

Patience Sparhawk and Her Times 11

with odds and ends, in the midst of which place had been made for a lamp.

Over a large stove a woman was frying bacon and eggs. She wore a brown calico garment, torn and smudged. Her fine black hair, sprinkled with ashes, hung raggedly above magnificent dark eyes, blinking in a crimson face. The thin nostrils and full mouth were twitching. In her ruin she was still a beautiful woman, and she moved her tall bloated form with the pride of race, despite the alcohol in her veins.

On a broken chair by the stove sat a young man in the overalls and flannel shirt of a farm hand. His hair was clipped to his skull with colourless result; his large red under lip curved down into a yellow beard. In a long low room adjoining the kitchen a half dozen other men were seated on benches about a table covered with white oilcloth and chipped crockery. They also wore overalls and flannel shirts; and they were bearded and seamed and brown. The Californian sun soon burns the juices out of the flesh that defies it.

Patience flung open the kitchen door and threw the sugar on the table.

"Oscar," she said peremptorily to the man by the stove, "take Billy round to the barn and put him up, and bring in the flour and the beans. They're under the seat." The man went out, muttering angrily, and she turned to her mother, who had begun a tirade of abuse. "Keep quiet," she said. "So you're drunk again? I thought you promised me that you would n't drink again for a week. Where did you get it?"

"Could n't help it," muttered the woman, cowed by the bitter contempt in her small daughter's eyes, and thrusting a long fork into the sputtering fat.