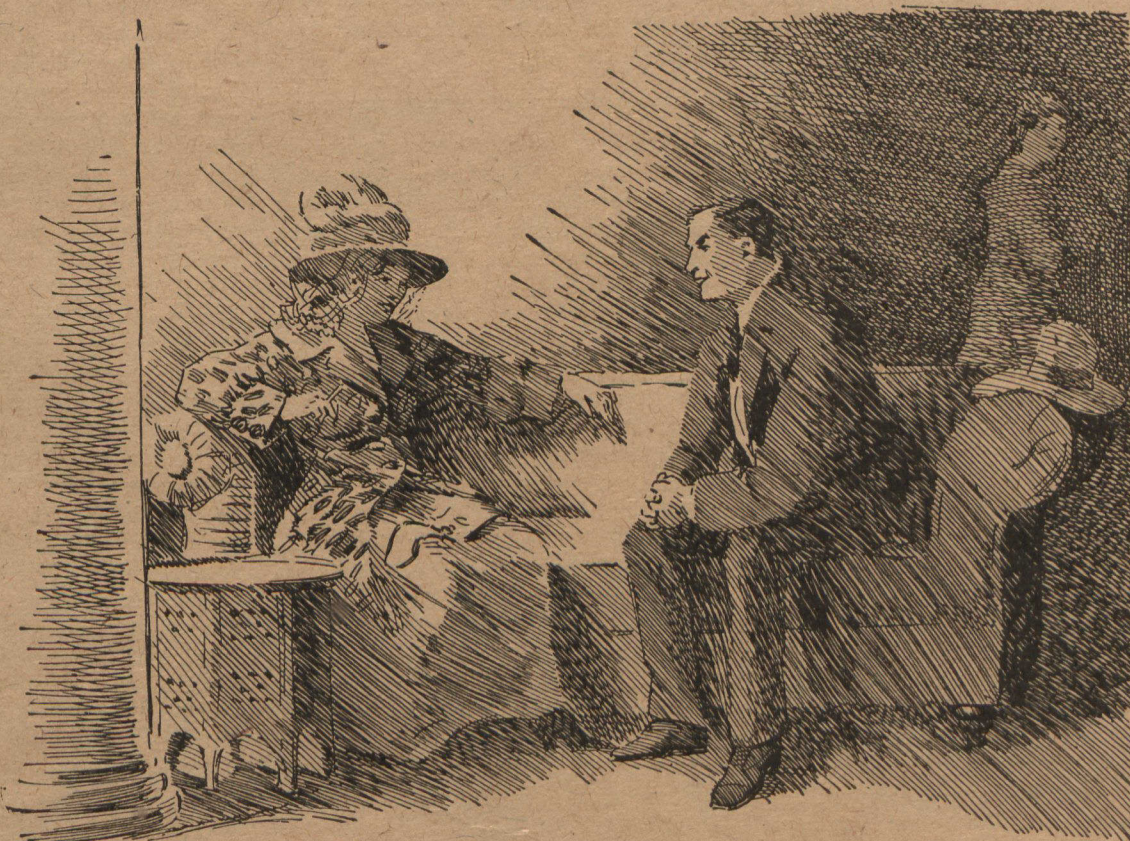
"They can talk all they please," he said in his presentation speech which, though brief, invoked tremendous applause, "but the man don't live that can say I don't remember my friends."

Yet how difficult it is to retain all our friends, though we come with gifts in both hands! Rimrock rewarded Hassayamp and L. W., and Woo Chong,

And after that, repentance; the same, joyless waiting; and, at last, drink again, to forget. And then humbler repentance and forgiveness of a kind, but the sweet trustfulness was lost from her smile.

So with money and friends there came little happiness, either for Rimrock or yet for her. They looked at each other across a chasm of differences where any chance word might offend. He had alluded at one time to the fact that she was deaf and she had avoided his presence for days. And she had a way, when his breath smelled of drink, of drawing her head away. Once when he spoke to her in his loud, outdoor voice, she turned away and burst into tears; but she would never explain what it was that hurt her, more than to ask him not to do it again. So it went until his wild, ungoverned nature broke all bounds and he turned to drink.

Yet if the first phase of his devotion had been passed by Rimrock he was not lacking in attentions of a kind, and so one evening as the West-bound train was due, Mary found herself waiting for him in the ladies' balcony. This oriental retreat, giving them a view of the lobby without exposing them to the rough talk of the men, was common ground for the women of the hotel, and as she looked over the railing Mary was distinctly conscious of the chic Mrs. Jepson, sitting near. Mrs. Jepson, as the wife of the Tecolote Superintendent, was in a social class by herself and, even after Mary's startling rise to a directorship in the Company, Mrs. Jepson still thought of her as a typist. Still a certain feeling of loyalty to her husband, and a natural fear for his job, had prompted Mrs. Jepson, in so far as possible, to overlook this mere accident of occupation. And behind her too-sweet smile there was another motive—her woman's curiosity was piqued. Not only did this deaf girl, this ordinary typist, hold the fate of her husband in her hand, but she could, if she wished, marry Rimrock Jones himself and become the wife of a millionaire. And yet she did not do it. This was out of the ordinary, even in Mrs. Jepson's stratum of society, and so she watched her, discreetly.



THE train 'bus dashed up outside the door and the usual crowd of people came in. There was a whiff of cold air, for the winter night was keen, and then a strange woman appeared. She walked in with a presence, escorted by Jepson, who was returning from a flying trip East; and immediately every eye, including Mrs. Jepson's, was shifted and riveted upon her. She was a tall, slender woman, in a black picture-hat, and from the slope of her slim shoulders to the high heels of her slippers she was wrapped in a single tiger skin. Not a Bengal tiger with black and tawny stripes, but a Mexican tiger cat, all leopard spots and red, with gorgeous rosettes in five parallel rows that merged in the pure white of the breast. It was a regal robe, fit to clothe a queen, and as she came in, laughing, she displayed the swift, undulating stride of the great beast which had worn that fine skin.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Tiger Lady.

THE winter came on with its rains and soft verdure and desert shrubs bursting with bloom and, for a man who professed to know just exactly where he was at, Rimrock Jones was singularly distraught. When he cast down the glove to Whitney H. Stoddard, that glutton for punishment who had never quit yet, he had looked for something to happen. Each morning he rose up with the confident expectation of hearing that the Old Juan was jumped; but that high, domelike butte remained as lifeless as ever, without a single guard to herd the apex claim.

And as all the world seemed far away, they took no notice of a ghost.

and every man who had done him a kind act. "If money can cement friendships he had won over the whole town, but with Mary Fortune he had failed. On that first triumphant night when, after their bout with Stoddard, they realized the true value of their mine; in the dim light of the balcony and speaking secretly into her ear, he had won, for one instant, a kiss. But it was a kiss of ecstasy, of joy at their triumph and the thought that she had saved him from defeat; and when he laid hold of her and demanded another she had fought back and leapt up and fled.

They came down to the desk and the men who had preceded them gave way to let her pass. She registered her name, meanwhile making some gay answer to a jesting remark from Jepson, who laid aside his dignity to laugh. The clerk joined the merriment, whereupon it was instantly assumed that the lady was quite correct. But women, so they say, are preternaturally quick to recognize an enemy of the home. As Mary gazed down she became suddenly conscious of a sharp rapping on the balcony rail and, looking up, she beheld Mrs. Jepson leaning over,