

"Am I the same? No, I ain't," she said clearly.

Jessop made a step toward her with protesting, out-thrown hand as if to stop her. Then, evidently thinking better of it, he stood negligently with folded arms. His eyebrows were still raised in unconquerable amazement, but a faint smile of mingled resignation, amusement and admiration played about his lips. The ways of Alma were past even his Celtic comprehension.

Gallito had dropped his hand from Tillotson's arm. The time for emotion as well as for further interrogation was gone. All three men recognized that. This was the moment for action. Still in his slow, cold voice, he said to Tillotson, with not another glance at Alma, "This is mine; but you'll probably get a shot at him," and reached back to his hip pocket.

"Look here, Gallito," cried Jessop, still with his arms folded, "I ain't afraid of either you or Tillotson. I don't care a darn how soon you begin to shoot. I ain't even got my gun with me, but I been cleaning and loading it all morning, and if you two don't put air through me out here, I'm going back to the cabin and finish the job myself; 'cause I won't stay here without her. For some reason—God knows what—she's stringin' you both. I've asked her to marry me more than once since she came here, but she wouldn't hear of it."

The Spaniard, unheeding him, lifted the pistol and took steady aim.

"Put up that gun, pop." Alma's voice was lifted in imperious command as she stepped lightly between Jessop and himself. "There won't be any shooting around here until I say what I got to. Ain't men the fools?" Hands on her hips, the color back in her cheeks, the light in her eyes, her mercurial spirits apparently restored, she swung her skirts and surveyed Tillotson and her father, a half humorous mockery in her slanting gaze. "You prancing up here trying to show off, and ready to smirch my good name in the camp by shooting holes in Bill Jessop! A nice trick! And you, pop, to go bringing that suspicious lump of dough with you!" A contemptuous tilt of her elbow toward Tillotson. "And letting him ask me such questions! Do you think I'd take it from either of you? My Lord! I don't see how the pair of you's ever going to hold up your heads again." And now her glance softened, her head lifted higher yet, her voice rang out exultantly. "Bill Jessop would never ask me whether I was good or bad and no man that's got any sense would dare to. 'Are you the same?'" mimicking their voices. "No, I ain't. I told you the truth when I said that. Nothing's the same. Look around you. This is a new earth and I'm new, too. For now I can go down"—her voice had sunk almost to a whisper and her lashes lay on her flushing cheek—"I don't want to."

Jessop was beside her in two strides. "Alma," he cried, "what in the name of all the saints are you saying? Alma!"

She lifted her radiant face to his, and leaned toward him with all the allurements, the softness and sweetness of the South in her voice and eyes. "I want to stay here now," she murmured; "I love you, Bill."

And this time, the flower of Spain unresistingly, joyously, adorned the coat of Irish frieze.

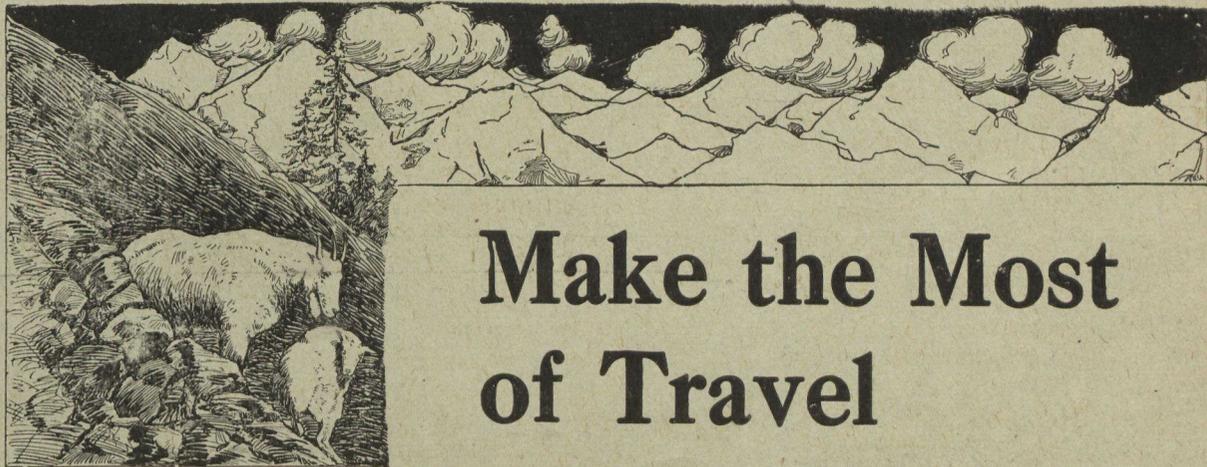


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