

**A Christmas Incident at Santa Domingo**

Continued from Page 12

break into their useful leaf and fruit, when they are all a mist of pink and white, and you hold your breath for fear they'll change! Well, we hadn't said the words. But I belong to him, and I shall wait for him; and because he is your boy you must let me come to you and try to comfort you."

"There is no comfort. I am disgraced." But her voice quivered.

"But he is homeless and forlorn and disgraced and unloved—and he was your son, your little boy!"

"Do not let us speak any longer of it," said Mrs. Carey quickly. "I am sorry for you, but you are young and—you'll forgive me—romantic. In my day we were not so—so intense. You'll outgrow it. You'll come to blush for your folly, generous as it is. But never, until one of your children disgraces you, will you know what I am suffering. There may be worse to follow—his capture, a trial—"

She shuddered. Elizabeth bent over her. "You don't know how I have half envied you," she whispered. "To have been his mother, to have cradled his dear little baby head on your arm, to have seen his little boy face shining with the wonder of each day's newness! I never thought to talk like this. But now you make me think that I, in my mere fancy, have had more joy of his childhood than you—you who can think so selfishly of him ashamed, ruined, fleeing! Oh, why did you not go with him?"

She finished tempestuously. Usually there was a delicate reserve beneath even her most impulsive talk, but today, in her shocked and jealous anger for the man she loved, she was stirred to relentless self-revelations.

"Will you go?" cried Mrs. Carey, her low voice savage.

But when the door closed upon Elizabeth, her proud, miserable head was bent, and she sobbed. A rush of tenderness for the little boy of Beth's conjuring and imagination engulfed her. She loved and cherished the memory of a sudden primitive passion that she had never known for the original.

III.

In Canon Center there are many men whose eyes have the look of the hunted. They are apprehensive of footsteps behind them; they scan new-comers with furtive keenness; they resent any searching inquiry into their habits of life "back East;" they sometimes absent-mindedly forget to respond to the name by which they have introduced themselves into the community.

Something seemed to place Carruth in this band when he first appeared in the town, the last link between civilization and the sun-baked hills and mesas of the desert. Yet something also seemed to differentiate him from most of its members. There was rather the recollection of misery than the apprehension of trouble in his look.

The delicately balanced code of the place stifled inquisitive curiosity. In Canon Center a man stands upon his record from the time of his arrival. Carruth's was good. In a place where many men were drunkards he was conspicuously sober; only a certain charm of manner prevented him from being offensively so. Where many were idlers he was consistently energetic. Where the population seemed almost equally divided between spendthrift and pauper he was thrifty. Where it was the custom to be uproarious in mirth and lax in conduct he seemed to dwell upon some sure height of kindly indifference that removed him from temptation. In a place where half the men were gamblers—gamblers who settled for their day of faro in the saloons and hotel lobbies with a businesslike promptitude in the morning, gamblers who staked their fortunes upon the chance of gleaming copper in places which they did not know among the bare hills, gamblers in cattle that they had never seen—among all these he held steadfastly to sureties.

He was poor when he arrived, but he was both well-educated and trained to business methods. In the big, hideous smelter at the edge of the city, just where the burned desert began its wavering ascent to the shimmering blue hills, he found some sort of clerical employment, and step by step he mounted until he

became the manager's assistant. He knew the details of the business; he knew the mines that sent their product to the establishment. He rode among them, fifty miles a day in the clear-domed waste places of the earth.

Gradually men came to trust him greatly, relying upon his unhurried judgment, his exact honesty. And women liked him for his long, lean frame made hardy by the life of the frontier, and for the inscrutable melancholy of his gray eyes.

He had been in Canon Center eleven years, changing from a slight boy of twenty-four or five to a man. Whatever fear had dogged his footsteps at the beginning was gone. He sent no hasty glances over his shoulder now at unexpected steps. And he had resisted the allurements of Southwestern women and the snares of Southwestern parents who knew of his growing balance in the bank. There was an air of elation about him just at this time which it was difficult for those who noticed to explain to their satisfaction.

The housekeeper of the Mansion Hotel, where he lived, had been pained, to see him "positively gloatin' over a bank-book for all the world like a miser," as she said. She had not waited long enough to see him produce from a clumsy, mansewed case of oiled paper a small picture of a girl, bareheaded, in the opening of a vine-hung piazza, or she would have seen the look of mysterious elation change to the lover's instinctive, unquenchable rapture and then fade to utter misery.

Just before Christmas Carruth was sent to El Paso on business for the smelter. His chief occupation during the journey was to cast up figures on the back of envelopes or the edges of newspapers, and in this he seemed to find a deep and mysterious satisfaction. In El Paso he transacted his business comfortably. He had an evening and a night to spend. He strolled among curio-stores, ate sumptuously at a Chinese restaurant, and was again strolling about when the shout of a newsboy attracted his attention.

"Extry, extry!" the boy called, after the more vehement Eastern fashion. "Full account of the bank failure."

Carruth bought one of the papers. As he read the report of the speculations of a trusted official, and how these had forced the bank to close its doors that afternoon, his face grew ashen. A number of smaller banks, the report said, would be involved in the failure. Carruth knew that Canon Center was one of these.

The paper crackled in his shaking hands for a second. Then he flung it from him and broke into a run which brought him to the railroad station. He knew that there was no train to Canon Center that night, but there was one to a station thirty miles south on one of the haphazard branches which the main line radiated into the wilderness. Laying about him to the right and the left, falling over people, elbowing them aside, he breathlessly bought his ticket and swung himself aboard the train just before its departure.

On another track the Overland lay, its passengers stretching their legs on the platform. He dashed thru them recklessly, and as he did so a tall, graceful woman caught an older one by the arm and cried:

"Mother, mother! It—did you see him?"

Mrs. Carey turned her patient, tender eyes toward Elizabeth Darrell.

"No, dear," she answered.

"There, there!" cried Elizabeth breathlessly, pointing.

The other train, with Carruth catching his breath on the platform, was just starting. And Frederica Carey, stretching out longing arms toward him, astonished and disconcerted the other promenading passengers from the Overland. They were even more astonished when they heard the young woman demand wildly of an official the destination of the moving train.

"Santo Domingo?" she repeated after her informant. "Porter!" she cried, running along the platform until she reached their own car. "Porter, get our things out of section fourteen. We've changed our destination. The Pacific can wait. Santo Domingo for us!"

Thus the winter trip of Mrs. Carey and of her constant companion for the last eleven years, Elizabeth Darrell, was broken short. And the next morning's train for Santo Domingo bore them toward that small shipping station for the mines of the Santo Domingo Range, of which neither of them had ever heard before.

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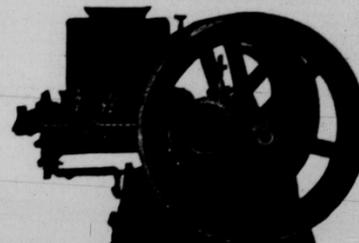
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