

# THE WILDCATTERS

## A Tale of the Cobalt Country.

By S. A. White

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## CHAPTER XXII.

CARL'S intention was to get away from Cobalt as soon as possible. His uncle seemed to be recovering satisfactorily. Carl's presence was not needed at the mine. He laughed when he thought of the earnest endeavour with which he had worked there at an earlier date. It took him but a short time to pack his few belongings. But before he went he thought he should see Rita Theodore and tell her that he had forgiven her.

Accordingly, as soon as it was evening he called at her home. Rita was at home, the maid said, but the Colonel had gone down town. Of this fact Carl was glad. It would be only embarrassment for the Colonel and himself to come in contact after what he knew about Theodore's "investments."

It happened that Rita was dressing when Carl came, so he was invited to enter the reading-room. He lay among the soft cushions in that dreamy, soul-possessing den of hers and waited. He did not read. It was satisfying just to gaze at the room and wait. When the maid lighted the lamp, its tinted radiance but enhanced the loveliness of all it glowed upon. Then Carl heard Rita's footsteps on the stair. She parted the door draperies and stood for an instant bowing to Carl, with her beauty showing in all its perfection against the dark background of curtain.

"I have kept you waiting," she said, faintly.

"A little," Carl returned, "but it is beautiful to wait here." Her radiance dismayed him. She was dressed in a creamy, clinging gown that he had never seen. She was dressed as he had never dreamed. She looked like a dark, stage-queen of tragedy, a woman who battles with the minds and souls of kings. Coming from the draperies Rita sank upon the cushions opposite Carl.

"And why?" she asked with a smile.

"The room!" he answered. "It is perfect. You have such taste and such harmony."

"It is because you have harmony and art in your nature that you appreciate it. One who is not inclined to art would not admire it. It is like painting."

"Have you done any lately?"

"Not since that day we were painting last!"

"Ah!" Carl exclaimed in surprise. "That is a long time ago. Why didn't you paint since?"

"Oh! I don't know," she said, quickly, while her gaze went past him. "I haven't time, I suppose."

"You shouldn't neglect it."

"But you? What have you done?"

"Nothing," he replied.

"There!" Rita cried with a laugh. "Then you are just as careless. We are both culprits."

"Yes, we are both culprits," he said, and the deep meaning of his words reached her. Neither of them had spoken of the incident to which he now referred.

The girl remained silent. Carl waited for some expression of sorrow or regret. None was forthcoming. Sudden pride rose in Carl's heart. He resolved that he, too, would be silent. He would offer no words of forgiveness till Rita voiced her regret at having been the means of making him gamble.

"When shall we paint again?" she questioned.

"I am leaving to-morrow," answered Carl.

Her cheeks blanched slightly. "For how long?" she asked.

"For ever."

"Don't say for ever!" she cried, vehemently. "I thought you were interested in your uncle's mining enterprise."

"I am no longer interested in that."

"Where do you expect to go?"

"I have not yet made my plans."

"But when did you take this sudden decision?" Rita inquired. "Do not think I am inquisitive, but something must have influenced you."

"Something of which I cannot speak!" he returned.

"Is it private?"

"Yes."

Rita placed a cushion under her head and remained in thought. How beautiful! How perfectly beautiful! was Carl's unspoken comment as she reposed against the tinted silk of cushion and hanging. Again he felt the power of her eyes and of herself. He could feel the magnetic attraction that always drew him when near this girl.

"You are going," she murmured, bending a deep gaze upon him, "and we have been such friends."

"Such friends!" he echoed. "But we will still have the remembrance of that friendship."

She sat upright with a quick grace that startled Carl. One white arm with the slit sleeve falling away she stretched out in a sweet gesture.

"Will you always have that remembrance?" was her question. The dark eyes gleamed like stars.

"Always," Carl answered. He wished she would not gesture like that or be so perfect in pose. It stirred the uneasiness which he habitually felt in her presence.

"Will nothing blot it out? Will nothing be dearer?" The words came with liquid sweetness. Her head was thrown back with that downward look which in a beautiful face is all-powerful.

Carl gazed in fascination.

"Will it?" she prompted. The white hand that undid him once before was near to his face.

Carl felt the power of her charm. In another instant he would tell her there was nothing dearer, however empty the words might afterwards be.

Acting on the impulse of restraint, Carl rose swiftly from his seat, intending to depart, but the arm which had been bruised struck the corner of the settee. The twinge of pain through it made him involuntarily ease it with his right hand while his lips closed tightly. Rita was on her feet in an instant and at his side.

"What is it?" she cried in alarm.

"Nothing," Carl said, "nothing!" He motioned her away.

"Oh! you are hurt. Let me see!"

"No, it is nothing," he repeated. "Please move away!" Carl was shielding the arm from her view, for it was swollen and he could not step past her since she blocked the way.

"Carl, are you hurt? Tell me the truth!"

"It is only a bruise," he answered. "I bruised it today. Of course it is tender and I struck it on the wood when I rose. It is nothing at all."

"But the pain, dear; I saw the pain in your face." Her tone was one infinitely sweet caress.

Carl flushed at the word. "Don't!" he cried. "Oh! Rita, don't! I am going."

"And for ever? We must part?"

"Yes."

Rita threw her hands up in abandon, with a flood of beseeching, appealing emotion in her eyes. "Carl," she said, "my Prince!" Her voice thrilled him like low harp sounds. "My Prince! Why should it be? Why should we part? Why can we not be together for ever? Oh! do you not see? Take me, Carl, take me!" All the passion which had shaken her soul many times before rushed out in a magnetic torrent.

"Carl, take me!" she trilled.

"No, no, it can never be!" he cried, shutting out the vision of her with a hand over his eyes.

"Why, Carl? Why will you leave me?"

"There is another," he groaned. "Down in the God-breathing country there is another all sunny hair and innocence. I love her."

Rita gave a little scream and her eyes were large with anguish.

"But I am going," he cried fiercely. "Enough of this! Let us say farewell."

"No, no!" the girl burst out passionately. "I cannot let you go. I cannot give you up to her. Carl, don't you care? Have I not touched your heart a little?"

"No. I am going."

Rita's voice went low and tender. "I love you," she sighed. "You cannot go."

"I cannot?"

"No," she said, moving swiftly away from him, almost to the other side of the room. "You would not accept my love when I was forced to declare it. Now you shall come to me. I can make you love me. Men for whom I did not care a farthing have gone insane over me. The one who is all the world to me shall be no different. Come, Carl, I am calling you."

She stood in lissome grace at the farther side. All queenly poise had vanished. Her form drooped like a swaying willow wand in a storm, calling a thousand times stronger for pity and sympathy. Her matchless white arms were held to him, appealing and inviting. The wealth of night-tinted hair fell in billows over her neck

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