

"Yes, took it away; and here's how they did it," he went on, suddenly striving to be calm. "The first man I staked for, after my father and kinfolks, was L. W. Lockhart over here. He was a cowman then and he had some money and I figured on bidding him in. So I staked him a good claim, above mine on the mountain, and sure enough, he came into the Company. He financed me, from the start; but he kept this claim for himself without putting it in with the rest. Well, as luck would have it, when we sunk on the ledge, it turned at right angles up the hill. Up and down, she went—it was the main lode of quartz and we'd been following in on a stringer—and rich? Oh, my, it was rotten!"

HE paused and smiled wanly, then his eyes became fixed again, and he hurried on with his tale.

"I was standing out in front of my office one day when Tuck Edwards, the boy I had in charge of the mine, came riding up and says:

"Rim, they've jumped you!"

"Who jumped me?" I says.

"Andrew McBain and L. W.!" he says, and I thought at first he was crazy.

"Jumped our mine?" I says. "How can they jump it when it's part their own already?"

"They've jumped it all," he says. "They had a mining expert out there for a week and he's made a report that the lode apexes on L. W.'s claim."

"I couldn't believe it. L. W.? I'd made him. He used to be nothing but a cowman; and here he was in town, a banker. No, I couldn't believe it; and when I did it was too late. They'd taken possession of the property and had a court order restraining me from going onto the grounds. Not only did they claim the mine, but every dollar it had produced, the mill, the hotel, everything! And the judge backed them up in it—what kind of a law is that?"

He leaned forward and looked her in the eyes and Mary Fortune realized that she was being addressed not as a woman, impersonally, but as a human being.

"What kind of a law is that?" he demanded sternly, and took the answer for granted.

"That cured me," he said. "After this, here's the only law I know."

He tapped his pistol and leaned back in his chair, smiling grimly as she gazed at him, aghast.

"Yes, I know," he went on, "it don't sound very good, but it's that or lay down to McBain. The judges are no better—they're just promoted lawyers—"

He checked himself, for she had risen from her chair and her eyes were no longer scared.

"Excuse me," she said, "my father was a judge." And Rimrock reached for his hat.

"Whereabouts?" he asked, groping for a chance to square himself.

"Oh—back East," she said, evasively, and Rimrock heaved a sigh of relief.

"Aw, that's different," he answered. "I was just talking about the Territory. Well, say, I'll be moving along."

He rose quickly, but as he started for the door a rifle-cartridge fell from his torn pocket. It rolled in a circle and as he stooped swiftly to catch it the bullet came out like a cork and let spill a thin yellow line.

"What's that?" she asked, as he dropped to his knees; and he answered briefly:

"Gold!"

"What—real gold?" she cried rapturously, "gold from a mine? Oh, I'd like—"

She stopped short and Rimrock chuckled as he scooped up the elusive dust.

"All right," he said, as he rose to his feet, "I'll make you a present of it, then," and held out the cartridge of gold.

"Oh, I couldn't!" she thrilled, but he only smiled encouragingly and poured out the gold in her hand.

"It's nothing," he said, "just the clean-up from a pocket. I run across a little once in a while."

A panic came over her as she felt the telltale weight of it, and she hastily poured it back.

"I can't take it, of course," she said with dignity, "but it was awful good of you to offer it, I'm sure."

"Aw, what do we care?" he protested lightly, but she handed the corked cartridge back. Then she stood off and looked at him and the huge man in overalls became suddenly a Croesus in her eyes.

"Is that from your mine?" she asked at last, and

of a sudden his bronzed face lighted up.

"You bet it is—but look at this!" and he fetched a polished rock from his pocket. "That's azurite," he said, "nearly forty per cent. copper! I'm not telling everybody, but I find big chunks of that, and I've got a whole mountain of low-grade. What's a gold mine compared to that?"

He gave her the rich rock with its peacock-blue colouring and plunged forthwith into a description of his find. Now at last he was himself and to his natural enthusiasm was added the stimulus of her spellbound, wondering eyes. He talked on and on, giving all the details, and she listened like one entranced. He told of his long trips across the desert, his discovery of the neglected mountain of low-grade copper ore; and then of his enthusiasm when in making a cut he encountered a pocket of the precious peacock-blue azurite. And then of his scheming and hiring American-born Mexicans to locate the whole body of ore, after which he engaged them to do the discovery work and later transfer the claims to him. And now, half-finished, with no money to pay them, and not even food to keep them content, the Mexicans had quit work and unless he brought back provisions all his claims would go by default.

"I've got a chance," he went on fiercely, "to make millions, if I can only get title to those claims! And now, by grab, after all I've done for 'em, these pikers won't advance me a cent!"

"How much would it cost?" she asked him quickly, "to finish the work and pay off the men?"

"Two thousand dollars," he answered wearily. "But it might as well be a million."

"Would—would four hundred dollars help you?"

She asked it eagerly, impulsively, almost in his ear, and he turned as if he had been struck.

"Don't speak so loud," she implored him, nervously. "These women in the hotel—they're listening to everything you say. I can hear all right if you only whisper—would four hundred dollars help you out?"

"Not of your money!" answered Rimrock, hoarsely. "No, by God, I'll never come to that!"

He started away, but she caught him by the arm and held him back till he stopped.

"But I want to do it!" she persisted. "It's a good thing—I believe in it—and I've got the money!"

He stopped and looked at her, almost tempted by her offer; then he shook his great head like a bull.

"No!" he said, talking half to himself. "I won't do it—I've sunk low enough. But a woman? Nope, I won't do it."

"Oh, quit your foolishness!" she burst out impatiently, "I guess I know my own mind. I came out to this country to try and recoup myself and I want to get in on this mine. No sentiment, understand me, I'm talking straight business; and I've got the money—right here!"

"Well, what do you want for it?" he demanded roughly. "If that's the deal, what's your cut? I never saw you before, nor you me. How much do you want—if we win?"

"I want a share in the mine," she answered instantly. "I don't care—whatever you say!"

"Well, I'll go you," he said. "Now give me the money and I'll try to make both of us rich!"

His voice was trembling and he followed every movement as she stepped back behind her desk.

"Just look out the window," she said as he waited; and Rimrock turned his head. There was a rustle of skirts and a moment later she laid a roll of bills in his hand.

"Just give me a share," she said again, and suddenly he met her eyes.

"How about fifty-fifty—an undivided half?" he asked with a dizzy smile.

"Too much," she said. "I'm talking business."

"All right," he said. "But so am I."

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### As a Loan.

RIMROCK JONES left town with four burro-loads of powder, some provisions and a cargo of tools. He paid cash for his purchases and answered no question beyond saying that he knew his own business. No one knew or could guess where he had got his money—except Miss Fortune, and she would not tell. From the very first she had told her-

self that the loan was nothing to hide, and yet she was too much of a woman not to have read aright the beacon in Rimrock's eyes. He had spoken impulsively, and so had she; and they had parted, as it turned out, for months.

The dove that had crooned so long in the umbrella tree built a nest there and cooed on to his mate. The clear, rainless winter gave place to spring and the giant cactus burst into flower. It rained, short and hard, and the desert floor took on suddenly a fine mat of green; and still he did not come. He was like the rain, this wild man of the desert; swift and fierce, then gone and forgotten. Once she saw his Mexican, the old, bearded Juan, with his string of shaggy burros at the store; but he brought her no word and went off the next day with more powder and provisions in his packs.

It was all new to Mary Fortune, this stern and barren country; and its people were new to her, too. The women, for some reason, had regarded her with suspicion and her answer was a patrician aloofness and reserve. When the day's work was done she took off her headband and sat reading in the lobby, alone. As for the men of the hotel, the susceptible young mining men who passed to and fro from Gunsight, they found her pleasant, but not quite what they had expected—not quite what Dame Rumour had painted her. They watched her from the distance, for she was undeniably goodlooking—and so did the women upstairs. They watched, and they listened, which was not the least of the reasons why Mary Fortune laid her ear-phone aside. No person can enjoy the intimacies of life when they are shouted, ill-advisedly, to the world.

BUT if when she first came to town, worn and tired from her journey, she had seemed more deaf than she was, Mary Fortune had learned, as her hearing improved, to artfully conceal the fact. There was a certain advantage, in that unfriendly atmosphere, in being able to overhear chance remarks. But no permanent happiness can come from small talk, and listening to petty asides; and, for better or worse, Mary took off her harness and retired to the world of good books. She read and she dreamed and, quite unsuspected, she looked out the window for him.

The man! There is always a man, some man, for every woman who dreams. Rimrock Jones had come once and gone as quickly, but his absence was rainbow-bowed with romance. He was out on the desert, far away to the south, sinking shafts on his claims—their claims. He had discovered a fortune, but, strong as he was, he had had to accept help from her. He would succeed, this fierce, ungovernable desert-man; he would win the world's confidence as he had won her faith by his strength and the bold look in his eyes. He would finish his discovery work and record all his claims and then—well, then he would come back.

So she watched for him, furtively, glancing quickly out the window whenever a horseman passed by; and one day, behold, as she looked up from her typing, he was there, riding by on his horse! And as he passed he looked in, under the shadow of his hat, and touched a bag that was tied behind his saddle. He was more ragged than ever, and one hand had a bandage around it; but he was back, and he would come. She abandoned her typewriting—one of those interminable legal papers that McBain was always leaving on her desk—and stepped out to look down the street.

The air, warm and soft, was spiced with green odours and the resinous tang of the greasewood; the ground dove in his tree seemed swooning with passion as he crooned his throaty, *Kwoo, kwoo-o*. It was the breath of spring, but tropical, sense-stealing; it lulled the brain and bade the heart leap and thrill. This vagabond, this rough horseman with his pistol and torn clothing and the round sack of ore lashed behind; who would ever dream that an adventurer like him could make her forget who she was? But he came from the mine she had helped him to save and the sack might be heavy with gold. So she watched, half-concealed, until he stopped at the bank and went striding in with the bag.

As for Rimrock Jones, he rode by the saloon and went direct to L. W., the banker. It was life or death, as far as the Tecolote was concerned, for his