

After Many Years

Written for The Western Home Monthly By W. R. Gilbert

IN a dazzling mass of molten gold the sun was dipping low behind the hills of Colorado, and two men, who gave a picturesque touch to the scene by reason of their bright-colored shirts open at the neck, and their broad-brimmed slouch hats, stood for a moment looking across the blue-misted valley towards this riotous extravagance of Nature.

Not another soul was in sight, nor was there even a sign of a habitation so far as the eye could see. In another moment they would turn their backs towards the sunset and follow their road, which led through a shadow-filled canyon to the other side of the mountain ridge whereon they stood.

The younger of the two men—a tall, bronzed giant—drew in a deep respiration of the invigorating air. Then he laughed joyously.

"It's hard to make myself believe, Jim, that only twelve short months ago I was a puny, narrow-shouldered specimen of humanity who was battling for dear life against overwhelming odds in a Manchester slum."

The other turned and looked at him. "Yes," he agreed, "and now you're about as fit as any man I ever saw. This place has put new life into you—and Amy also."

"Yes, and Amy also," repeated Alan softly. "Sometimes I dream at nights that we are back again in the little surgery with the red lamp over the door. I dream that we are sitting together, two very hopeless young people, who see all their ships sailing forlornly out to sea and never coming back again. You know I put that legacy of Uncle Will's into buying that practice, and Amy and I married on the strength of the income it was cracked up to bring in. It nearly did for the pair of us. I don't know how we ever endured even two years of it. And then my health giving way seemed about the worst touch of all. Why, I didn't even see light when I got your letter, old chum, asking me to come out and help you work your claims out here."

"There's only one thing that has troubled me about it all," said the elder man as they turned and strode towards the canyon, "and that is that you have had to give up your doctoring business. You see, all your ambitions led that way. Don't you ever want to go back to it? We are such a deucedly healthy lot out here that you never get a chance."

"I am content," answered Alan quietly. "I have health and happiness. There is nothing to worry over. I tell you it gets into a man's blood, the contentment that comes from living right next to Nature."

Yet deep in his soul he knew that there were moments when his dreams had their way with him. He knew that he spent long idle hours thinking out anatomical problems, trying to find some ray of light on the baffling intricacies of diseases which appealed to him because of their difficulties. He knew, too, that he had gained a wonderful nerve force. He felt, he knew, that though he had come back to the land, he had lost that higher skill.

It was almost dark when they emerged from the high-walled track through the canyon, and came out into the tiny, straggling township that had neither form nor order. The wooden houses had simply been dumped down wherever the fancy of the occupant pleased. Jim's shack was close by, but Alan had to walk to the far end of the valley. A tiny speck of light gleaming against the hazy dusk guided him and sent a glow through his heart, for that was his home and there Amy awaited him.

He came swiftly up the rough road, smiling to think how pleased Amy would be since he was earlier than usual. There was no fence to his house, and he simply turned off the road and walked up the path. He wondered idly why Amy had drawn the curtains across the window, she didn't do so as a rule. He called out cheerily. And as he did so the light was extinguished suddenly.

Then he fancied he heard the rear door shut. But, as he ran up the short flight

of wooden steps, there was Amy, his pretty English wife, waiting for him.

"Have you been entertaining, dear? I thought I heard the back door close," he said as he stooped to kiss her cheek.

"Visitors at this time!" she answered, with a nervous laugh. "Why, no; I expect it was the dog who ran out. Now I will get your supper. Have you and Jim had any luck to-day?" She chattered away rather more rapidly than usual, and there was a bright touch of color in her face. Once or twice it struck Alan that there was some inward excitement which she was struggling to control.

It was not until after supper was finished and Alan was sitting by the stove, drawing contentedly at his pipe, that she left him alone and ran out to close the door of her fowl-house. The warmth of the fire, after the long hours in the open air, made the man drowsy, and he nodded

the stab of jealousy suddenly aroused at the thought.

He watched her covertly, saying nothing of his fears, and as the hours passed his suspicions grew and grew with amazing rapidity. He slept heavily through the night, but the moment he awoke he remembered, and there was a blot already on the brilliance of the morning. Just after sunrise he was off to join Jim Forshaw, and he fancied he saw a look of relief on his wife's face as she stood and watched him go away down the path in the hush of the morning. At the corner he hesitated, then he turned and called back:

"I may be a little later to-night, so don't worry if I'm not up to time!"

She laughed her reply and waved her hand gaily. Alan bit his lip savagely as he turned and strode up the road. All that day he worked doggedly, silently. And all day the fire in his heart smoldered and grew greater in intensity. He longed for and shrank from his return to his home. With eagerness and reluctance he watched the sun creep

then he laughed: "Ah, yes, yes; we are earlier than usual, aren't we, Jim?"

The canyon road seemed interminable to-night. Their home-valley lay wrapt in a curious semi-dark as they emerged. Jim called a good-night as he turned off towards his own shack, and at the same time he waved cheerily towards the bone-shaking stage which they could see rattling along its last mile. It was their only real touch with the outer world, that stage-wagon, which linked them and the nearest railway town, sixty miles away. Each morning it left very early, each night its fellow returned, bringing always mails and sometimes passengers. To-night it looked as though it was being swept like a scrap of dust before the storm.

Alan lingered to watch its arrival. Two passengers, men, got down and stretched themselves stiffly. But Alan took no interest; that inward fire consumed him to the destruction of all else.

He slouched home slowly, taking a by-path merely by chance, and not at all by intent. Suddenly he looked up and saw the light shining in the window of his home, and he quickened his steps. He would have this wretched business out with Amy; he could not have his days made into tortures as this day had been. After all, they had never been a quarrelsome pair. They had been singularly happy. Well, nothing was going to come between them now; Alan made up his mind to that, and the resolution made him quicken his step.

He drew close to the house, and the light in the window shone out towards him like a beacon. It was grown very dark out here, dark and hot. He hurried forward, and as he set his foot upon the steps the first crash of thunder rolled out like a fusillade of guns. He ran up and pushed open the door, stumbling into the living-room.

A sudden scream from his wife greeted him. He saw her dart forward and put out the lamp. Someone across the room started up and knocked a chair over.

"Dave! Go! Go quickly!" came in agonized tones from the woman.

Alan stumbled back against the door. Everything had happened in a second's space of time. He stared straight before him, not knowing what was going to happen next; he saw, in that flash of time when each person in that room wondered what the other was going to do, that a bundle of new pine logs had been recently thrust in to the stove. He watched them flare and splutter in the red heart of the fire. And by their light he saw across the darkened room a man's form dart, as quickly as a hare, towards that back door which led out to the corral.

Alan leaped forward and thrust himself between the man and the door as he felt savagely for his revolver; remembered with a curse that it was lying in the next room, out of order. The stranger was trying to dodge him and make for the door. The woman was there with her hands on the latch, watching with wide, horrified eyes.

"Quick, Dave—he hasn't seen you—he doesn't know who—" she cried, fear making her voice shrill. "Get away—get away!" She rattled the latch impatiently. The man darted towards her. Alan lunged at him, missing him by a hair's breadth, and went whirling against the stove. Then he gave a loud laugh. He snatched a flaring, smoking pinebrand from the blaze, and sprang after the other as he ran through the door, which the woman held for him.

Alan, rushing out like a madman; flung her aside; he crashed, almost on the shoulders of the foremost man, to the foot of the steps, and he brought his blazing weapon down on the man's back. There was a loud cry, the man spun round, and once more Alan's smoldering brands descended, catching the other full across the body. The man doubled up and leaped forward into the darkness. At the same moment the heavens opened and the rain descended in a drenching torrent.

For some time Alan pursued the fleeing man, though he could not see an inch before his hand in the sheet of water which blotted out all. When he returned to the house his emotions had spent themselves. Horror hung like a leaden weight around his heart. He stared at the burnt tree-branch he held. It was



Carrying out the customs of the Crusaders who, centuries before, delivered the Holy City from the infidels for a time, General Allenby, commander of the victorious British forces, is entering Jerusalem on foot, after he had succeeded in wresting it from the sway of the Turk. The Turks and their "Futuh" allies had already evacuated the city, and the British forces were in complete control when the British commander made his triumphal entry through the Jaffa gate. Accompanying General Allenby are his staff and the commanders of the French and Italian forces who co-operated with the British in the drive through Palestine. British official photo.

ed over his book, until it fell to the floor with a crash. As he stooped, with a start, to pick it up, he became aware that he was staring at an object which lay at his very feet—an object that glued his eyes to the floor. After a hesitating moment, during which he felt at once very hot and icy cold, he picked up the object.

It was a cigarette end—and he only smoked a pipe!

It seemed to him that he sat there a long, long time staring at that burnt-out fag. But he tossed it hastily away as his wife returned to the room. He looked at her with eyes grown suddenly suspicious. He noticed again what, in his contentment and easy-going life, he was very liable to forget or take for granted—that Amy was a very pretty woman. Yes, these Colorado hills had given her an added freshness of complexion which gave her greater beauty. It was very possible that other men thought her pretty too. And there was a swift dart of pain through his heart—

its rays across the hill; he counted the passing hours and dreaded the flight.

"Seems as if it's clouding over for a storm," observed Jim, as the evening approached; and Alan laughed in a way that made him look round suddenly.

That night the sun dipped from sight, obscured by sullen clouds, so that the valley was filled with fantastic shadow-shapes, and the canyon road was splashed like a patch of black before them. Their footsteps echoed with solitary distinctiveness as they tramped homeward. Every moment the heavens grew darker and darker, and from the distance there came the shimmering flash of the first lightning. No rain yet and no thunder, only the heavy, stagnant warmth of the air around them, the growing darkness, and the occasional vivid magnesia light.

"I'm glad we knocked off a bit earlier to-night," observed Forshaw presently. "Amy'll be glad to have you home before the storm breaks."

"Earlier!" repeated Alan, with a dull, curious throb at the sudden thought;