

OUT OF
DROWNING
VALLEY



S. CARLTON JONES

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BY

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. SCARLETT	1
II. A TALLOW-FACED FRENCHMAN	15
III. THE WAY IN	29
IV. THE FALL OF A PEBBLE	42
V. THE JANESVILLE ROAD	53
VI. "EDGERLEY"	62
VII. THE "ETHEL-GIRL"	68
VIII. THE ROADHOUSE	76
IX. THE FOOLHARDINESS OF REFLECTION	89
X. "ELDON!"	98
XI. HALLIDAY SEES A GHOST	110
XII. A CHESTNUT PONY	124
XIII. "BURNS!"	138
XIV. THE BACK WAY	150
XV. HENSHAW'S GANG	163
XVI. "HENSHAW"	176
XVII. ONE MAN RIDES INTO THE ROADHOUSE YARD	188
XVIII. MR. HARRIS KNOWS NO SUCH NAME AS SCARLETT	200
XIX. SABIEL GIVES A WARNING	215
XX. JIM WELSH	231
XXI. MRS. SOPHIA SCARLETT	244
XXII. DARK SHADOWS IN THE DARK	256

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXIII. SCARLETT KEEPS A PROMISE, AND THE DRINK DIES OUT OF JIM WELSH	272
XXIV. THE TABEAK MEN	279
XXV. "LUCK PEOPLE WOULD SELL THEIR SOULS FOR!"	287
XXVI. THE WAY OUT	304

OUT OF DROWNING VALLEY

CHAPTER I

SCARLETT

ON the rocky bluff that commanded the entrance to Drowning Valley Charles Edgerley Scarlett sat bareheaded in the rain and gazed with a set mouth at the prospect lying below him.

As far as his hawk's eye could see stretched miles and miles of gray rocks emerging from sodden moss, broken here and there by a small stream marked out by dead trees that might never have been alive, and arched by a somber sky that spat rain or snow at intervals. He was not a day's march from civilization, but, except for the smoke of his partner's cooking fire, he might have been the only living thing in an uninhabited world—and he would have been better pleased if he could have thought so! The valley below him had no good reputation; had in fact so bad a reputation that men took their lives in their hands when they entered it. But it was not the valley which was troubling Scarlett as he scanned its quiet depths. If he could trust his instinct, and he usually could, there lurked in that blank desolation

something unwelcome; something foreign, that boded him no good.

"I think I'll go and break that news to Halliday, even if I'm not certain of it," he muttered.

He shook the wet from his soaked hair, and moved across the ridge of rock that sheltered his partner's fire. Halliday, thickset and stolid, never looked up as Scarlett joined him.

"Seen anything?" he mumbled, from where he shielded his frying-pan from the rain.

"I haven't seen my Indian who was going to meet me here; and I'm just as glad," returned Scarlett cryptically. "But I don't like—the view—today!"

"It's just the same as it was yesterday," grunted Halliday. "I don't see any difference. Grub's ready!" But though his knife deftly speared fried bacon he, too, stared into the featureless wallow below them.

They were not the first white men who had ever set foot there, but there was room for conjecture that they might be the last. From time immemorial it had been dangerous and forbidden ground. In wet seasons great floods rolled out of it, coming from no man knew where, for the upper end of it was unexplored and supposed to be impassable. And there were other drawbacks to Drowning Valley.

The remnant of Indians who lived in it were peaceable, to all seeming. They had never taken

treaty, they explained, that they might go on being peaceful, without the unwelcome shepherding of government and Indian agents; but there were a few people who said they had other reasons. There had been incautious young men of the tribe who had appeared outside the valley, with a handful or so of a peculiar gold, which they sold before they disappeared again. But such bold spirits as had first interrogated and then followed them had disappeared without arriving at any selling.

The latter were not the class of population who are either missed or have inquests held over them, even if their bones are producible. Those witnesses to their end being lacking, few questions were asked concerning them; but, nevertheless, there had grown up in the Blaze Creek district a wholesome terror of trying to prospect in Drowning Valley.

In the circles where such things mattered, no murder had ever been put down to its Indians; but in the lower world of trappers, miners, and such as gamble their summers against their winters, Drowning Valley was barred. Not a man of them would have entered it without an excellent reason. Yet it was Scarlett's only hope, as he looked on it over Halliday's broad shoulders; and a hope—he thought—that bade fair to prove a delusion.

“What's the matter with you about not liking the view?” asked Halliday suddenly. “We knew it was this kind of a place. D'ye mean your Indian isn't going to turn up—that he's repented of his

offer to you about Drowning Valley gold, and means to treat us like his friends have treated the chaps who came in before us?"

"Neither," said Scarlett absently. "I'm not worrying about him—and I don't believe all the bogie tales of the Drowning Valley Indians murdering people, either!"

"What do you believe, then?" Tales of murder were not affecting Halliday's appetite. A stout, comfortable man, he ate to keep himself so.

"I'm not certain," returned Scarlett unsatisfactorily. He regarded his dinner and the valley by turns, hunching himself in his damp clothes. "But I expect, as far as gold's concerned, you and I may as well go back to Blaze Creek!"

Halliday snorted with astonishment. "What on earth for? Lord knows we've heard enough about there being a gold-belt in this valley. You hauled an Indian away from some miners who were maltreating him, and he said he'd show it to you for gratitude, if you came out here and kept your coming good and lonely. I don't see what you're fussing about—unless you do think his offer was all a plant, and that he and his friends are going to ambush us!"

Mr. Scarlett had peculiarly clear eyes, and he turned them on Halliday.

"It's Blaze Creek that's going to ambush us, Billy," said he.

"Blaze Creek?"

Scarlett nodded. "That's why I said we might as well go back there. Half of my bargain with the Indian who's going to meet us here was that we'd be alone; and," he paused heavily—"I don't believe we got off from our late quiet abode as unnoticed as we thought we did! I believe we're followed."

"Followed?" Halliday glared round him incredulously.

"Eat your dinner," ordered Scarlett. "You wouldn't look well through a glass, standing up and searching the horizon! We're followed sure enough, though I was only positive of it this minute; and it means good-by to our gold. Indians might let you and me get some of it, even if we never meet my man who promised to guide us—but they're not going to let into their valley what might turn out to be the forerunners of a rush there!"

"Who in reason could follow us?" sputtered Halliday. "Heaven knows we lit out from Blaze Creek casual enough! Even Eldon and his lot didn't see us go." But he paused sharply. "I meant to ask you about Eldon," he exclaimed, "only I forgot it! What's he got against you?"

"Eldon?" Scarlett stared. "Nothing! Why, till a month ago I never spoke to him in my life. I used to see him round west of this, when I was a cowboy, till I came to know him by sight; but I never ran against him enough to know his name till

he turned up in Blaze Creek. What put any idea about him into your head?"

"Mighty little," grimly. "Just the first night he saw you in Dempsey's shack his eyes kind of lit up before they narrowed on you, and—— Well, I've seen hate in a man's eyes, but never so clear as in Eldon's, glaring at you behind your back!"

"Eldon?" Scarlett repeated incredulously. "You're dreaming!"

"If I am, I bet it comes true he has a grudge against you all right," insisted Halliday obstinately. "You don't think it could be he who's after us now?"

"He didn't know when we went, nor where we were going." Scarlett dismissed the suggestion succinctly. "You've a bee in your bonnet about the man, Halliday! I never had anything to do with him."

"Oh, all right—have it as you like!" Halliday grunted. His eyes fell on Scarlett's long legs, his handsome, hard-bitten face, and the smooth wet head on which he never wore a hat; a trick that had made him a marked man in Blaze Creek. "I don't know why, Scarlett," he burst out dolefully, "but people always seem to keep an eye on you! Every place I was ever in with you was the same: if you got a *flair* for anything, the whole camp packed out after you. Doesn't seem as if you could ever manage to be inconspicuous, and Heaven knows why! I used to think it was your clothes."

"What?" Scarlett looked down on his well-worn garments blankly.

"Well, I mean the way you put 'em on, or something," Halliday explained sheepishly.

"It wasn't my luck, anyhow, you old idiot," but there was affection in the tone. "Give up hunting for why we're followed; we are followed, and that's the end of it."

"I dunno," said Halliday ruefully. "When you've got that kind of grin on, I guess it's about the beginning. What are we going to do?"

"Light out from here, and climb straight back again. Then I imagine we may find out what's going to happen next, and how many men are after us. Good luck! It's raining hard! Now, if it had been fog——" he paused reflectively.

"You'd have sat here on this rock, waiting to see who followed us, till week after next," grumbled Halliday. "I've got times when I could get along if you weren't so thorough, Scarlett!"

"You'd better get down on your marrow-bones instead and pray I'm going to keep on being thorough, if either of us want to see any gold," retorted Scarlett sententiously. "Keep still till I give you the word to move; it's no use getting down from here till whoever is after us can see us go. Then I expect we can get rid of them somehow."

He spoke lightly enough, but his eyes were somber as he stared abroad for the men on his

trail, whom so far he had sensed rather than seen. He wanted no one in Drowning Valley. It was not the legends he had listened to in Blaze Creek that had brought him there: tales of unclimbable mountains shutting in the north end of it, and fencing off the mother-lode of a great gold belt that its Indian owners guarded jealously, aided by inexplicable risings of subterranean waters that drowned intruders, had left him cold; even Halliday's sworn statement that to his personal knowledge one white man had really penetrated to the forbidden gold of Drowning Valley, and come out empty-handed and jabbering crazy, had certainly not sent Scarlett out to prospect for it. But the actual, tingling touch of the rumored treasure had.

It was by pure chance that he had rescued a strange Indian from a gang of drunken miners at Blaze Creek, dressed his wounds, and fed him in his own shack. The man had given him no thanks at all, till he turned to go. It was then that the miracle happened that had brought Red Scarlett hot-foot into Drowning Valley.

The Indian had pushed into his hand a bit of gold, of a quality he had never laid eyes on, and announced quietly that if Scarlett came to the entrance of Drowning Valley in a week he would meet him there, and give him as much more gold as he chose to take away. But—and the emphasis on the condition was the heavier for its quietude—he must come in secret, and alone. With which he put on

his hat and went away, leaving Scarlett looking at the gold in his hand as a condemned man might look at a reprieve.

And a reprieve was just what it was. The man was desperate for money. It was not for his own needs, which were simple enough, but to discharge an outside, ever growing liability that he never spoke of even to Halliday.

In a way Red Scarlett was a mystery to Halliday. The latter had known him, off and on, from his boyhood till he was twenty-two; when he had apparently disappeared off the face of the earth. He came back again without so much as referring to his absence; and something in his face had kept the elder man from so much as asking a question. Things had happened to Red Scarlett, and he bore the mark of them; but Halliday was too wise to let out that he saw it. And perhaps, if he had been told, he would not have believed the word the lines on Scarlett's lean face spelt.

He had begun life as a cowboy, but at twenty-three civilized ways of life were shut to him, for the very simple reason that from twenty-three to twenty-five he had been in Sing Sing.

He had not a jailbird air as he sat in the rain, though his face was too hard for that of a man just eight-and-twenty, and the lines of the bones too plain under its leanness. Perhaps he had never been a real jailbird—but he was the last man who would have said so. To simply affirm he had been

innocent would have been to affirm what every other prisoner did—and useless, besides.

Scarlett, coming out into the world again, with the prison smell heavy in his nostrils, had done what better men than he do every day in the year; taken the easy way, and the expedient one. After one vain effort to make an honest living, while he met certain expensive obligations out of his small capital, he had drifted back to his best friend, Billy Halliday; to the places where men asked no questions, and had no files of old New York papers—which was all very well as long as his money lasted.

When that came to an end Scarlett faced necessity; till an Indian had shown him a way to solve all his problems, with the two words—Drowning Valley.

It would go hard with him if he let that solution be snatched from him now, just because he had not left Blaze Creek unnoticed. Suddenly, as he stared into the rain, he made a quick motion to Halliday and came lightly to his feet. By some magic he seemed to gather up the whole of their slim camp equipage with one casual motion, and hitch the whole of it on his back. Whistling aloud under his load, he led the way down the steep bluff into the featureless wallow of swamp and boulders below it, with Halliday at his heels.

When, half an hour after, the two came back again, it was silently; and so unostentatiously that

a man might have been sitting on the bluff itself and never seen them come. Without a word they flattened themselves under the shelf of rock where they had eaten their dinner, and lay there waiting, with their heads in the drift of the casual rain.

Behind them, two hundred and odd miles to the south, lay the railway, whose last outpost was Blaze Creek, whence they had come; eastward stretched Heaven knew what of bad lands and desolation; to the west, cut off by impassable hills, sat Tabeak and Janesville, two struggling mining camps, the only road to which was miles away; and north, dead in front of them, lay Drowning Valley, that led nowhere, and that no man who entered ever came out of—that was only another word for murder and sudden death.

Considering its reputation, it seemed to Scarlett that any one on their trail there could be on no other business than to profit, somehow, by their journey; and there was no citizen of Blaze Creek who would have been above following them, nor one whom he would have been glad to see. He had no use for the society he had left in that center. His life was not an open book—even Halliday's blind loyalty might have called him a fool for some pages of it—but, even so, he drew a line at the ethics of Blaze Creek.

He had been plainly thankful to give the slip to his would-be intimates there, leaving out of consideration the fact that if any of them followed him into

Drowning Valley and pawed up trouble with the Indian who had trusted him he would never see the gold which was all the hope he had in the world of ever making anything beyond day's wages. Therefore his eyes were very hard and blue as he stared through the spitting rain at the boulders that spelt cover to any one who might be tracking him. It was true that he never seemed able to be inconspicuous; but still it seemed to him that no man could possibly have known he had started for Drowning Valley. He had never spoken of it or the Indian out of it to any one but Halliday, who was no more given to talking than he was—yet it seemed somebody knew! Scarlett's eyes narrowed at the thought, and as suddenly blazed wide open.

"There he goes," said he, very quietly, "and if I'm not mistaken it's that tallow-faced Frenchman who was treating all round the night we left Blaze Creek!"

"*He* couldn't have heard anything. He only got there the day before," whispered Halliday; and broke off, staring guiltily at the soundless figure that flitted below them in the rain. "He could, though," he swore, gulping. "I'm the easiest kind of a fool, Scarlett! I don't know what put it in my head, but I thought he was a half-breed, and I asked him straight out if he came from Drowning Valley. It was me brought him after us."

"That's nonsense," said Scarlett absently. He had a sudden distinct vision of his own lath and

tar-paper palace at Blaze Creek, where he and Halliday had made ready for their journey. There swept over him a queer, sub-conscious memory that he had felt as if some one breathed under his open window, and been fool enough to keep on talking instead of looking out of it.

"It was both of us brought the man after us," he announced impatiently. "If he was loafing outside my shack, while we were reckoning up loads and stuff, it wouldn't have taken much intellect to guess we were going into Drowning Valley. It's lucky he's no one worse than a weak-kneed Frenchman—it won't take much to turn him home. A few war whoops and night alarms of Indians out for massacre will take away his appetite for our trail; and he'll be another one to sit round stoves in Blaze Creek and tell lies about the dangers of Drowning Valley. But I'm mighty glad my Indian we're going to meet isn't here to see him. I'll have work enough to introduce you, without having to explain that a third party doesn't belong to us. I——"

His eyes, carelessly following the Frenchman, turned to the eyes of a different man.

"That's murder," he exploded, "plain murder!" And with the word in his mouth he slithered down the bluff and out of sight.

Halliday, gathering his slow wits together, stood up and looked after him. In the valley below Scarlett raced like a man possessed. Once he fired his revolver without a pause in his springing run,

14 Out of Drowning Valley

and for a moment the elder man could not see why.

When, suddenly, he did see, if he followed Scarlett heavily it was not slowly, for a man of his build. But as he ran he wondered stupidly what earthly concern the business in hand could be of theirs; who the second man was who had sprung into sight out of nowhere; and for which, if either, of the two struggling figures among the rocks Red Scarlett meant him to fight.

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CHAPTER II

A TALLOW-FACED FRENCHMAN

WHAT trouble there had been was over before Halliday got to it.

On one side of a tussock of moss lay an old Indian, with an ugly cut on the side of his head; on the other stood Scarlett, covering with his gun a motionless object that was none other than the tallow-faced Frenchman from Blaze Creek, seated on the ground and nursing with his right hand an ear with a piece nicked neatly out of it. To Halliday, staring at them, none of the three said anything. The Indian, with his face a mask of blood, spoke sharply to Scarlett:

"This man would kill us while we sleep! He belong to you?"

"You may go bail he doesn't." Scarlett's gaze was on the Frenchman. "You may as well own you don't," he said slowly.

The man was fool enough to whine out something about not having followed him and Halliday, and Scarlett's stare deepened.

"I don't care who you followed," he returned tonelessly. "Sitting on that bluff you

thought we'd left, I saw you sneak up to a sleeping Indian and try to knife him. What did you do it for?"

"So he wouldn't kill me," muttered the Frenchman. "They kill every one that comes into this valley."

"Then I see no reason you should be an exception," drawled Scarlett. He signed to Halliday for the rope off his pack, and bound the Frenchman with it.

"What are you going to do with him?" stuttered Halliday.

"Shoot him," placidly. "Or turn him over to the Indians to play with."

The man on the ground turned the livid gray of which only a French-Canadian is capable. Scarlett lifted his pistol hand.

"Go slow, Red!" Halliday was suddenly nervous, and not at all sure Scarlett was not in earnest. "You ain't the sheriff, and he's not worth it. You've marked him—let it go at that. I don't see what's making you kick up the devil, anyhow!" He walked to Scarlett's side. "Get hold of yourself," he muttered.

Scarlett turned sharply away. Halliday's interference had really been half-needed. To be tracked was bad enough, but to have casual Indians knifed by the tracker would dispose of any chance of Drowning Valley gold. He had been a fool not to kill the Frenchman while his blood was up. For

the first time he looked at the Indian the man had attacked.

"You're not hurt much," he began; and broke off, staring. "Why, it's *you!*" he exclaimed. "I thought you'd changed your mind about meeting me." For it was the Indian he had expected. He knew him, now that he had wiped the blood from his face.

The man nodded. "We promise in Blaze Creek to meet you here," he said simply. "You good man to us there, so we come here to wait for you." He beckoned to Scarlett to come closer. "Stoop down, so no one hears," he muttered. "We wait round here for you to come to us like we told you, and while we wait we see that Frenchman. He trail you all the way from Blaze Creek; think p'raps you know, p'raps you don't. But he only one, no others with him, so, though we old man, we sleep; and——" he finished his sentence with the gesture of a man striking, a touch on the hollow between his own collar-bone and shoulder, and a laugh. "We strike up his hand, quick; but we think you shoot just in time, all the same."

"Hang the man," said Scarlett blackly. "I don't know what to do with him, unless I walk him back to Blaze Creek. Considering what I came here for, I don't suppose it suits you to have me followed any more than it does me?"

The Indian shook his head. "We told you to come alone," he reminded Scarlett, glancing sus-

piciously at Halliday. He listened doubtfully as Scarlett explained his presence; but Halliday's need, Halliday's friendship for Scarlett, and perhaps the assurance of his silence made things clear to him, for suddenly he smiled. "You two old friends," he said comprehendingly, "you and me new friends. Well, all right! The gold is enough for both. We take him with us, too."

Scarlett's heart jumped with relief.

He had not known how utterly the torch of hope in his soul had gone out till it was lit again. He forgot the Frenchman. He was going to have his gold—his friend of a day would stick to him. The man before him was no untrustworthy degenerate, but of the old type; six feet of bone and muscle, with a face chiseled out of stern yellow bronze.

"You mean," he began in delight that was almost incredulous, "that you're really going to give us the gold?"

The Indian cut him off with a glance over his shoulder.

"We fix that Frenchman first," said he stolidly. "Best way is to kill him, like you say. Then he not see where we go, and not go back and tell he seen you!"

The proposal came out so blandly that Scarlett laughed before he swore.

"We can't do that," he returned impatiently, inwardly cursing the Frenchman for the second time. A wild idea of dragging him with them and keep-

ing him tied up crossed his mind, and was dismissed. If he did find the Drowning Valley gold he wanted no witnesses. But he could not afford to let the man get away scot-free, and return to Blaze Creek with a nine-days wonder tale of having left him and Halliday prospecting in Drowning Valley with a complacent Indian.

"Klondyke rush wouldn't be in it with the rush after us," he murmured, more to himself than his hearer; but the Indian nodded understandingly. "I don't know what to do with the brute. I wish the devil would fly away with him, or that I'd had the sense to drill his brains instead of his ear!"

"For Heaven's sake," Halliday called out in wrathful interruption, "how long are you going to stand jabbering in the rain? Let's kick this fellow out of this," with a scowl at the Frenchman, "and go to camp somewhere till it's dry!"

"We got camp quite close," observed the Indian quietly.

Halliday and Scarlett looked at each other. They did not want the Frenchman, who sat shivering in his rope; but neither did they dare to let him go and carry news of them. Scarlett said something under his breath to the Indian, who nodded.

"We take him to my place for to-night," he assented grudgingly, and Scarlett turned to the prisoner.

"Come on," he ordered. "I suppose you'll have to stay somewhere till I know what to do with you.

I don't know whether I'd eat an Indian's bread myself so soon after trying to murder him, but that's your risk!"

He had a sudden shame at having desired to kill the Frenchman: he looked so undersized and contemptible, standing by Halliday in the rain; but he had the sense, nevertheless, to despise no enemy, nor spy; and the man was certainly one, and probably both. Scarlett drove him grimly after the Indian and Halliday, till they came with uncanny suddenness on a bark camp that promised dryness if not comfort.

But the Indian had no intention of letting his would-be murderer inside it. He pointed instead to a lean-to built up against a stout tree, and briefly bade Scarlett secure his captive there. It would have been without food or fire if it had not been for Scarlett, who provided both before he turned away with the wrathful obligation heavy on him of having somehow to get rid of the man the next day.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with him," he thought. "It's all very well to talk of running him back to Blaze Creek, but I might as well write and say where I am and where I'm going. I expect all I *can* do is to chase him out of this valley—where he can't get his bearings to come back again!"

But, all the same, he meant to take no chances about losing him to-night. He had already assured

himself he had the man's only knife; but the last thing that night he tied him up tighter than ever, and extinguished his fire that he might have no chance to roll to it and burn off his bonds. Do more than roll he could not, and Scarlett retired to his Indian host's camp with a mind as easy as it could be when he had on it the unsolved problem of disposing of his incubus.

He slept ill, because his thoughts worried him. With the first blink of dawn he crawled out of his blankets to see his prisoner—and found the lean-to empty. If the Frenchman had managed to cut his ropes, they were not there to tell tales of it—man and bonds were both gone. He could not have walked in them, nor even have rolled very far; yet Scarlett came back with no result after an effort to track him.

The country was all rock, and rock in rain keeps no records. The only tangible fact was that the Frenchman was gone, taking the knowledge of Scarlett's, Halliday's, and the Indian's whereabouts with him, and that neither of the three had set him free. Scarlett had slept his cat's sleep at the camp door, where the Indian must have stepped over him to pass; and Halliday, of course, was beyond suspicion.

He would have been at a loss to say why it seemed to matter so much that an insignificant Frenchman, whose name he had not asked, and whose features he had not taken the trouble to

scrutinize, should be getting back to Blaze Creek with news of him. The man did not seem the type to have any friends or backing. It was mere curiosity and the hope of profiting by it that had brought him to spy—and yet Scarlett was uncomfortable. He gave out the news of the Frenchman's escape with a clouded eye, and was annoyed when neither Halliday nor the Indian was perturbed by it.

"We're rid of him," observed Halliday practically, "and that's the great thing. I guess he'll be scared off tracking us. I say, let him go!"

The Indian turned from cooking breakfast to agree placidly.

"That's best," said he, "and what's more best, we can take you from here where he can't follow, couldn't track us if he sat here watching us. We done well to have him run. Last night we don't talk, and we don't ask you to talk, thinking of him listening. Now, you say what you want, and we tell you what you can do. You call us Sabiel!"

He had a fine air of introducing himself, and Scarlett laughed against his will.

"I always had my own opinion of men who said they washed their hands of things," he said sardonically, "but if ever we get into trouble from letting that little snake go, Halliday, you'll oblige me by remembering I told you I washed mine. What I ought to do now is to gambade after him.

But if the sense of the meeting says I'd be a fool to, why, perhaps I might be," with the laugh that made him so suddenly and miraculously young-looking. "Instead, you can listen, Halliday, while I tell Sabiel just what we want out of him."

It did not take long, even punctuated with breakfast. The Indian heard in silence that Halliday and Scarlett, in return for a small share of the Drowning Valley gold, would keep silence about where they got it. They had no more desire for other goldseekers to succeed them than the guardians of the gold had. They were also quite willing, said Scarlett, to give up all idea of prospecting if it were really true that the Drowning Valley Indians held their gold to be sacred, and any attempt to take it an insult to their religion.

"The truth is," he ended, with bald earnestness, "we don't want fights, nor talk, but gold. And if we're not to get it—well, you need only tell us so!"

Sabiel looked at him consideringly. "Some of that all right about the gold, and some all wrong," he said slowly. "We think like this——" and he broke out into a torrent of mingled Indian and English that made Halliday throw up his hands.

"I can't follow, Scarlett," he exclaimed. "You'll have to take that down in shorthand and give it to me cooked! I can't handle it raw."

Scarlett nodded absently. He could talk Cree, but of Sabiel's dialect he knew little, and he was

needing every word of that little now. He leaned forward, listening with every bone in his body, sitting close to the Indian.

Outside the wind rose and the rain dripped, but the bark camp was comfortable. The air of it was aromatic with the wood fire that glowed in the center of it; round its walls ran a couch covered with spruce boughs—wide enough to let a man lie full length across it with his feet to the fire—and Halliday stretched himself there in sheer animal comfort. He was dry for the first time in three days, and he was quite content to let Scarlett do the negotiating of the business that had brought them; but he was not prepared to be roused at the sudden cessation of the Indian's voice by Scarlett's own, without even an exclamation in it.

"It's all settled," was what he said; and it came out dully. Perhaps his need of money had been crueller than even he himself knew, for he was suddenly conscious that he was very tired, and that another day of uncertainty would have killed him.

"What?" gasped Halliday. He answered Scarlett's tone, not his words. "Do you mean he's gone back on showing us the gold—or that there isn't any?"

"I mean Sabiel will"—somehow Scarlett found a difficulty in speaking, in putting his words together—"will take us straight to it. We can have all we want. The Indians won't care so long as we swear to hold our tongues about ever having been

at the place. Shut up, man; you needn't wake the dead about it!"

But Halliday's yell, even muffled, rang against the bark walls.

"And you're telling it like a funeral," he roared, "that we can take all we want of real gold that's really there! Why, it means we're made, Scarlett! It's not *au revoir* to picking up a living from measly camps and cards for me, but good-by—and the Lord knows I've no grouch for the parting! When I think of the things I've had to do, because I was *poor*—" He slapped a great hand on his thigh in disgusted remembrance. "And here you are without a grin, when we're going to be rich! I didn't believe I'd ever know what it was to be rich till I came to die—and then it'd only be in debts I'd got out of paying."

"We're not rich yet," said Scarlett quenchingly. "We haven't even seen the gold, let alone other things."

"What d'ye mean?" Halliday's face fell sober. "Are there conditions, or what?"

"Conditions? Oh, they wouldn't hurt a fly," absently. "They only mean—but here, I'll tell you all Sabiel said!"

Condensed, it came to a simple business enough.

There was gold in the valley; and so much of it that the only hope for the Indians was to keep a sworn silence about it. Once let it be known that half the streams in the place held their quota of

gold, and that the mother-lode—that in other places men held for a figure of speech, or a dream that would never come true—ran through a maze of caverns surrounding a great lake, and was to be got at without shafts or machinery, it would be good-by to Drowning Valley for its Indian habitants. But to that mother-lode, in gratitude for services rendered, and for no promises but that of secrecy, Sabiel would guide Halliday and Scarlett now.

“He says,” Scarlett repeated, “that the place isn’t even known to all the Indians; only to himself and a few other old men. What gold they bring in to sell is just washings from some stream or other; they don’t even go to the lake where the caves are. It’s kept, as far as I can make out, as a sort of sacred place. There is a high rock in the middle of the lake, looking something like a man, which they’ve some kind of superstition about—but there’s no sacredness about the gold. It’s only kept secret for the good, old, hard-boiled reason that, if the whites knew about it, they would come in and annex the place. As for Indians having murdered what few prospectors have come into the valley, Sabiel says that’s nonsense—they just got lost, and starved, and snuffed out accordingly. Nobody murdered them; but I gather nobody rescued them either.”

“The man who did get in, and came out crazy——” interrupted Halliday.

"Didn't ask about him! Why?"

"He got out, anyhow! He's down in an asylum in Toronto."

"He's not here, then"—Scarlett had no attention to waste on crazy men—"and we are—the only whites who've ever been allowed in Drowning Valley! All we have to do is to swear we'll never tell where we found our gold."

"People won't need telling, if we come out from here with it," said Halliday gloomily.

"But we won't go out from here! We'll do our going out from the other end of the valley."

"Other end!" Halliday roared. "There isn't any: it's a *cul de sac!*"

"That is just what it isn't," contradicted Scarlett weightily. "There's no way out, *north*; but that's because the valley doesn't run to the north. It turns right on itself, and"—Scarlett's triumphant voice rose clearer than he knew—"goes west! You can go right through it, and come out on the road between Tabreak and Janesville."

"Janesville?" Halliday's geography whirled. "But——"

"Exactly; Janesville doesn't know it. No one has ever connected Drowning Valley with the little gully that happens to run out west of Janesville; but that's where Drowning Valley ends. And Janesville is where we must go to do our business with the gold. We're never to show our faces at the Blaze Creek end of the valley, nor to let one living

soul know where we are. And that's all—except that we'll start to the gold with Sabiel, to-morrow."

"It's enough," said Halliday slowly; realizing the magnificence of his luck. "Mother-lode," he yelped suddenly. "Me, Billy Halliday, getting introduced to Drowning Valley mother-lode! And getting my dust out through Janesville!"

Scarlett's hand came down on him like a hammer. "Hold your tongue. There's some one outside!" And as if the one spring moved them, he and Sabiel were gone. Before Halliday was on his feet, a shot rang out in the rain.

CHAPTER III

THE WAY IN

HALLIDAY tumbled out of doors in a heap.

"Who was it——" he began; and stood gaping. "Why, there's no one here! Did you get them?"

Sabiel shook his head. "We just see something running behind a rock," said he, "so we shoot. But it wasn't no man; just a fox or something. You make mistake, Scarlett; nobody came round."

Scarlett made no answer: he never did when he had nothing pleasant to say. He had been too late to see anything running, yet he was sure the sound he had heard had been no animal. It had not even needed a tiny stain of blood on the door-pole, at just the height of a small man's ear, to make him certain that the footstep he had sensed, more than heard, stealing away from the camp, was the footstep of the Frenchman he had let escape.

Common-sense told him the man was gone now for good—at least temporarily—but the mischief was done. He tried to think of any salient facts in his programme that he might have been overheard stating, but he had been so excited that he could remember nothing he had said. But he was silent,

while Halliday and Sabiel laughed at the fright the fox had given them. It seemed to Mr. Scarlett that it was not going to be as easy as it sounded to keep the secret about the Drowning Valley gold. He ran through a mental list of the few persons who might think it feasible to come after it and him. The first name he dismissed was Eldon's, in spite of remembering Halliday's insistence that Eldon had a grudge against him. He had never had anything to do with the man, beyond seeing him round the West five years before, and meeting him casually in Blaze Creek. It was all rubbish about Eldon. As for the rest of the Blaze Creek population, if the Frenchman had returned there to organize a gang to follow him, most of them would need no spur to join it but the greed of gold.

"Well, I'll bet they have to pull the laboring oar to get it," concluded Scarlett with some energy, if all the same he repented wrathfully that he had not dealt with his Frenchman once and for all. Yet if he were filled with silent forebodings, they vanished after five days' travelling with Halliday and the Indian. For one thing, no human being—unless it were absolutely on their heels, which he made sure the Frenchman was not—could have kept tab on their quick, devious, and secret progress through Drowning Valley. And no human being was within miles. They saw not so much as one Indian, which Sabiel vouchsafed was purposely. If they passed camps they passed them at night and in

silence. Once Scarlett thought he heard the barking of dogs, but it was too far away to be sure.

What he was sure of was that, at last—on an April morning full of sun and blue sky and robins singing—he and Halliday followed Sabiel out on the shore of a wide lake with a great obelisk of rock standing up in the middle of it, and that no man had seen their journey, nor followed them one step to their goal.

On one side of them towered real mountains that presented overhanging cliffs to the lake, so high that the clouds hid their tops; while, on the other, the shore rose more gently in a ridge between them and the main valley, where the Indian villages lay. Sabiel, standing by Scarlett, pointed across the lake and past the huge pillar of rock in the middle of it.

“We go up lake,” he said, “till that rock shows up like figure of Indian man. Then you cross to caves.” He laid a hand on Scarlett’s shoulder. “You good man to me twice, and now I pay! Six miles more and you see your gold.”

Scarlett’s lips moved to thank him, but he could not speak. He wondered sheepishly, if he would have given so much for so little. It was merely on impulse that he had protected the man from Blaze Creek miners and the Frenchman’s knife, and in return he had gone to endless trouble, setting aside the gold. Even a canoe was waiting for them, cached on the lake shore.

The lake was hardly clear of ice yet. The canoe

crept slowly up it, past a thickly wooded bank fringed with broken ice that glittered greenly in the sun; a shore that would have been impassable on foot without a long detour which might have run them across Indians who were never to know their presence in the country.

Sabiel made no bones about it: if they did know there would be trouble; secrecy and haste were his doctrines when he chose to preach at all. But for the most part he kept silence, accepting Halliday as a necessary evil and caring for Scarlett like a father.

As they drew abreast of the rock Scarlett had secretly thought utterly unlike a man he exclaimed aloud with surprise:

"Good Heavens, it *is* a man! Talk about the statue of Liberty in New York—this knocks it flat!"

And it did. Towering above them, calm, unspeakably majestic, they saw now the giant statue of an Indian. It was no natural illusion, but man's carving; Scarlett could almost think the fringes of the leggings fluttered in the wind below the long tunic. The grim profile was worked out so wonderfully that even Halliday started.

"Who did it?" he demanded, goggling at it. "And who's it meant for?"

"We don't know; but it—he—keeps the gold," returned Sabiel superstitiously: Scarlett had a feeling that if he had been a Catholic he would have

crossed himself. He turned the canoe sharply to shore, and got out. "We make camp here," he announced unexpectedly. "You go see the gold, and come back to sleep. Those caves not good to sleep in—suppose water rises in the night, you drown!" He added something under his breath to Scarlett.

"What did he say?" asked Halliday, as the lightened canoe shot across the water. "The gold 'll keep, Scarlett: slack up a bit!"

Scarlett apologized absently. Halliday was no canoe man, and he was panting.

"He said—it's queer the mixture the old chap is—first, that there was no superstition about the gold, and it wasn't sacred; and next, that the carved figure stands there to keep people away, and that if we want to get our gold we must not pass in front of it so as to get its eyes on us. If it saw us it would make the lake rise. It appears there are certain seasons when the water comes up and floods out the caves; it would be certain death to be caught there then, and on that account Sabiel won't even venture into 'hem. Far as I can make out, it's pretty safe now—the autumn is the usual flood-time—but, all the same, he made me promise we'd never spend a night in the caves, but go back to where we left him."

"Go back every night," roared Halliday, "a two-mile paddle each way if it's an inch! No, sir! If I get a sight of my gold I want to camp on it.

I'm not long enough on Indian fairy-tales to rack my muscles for them, and you say that what he calls the floodtime isn't for months."

"You idiot," said Scarlett impatiently, "it's not floods I'm listening to the old man for—it's plain sense! Supposing any one, even Indians"—if the Frenchman occurred to him he did not say so—"did turn up here and saw a camp just where we were working, how'd we keep the gold to ourselves? No! We camp on the safe side, and if the devil himself comes here he'll be none the wiser for it. Hold hard, Halliday; we're aground!"

They were; on a low, shelf-like rock that seemed to stretch from them to the shore. Scarlett got out on it, found the icy water only ankle-deep, and motioned to Halliday.

"Here's where we walk," he said, and there was a curious quality in his voice; for before them the cliff was broken by a low archway, full of the black emptiness of a great cave's entrance.

In silence the two men shouldered the canoe—Halliday with a crawling down his backbone that was not from the icy water he walked in. They were on the very threshold of the Drowning Valley caverns, where the mother-lode was supposed to run. If it did not, they would just have to tramp back to their old haunts again, to keep on scratching up a living as best they could. If it did—neither man dared think of all it meant to him.

Scarlett tried to smile as he stepped from the

water to a dry ledge of outcrop just below the granite arch. He lowered his end of the canoe; lit a candle; and, side by side with Halliday, went in.

At first the two saw nothing. Their candle flickered blue in the chill of a great subterranean chamber, and its light merely made darkness visible. Tangible darkness, like a cellar, or the grave; not what the average man means by calling a night dark. Halliday coughed in the heavy air of the place.

"I guess we've come for nothing," he said, shivering; and the cave seemed to pick up his words.

"Nothing, nothing, nothing," came from all round him; first deep, and then falling away to a whisper. Somehow it was startling in the vault-like place; the more so to Scarlett that it echoed the thoughts in his head. The cave, so far as he could see its formation and the rock from which it was hollowed, offered no promise of gold.

"We can't tell yet," he answered Halliday; and did not know he had whispered, till he heard the endless sibilation of his own words echo round him. The sound was not cheering in a blue island of candle-light in an immense sea of darkness. Scarlett hastily produced a patent lantern, and was relieved when its staring white flame cut the gloom like a knife. But it was only relief in the tension of his nerves, not as to the character of the place. They had trended to the right and were almost elbowing the vaulted side of the cave. Neither it

nor the bare rock their boots grated on showed any promise of gold.

"Bed-rock—and nothing in it," explained Scarlett tersely; he was hardened to the echo now, and did not listen for it. "I don't know—I don't believe Sabiel would have brought us all this way for nothing—but——"

"But what?" Halliday was not hardened to the echo. It made him nervous to feel as if they two were speaking in the midst of an unseen, jabbering crowd.

"Well, he said himself he'd never been in this place," Scarlett answered simply. "It may be all a kind of an Indian dream about the gold. We'd get none here, anyhow, if we blasted the roof down." He swung his lantern upwards as he spoke and stood staring, as if what he saw surprised him.

"How much of it—I mean, how many caves are there?"

"Fifty to a hundred miles, Sabiel told me," said Scarlett absently.

"And us hunting round in them for gold till we get lost!" For a man of his build, Halliday had imagination. Death in the open he could stomach; but the death that would come to a man lost in the dark staggered him. He had to moisten his lips to speak. "For any sake, Scarlett, don't let's get confused and miss the way out!"

"What?" asked Scarlett vaguely, as if he were

waked out of a calculation. "Oh, the way out! We can't lose it. All we have to do is to keep close to the right-hand wall of the cave, and follow it back again. Come on!"

Halliday came on, sweating. He would have given much to have owned that the adventure was beyond him, but he would have been puzzled to explain why. The cave was just a cave. They had not even advanced very far in it, and he was ashamed to say the eeriness of it shook his nerve. He stumped in silence after Scarlett. As far as their light reached the place showed oddly clean; clean floor, clean sides, even a clean roof. Suddenly the latter seemed to run down and bar their way, leaving only a small opening between it and the floor, into which Scarlett first leaned with his lantern and then entered; for it was the beginning of a narrow passage. It ran down hill, slightly at first, then at an angle that would have taxed the men to keep their feet, if it had not been for the roughness of the way.

"Where in——" gasped Halliday—but he hastily substituted another word for the one on his tongue—"earth are we going to?"

There was no echo in the yard-wide passage, and Scarlett's voice came back normally.

"We're going down a ready-made shaft—and, as I live, I believe it's through the first bed-rock! We're pretty deep underground now, judging by the height of the hills these caves are in; and if I'm

right, the strata will soon tell us so. Keep your eye on the wall."

Halliday did no such thing, having stubbed his toe agonizingly. It was out of a mist of pain that he heard Scarlett's voice before and below him.

"There's muck here, if most of it hadn't been washed out clean," he exclaimed. "There'll probably be chambers and ramifications later, where it will show better. Now, if we get gravel, and then slide rock——"

His voice stopped as if he were choked. There was gravel under his feet; gravel slipping from the V-shaped sides of the passage with the jar of their passing; and, after the gravel, slide rock—cut through as with a chisel. It seemed to Scarlett that the natural tunnel descended through miles of it. It was with a shock that at last he felt a different surface under his feet, a different air on his face. It was now or never; and he stopped and swung up his lantern—to stand speechless. They had come down, absolutely, incredibly, to the second bed-rock; and out into a second cave!

It looked neither high nor wide, as it curved laterally in front of them; but it was not the shape of it that held Scarlett's eyes.

Before him lay what might have been any stope in any goldmine—if such a goldmine had ever been seen. Even at his ten yards' distance from it Scarlett could see the vein of gold from whence the

quartz had been cleared away—and, to his dazzled eyes, it ran anywhere from a man's wrist to his thigh in thickness—undulating like a yellow python along the rock wall. Halliday, standing behind him, heard him gulp.

"We've—made good," was all that Scarlett could say. Somehow he felt shocked. He had dreamed of gold; but not this. No man living had ever dreamed of this. He could not even realize that he would never be in need of money again as long as he lived. The place was so silent; their little light and themselves so small in it, down, Heaven knew how far, below the level of the lake outside. It was Halliday who first came to his senses.

"My soul," said he, trembling, "my soul!" He took a hammer out of his pocket, and moved shakily to the gold; tapped first tentatively, then exultantly, at the quartz round it. "By glory, it's honey-combed—rotten—easy!" he shouted. He flung up his hammer like a boy.

Scarlett made no answer, for something had startled him. In his very face was blowing a draught of fresh air. Real air, from outside. Could they have come through the very bowels of the mountain, to an opening on another valley? He stooped mechanically to see if the air blew harder along the floor, and kept on stooping till he had gathered up something in his hands that he held out to Halliday. It was nothing but unconsidered chip-pings from the vein—and that they should be un-

considered showed the awful richness of the place. But it was not their quality that the two men stared at.

"It's been worked," cried Halliday, "worked with tools! The whole stope's been *made*—and what I want to know is, *who by?* If there's any one here, and we're late——" He could not even finish the sentence for the rage that swelled his great bull neck. He cast a haggard eye on the gold, ready to fight for it.

"Shut up," said Scarlett practically, "the chips are ten years old!" But a shiver took even him. It must have been a good reason that could make a man go away and leave such chippings as those in his hands—and, as he thought it, his lantern flashed on something he had taken for a pile of rock.

It was not rock, though, as he stepped to it. It was the ruins of a home-made forge, where a man might even smelt at a pinch. Around its ruins lay a couple of picks, a hand-drill, and a crowbar; all dropped broadcast, as if some one had thrown them down to run. A quick conviction caught at Scarlett's soul.

"By George," said he, "it was true about the white man who got into Drowning Valley, and came out crazy! I always thought it was a lie. He was *here*; and he cleared out, from—something!"

Halliday gave one glance at the desolate, rusted

tools; one at the blackness about his head; and went straight back to his childhood, when a fear of ghosts had been ingrained into his very being.

“Golly,” he muttered, “come out! Let’s get out!”

CHAPTER IV

THE FALL OF A PEBBLE

IT seemed a bare hour they had spent underground, but the westering sun was already in Scarlett's eyes when he and Halliday emerged into the blessed daylight. Perhaps it dazzled him, for he stood in the cave's mouth hesitatingly, as if he saw neither the canoe nor the lake in front of him.

Halliday made no bones about his emotions. He sat down on the entrance ledge beside the canoe, unconscious that his feet dangled in the water.

"I'm kind of weak," he confessed. "You'll have to wait a little before I can even pick up that canoe. No, it ain't the belongings of that poor crazy man that's upset me—I guess I'd sooner have seen them than a live man's working outfit—it's the gold! I didn't believe there was that much gold in the world. I"—he perspired visibly in the late sunlight—"have got to get used to it. Why, there's enough there to—to—I don't know what," he ended, with lame incoherence.

"There is," Scarlett assented as placidly as if Halliday were talking sense. His face looked oddly young, and it was no wonder. The secret

responsibility that lay on him had left him with the sight of the gold which could make it a nothing; instead of a haunting, growing burden that galled him till it drew blood.

"There's no sense in trying to work that gold properly just now," he announced abruptly. "It is a mother-lode, if ever there was one in this world. It would take months and years to work it clean, and I can't afford them, if you can. My idea is to take out just what I can carry, have Sabiel guide me to the Janesville end of the valley with it, and arrange with the Janesville bank to forward an allowance to your kids and do some business for me. Then I can come back and settle down to a summer's work with an easy mind."

"If you can fix the bank about the selling," answered Halliday doubtfully, "without bringing people down on us."

"I think so! I'll tell you how when I've had some dinner. I am as hungry as a wolf."

Halliday woke from his trance with the word. "Gosh," he exclaimed, "so am I! I guess I needed a little bringing to, when I forgot that, and didn't know my feet were in the water, either." And the healthy grin returned to his face as he swung up his end of the canoe.

Sabiel, being an Indian, had no prejudices about mealtimes. Dinner and supper in one were ready when the expedition of two arrived on the safe side of the lake. It was not till even Halliday was con-

scious of a comfortable fullness that there was any conversation. Sabiel had never asked a question; only smiled contentedly at the look on Scarlett's changed face. His camp was as comfortable as though he had been there for weeks; and Scarlett suddenly remembered, with an odd sense of guilt, his unlucky predecessor in the dark and lonely caves opposite, who had had no Indian ally to come back to. He pulled some of his chiseled chips from his pocket, and recounted the tale of their discovery, with that of the rusted tools of a white man.

They were no news to Sabiel, who merely nodded. He explained briefly that he and some others had discovered that a white man was working in their forbidden caves, and that while they were wondering how to get rid of him the lake had saved them the trouble.

"It came up in a flood," said he. "In half a night, 'most in four hours, it rose. And there was no more trouble about that man carrying out gold—or talking! Most likely you find his bones, if you look a little further. We sat here, four of us, waiting, but he never came out when the water fell. His name was Burns."

"Gosh!" Halliday interrupted contemptuously. "That's all wrong! I know all about Burns. That man did get out, Sabiel! He used to be running round the country, choking crazy, till somebody got sorry for him and put him in the Toronto asylum. Burns's bones ain't in your cave."

"He never got out," said Sabiel obstinately.

"He must have—or how could he be in the asylum now? Unless there were two Burnses!"

But Sabiel was positive there had been only one; and he was not to be shaken on the fact of his drowning by the mention of any asylum. The conversation was getting warm, when Scarlett cut in.

"Hold hard a minute, Sabiel," he cried. "Isn't there any other way a man could get out of the cave except by the main entrance?"

"Not one! Plenty passages that go nowhere, but no way out. Supposing the water comes up quick,"—Scarlett had no need to suppose; he was too vividly conscious of the way a flood would tear down that dead slope of tunnel, and of how little above the lake level even the upper cave lay—"that man throws down his tools to climb somewhere, and perhaps he starves; perhaps he falls and drowns. But he can't get out: that flood stays too long!"

"Perhaps," assented Scarlett doubtfully. He had a sudden vivid memory of the astounding draught of fresh air that had blown in his face from out of the back of the lower cave. It must have come from outside, somewhere; which, plus the man in the asylum, equaled another outlet.

But there was no use in arguing about it with Sabiel. Scarlett put the matter aside, to be investigated on the first opportunity; for, from the viewpoint of a man who had to work in the caves,

it seemed reasonably important. Supposing anything in the way of an unexpected flood should happen; a back way out might mean such trifles as his life and Halliday's.

Yet, illogically enough, it was the whole of ten days before he so much as thought of it again. It was easy enough to get out the gold—too easy, for the honey-combed quartz crumbled at a touch. But it was a different thing to shape great gobbets of it into the ordinary looking gold which was all that Scarlett dared dispose of at any bank. The very size of the vein made him and Halliday stare at each other in despair. They had no mind to produce lumps of gold as big as a man's head to sell at any bank; to be first a nine days' wonder, and then a bait that would infallibly send other men out to find the fabulous mine it came out of, following Scarlett as hounds do a hare, if other ways failed. He and Halliday pounded and hammered over the problem. Finally, by the end of ten days' hard work, they produced a sufficient quantity of small gold for Scarlett to take to Janesville, with not one bit large enough to be conspicuous.

Scarlett sat down, as he threw the last piece of it into the bag he was to carry out of the valley.

"We've managed for now," said he. "But at this rate we'll never make our fortunes. We ought to smelt, and take in bars like any ordinary mine output. We haven't the time to work like this, let alone the worry of making the stuff look right.

We'll end by getting careless, and giving away the whole show. But once in bars, no one would be any the wiser about what size the gold had been; it might have been run together out of low-grade ore, for all they could tell."

Halliday wiped the perspiration from his face. In spite of the draught it was warm in the lower cave.

"There's the crazy man's forge," he suggested doubtfully. "I might kind of put that in working order while you're away."

"By George, I'd forgotten!" Scarlett really jumped. "No, I don't mean about the forge; I thought of that, but we hadn't time to play with it. My troubles aren't sitting still till I'm ready for them, if yours are. It was something else I forgot. Our predecessor, if he was Burns, must have got out of this place by some back way—and we ought to find it. It's all very well to have an Indian guardian angel sitting opposite, watching out for floods; but, by what I've gathered from his conversation and the landslidy look of the very ground he's sitting on, he might not have time to complete the guardian act. Then I imagine we'd require a back way out—and require it hurriedly. You could have a look round this place while I'm away; see where this fresh air draught comes from, and if there isn't some outlet round there!" He pointed to the black depths where the cave curved away from him.

"Me!" Halliday started in all his solid bulk,

"Not much," he said soberly. "You can bank on a good deal out of me, but not that. I've got used to this place and working in it. I don't feel so queer now about the first man having had to run for his life, now I know who he was, and I don't mind having a try to fix up his forge—but go one step alone beyond this cave is what I don't do! I—why, I couldn't!" He looked over at Scarlett with shamefaced honesty. "I'd be plain scared. I'd sooner run the risk of dying for want of another outlet, than die certain, looking for it."

Scarlett did not even smile. When Halliday owned to weakness he felt it.

"Well, you mend the forge, then," he responded. "I'll try to bring back what we shall need for it, though I'm not certain I can. I'll have provisions to carry, too."

"How are you going to manage, anyway?" Halliday felt some relief at leaving the subject of explorations.

"Tramp with Sabiel to some place he calls his home. He says he'll give me a horse there—I suppose it will be some miserable Indian pony, but it can carry the load, if it doesn't carry me—and that I'll find pretty open country from the end of Drowning Valley to the nearest post-road. As Sabiel explains it, the valley wheels round to the west, a little to the north of us, and directly at the end of it lies the road that runs from Tabeak to Janesville. I ought to come out just between the two."

"Well, I'd never have thought you could," said Halliday, "and neither would any man in Blaze Creek, or we should have heard of it. Tabeak, too! Let me see, didn't I hear there was some kind of a gold rush there last winter?"

Scarlett nodded. "I don't know how it turned out. Most of the men were just grub-staked prospectors for Blaze Creek people, but Sabiel says that some of them were doing fairly well this spring. They've taken out enough gold there, anyhow, to make people ask no questions when I take ours to Janesville to sell. All Tabeak has to go there; for they've no bank, praise Heaven, or it might look peculiar for me to be selling in Janesville. As it is, I fancy I can manage it, without telling any lies about coming from Tabeak, or letting out where I do come from, either."

"You'll have to bring in stores," commented Halliday. "I suppose you don't want me to come, too!"

"Better not." Scarlett might make light of getting in and out of Drowning Valley unnoticed; but, combined with the selling of his gold, it was going to be a ticklish business, best done alone.

They had no legal right to a claim they dared not register; it was stolen gold, as far as the non-payment of government royalties went; and if Scarlett were traced back into the valley, could only be defended like other stolen goods. Besides, at the first sign of a white man's rush the Indians would

probably rise up in a body to turn them out, and inevitably wreak vengeance on Sabiel as a traitor. But of none of these contingencies did Scarlett mean to think till they occurred.

"You make a list of all you want," he said, "and I'll bring back as much of it as I can."

"If I made a list of all I wanted, now I've money to pay for it, it'd be five miles long," retorted Halliday. "Scarlett, I wake up in the night to hug myself when I remember all we can have when we're done here! I can drive my kids to school in an automobile, and you—well, I suppose you'll be getting married!"

"Married!" Scarlett's handsome jaw fell. "What put that into your head? I never saw the woman I wanted to be tied to."

Halliday chuckled. "Sure sign you're going to. Why, for all you know, she may be waiting for you round the first corner on the Janesville road!"

"She'll wait, then," returned Scarlett forcibly. "If you want my opinion about marrying, there's a proverb that says 'It's nothing to fly; the trouble is to light,' and I never saw the man yet who'd lit when he married. Besides, I've got too much on my shoulders already," and a scowl darkened his smooth face.

Halliday stared. "It's not natural at your age to talk about women like that," he said curiously. "What's set you against them?"

"The load I've carried for five years, if you

must know." It came out through set teeth, and Scarlett's only oath followed it. "If you want to talk, talk about the gold," he added blackly. "I've seen enough of women and marriages to keep me from thinking about either as long as I live!"

And the outburst was so unlike him that Halliday hastily changed the subject.

"You'll think I'm an ass," he began vaguely, "but that chap who worked here before us is on my mind. We're not paying any license or anything, and if he's still in the Toronto asylum it kind of lies on me that we ought to do something for him to square our account for this," with a backward nod at the gold their unlucky predecessor had done little more than see.

"I thought of that." Scarlett lifted the gold he was to carry to Janesville in the morning. "We're profiting by the work he did here. But the only thing we can do for the poor chap is to put him into the most expensive asylum we can find, as I put my——" But he caught the comparison up unspoken. "There's time enough to see to that when we're sure we're coming out better than he did," he said roughly. "We can't be shouldering all the crazy people in the world. Come along out of this: there's not much left in the lantern."

Usually Halliday would have taken to his heels at the bare mention of being left in the dark; but now his mind was elsewhere. He was shrewd in

a way, and Scarlett's outburst about women and asylums had startled him.

"So that's it," he thought abstractedly. "He's got a crazy wife somewhere, and I was a fool not to guess it before! No wonder he's haggard, and kind of sore on the bit. Poor old Red!" He had half a mind to put his conjecture into words, but the sight of Scarlett's vanishing back did not encourage conversation; and in the next second, with a gulp of pure superstitious terror, Halliday had totally forgotten all affairs but his own.

A light—an unmistakable, inappropriate light—had flashed out from the darkness of the hole in which the cave ended. It was gone almost before he saw it; but it had been there. Corpse-candles were the only things Halliday thought of: there could be no human light in that place. He bolted like a hare after Scarlett, and not till he was out in the upper air did he even realize that what had turned his eyes to the light had been the fall of a pebble against his boot.

"Gosh," he gasped, in relief, "I guess that means there wasn't any light at all! I just snapped my eyes round on the dark too soon after I'd been staring at the lantern."

And he was too sheepish about the childishness of his scare even to mention it to Scarlett.

CHAPTER V

THE JANESVILLE ROAD

SCARLETT, convoyed by Sabiel, started bright and early for Janesville. There was exhilaration in such an errand, especially on a fine spring morning. Sometimes their pathway left the lake altogether, sometimes ran close to it; but the deviations were merely for practical reasons, concerning bogs or tracts of deadfalls.

Sabiel explained carelessly that the Indians kept well behind the ridge that separated them from the main valley, and that till Scarlett should come out on the post-road to Janesville he need take no precautions against being seen. They kept steadily west, it seemed to Scarlett, and for the most part the way they took was practicable for pack-ponies. He remarked upon it with some surprise.

Sabiel nodded. "You best buy two pack-ponies if you can," he advised briefly. "You and I lead 'em in easy enough. My horse"—he dwelt on the word with pride—"you leave at my house where you get him—when you come back from Janesville."

Scarlett reflected dismally on the kind of horse

it was likely to be; but there would be no refusing it without offending Sabiel, and perhaps losing the gold. He pulled up in stark surprise as Sabiel, going crab-like up a steep rise, halted abruptly and pointed. Below them lay a stretch of long, smooth intervales—fresh with young grass, and skirted by Indian willows with heavy hardwood behind them.

“My horse is there,” Sabiel said in Indian, “just beyond, where this meadow curves round, and you can’t see. After you get him you ride perhaps five miles, perhaps seven, and you come out on the white man’s road.”

“But—then it’s no distance from where we’re camping!” exclaimed Scarlett. “I don’t see why you haven’t been flooded with prospectors long ago.” In one way he was pleased at the short distance between himself and a road, but in another he was worried.

Sabiel laughed. “Because this end is not called Drowning Valley, just plain Indian Valley,” he observed succinctly. “Nobody at Janesville ever heard of gold here. Any gold that white men ever saw went out the Blaze Creek way—the way that no one can find that doesn’t know it. Nobody, that’s going to tell, knows you can go clear through the valley to Janesville—they think it runs north—to hills no one can climb. You keep careful watch on yourself, though,” with a warning relapse into English. “Look sharp no one sees you go out or tracks you in. If they do, you got to lose them,

somehow. See?" He looked at Scarlett anxiously.

"I'll lose them, somehow;" the assent was grim. "I have no more use for outsiders in Drowning Valley than you have. But I expect I can manage safely enough. Janesville will think I'm from Tabreak, and Tabreak won't know anything about me. I've lived too long not to know how to get rid of people I may meet on the road. What's the way now?"

Sabiel motioned down the intervale, and the two struck boldly through the center of it. In places it was marsh, with wild flowers thick in it—scentless violets in the dry places, and sweet white ones where the water sucked under their feet. The sun baked them comfortably out of a softly blue sky, and Scarlett, for the first time in years, smelt the full savor of the spring. It was like coming alive to be walking free in it, with his cares so nearly off his shoulders. He stooped for a handful of violets. Sabiel, looking at him, put a hand on his arm.

"Spring is for spring flowering," said he indulgently, in drawling Indian. But there did not come into Scarlett's head the least echo of what he meant. Flowers had signified neither love nor women to him this many a long day.

As they walked up the intervale they came on half a dozen Indian ponies in fair condition. One of them was not a bad beast, but just as Scarlett was about to say so Sabiel pointed ahead of them.

56 Out of Drowning Valley

"My house," said he. "Nice place, don't you think?"

Scarlett stared at a neat house of log and plaster, two barns, and a stack of hay only half used. The only Indian home he could compare it with was one on a pattern reserve.

"Do you all live like this in Drowning Valley?" he asked involuntarily.

"Most," with a carelessness that covered pride. "Some not."

The small, sun-flooded clearing was very silent. Scarlett was not surprised to find the house empty, having had a good guess the day before that Sabiel had gone home to clear its occupants out of the way; but he was not to remain unsurprised for long. His host led the way to a small corral behind a barn; and as he came in full sight of it Scarlett really jumped.

There was a horse in it. Since his cowboy days Scarlett had never seen anything like that horse; and not often then.

It was a buckskin and fiddle-headed; but putting those two things aside, its thoroughbred strain showed plain. Yet there was a tough, capable look about it that never belonged to any thoroughbred. It turned a sensible eye on Sabiel, plunged at sight of Scarlett, and trotted round the corral with its head up. Scarlett broke out in rapture:

"You don't mean to say you bred that!"

"Yes! Old mare I have his mother; best

Indian pony his father. That why he not tall."

The horse stood under fifteen hands; but in build and shape he was more than equal to carrying Scarlett, and the latter marveled to see him so gentle. Even the novel sight of a white man seemed to cause him no agitation. It was not till long afterwards that Scarlett knew he had never had an unkind hand on him in his life. As he swung himself up into the saddle he laughed aloud with sheer pleasure at being on such a horse.

There was no trail from Sabiel's house to the road. He gave Scarlett a point to steer for along a second natural meadow, and the buckskin moved off over the short spring grass in an easy lope. Charles Edgerley Scarlett, commonly known as Red, could have shouted aloud with exultation at being at last on the way out of Drowning Valley with his gold—and instead, stuck his fingers down into Sabiel's old saddle till he found the wooden dees—for a thought had come to his uplifted soul which brought it down with a run.

"I'd better touch wood," he muttered, "instead of making an ass of myself! If I'd had any sense, I'd have been down on my marrowbones, praying for some sort of trouble, ever since I laid eyes on the Drowning Valley gold. The whole thing has been too easy—ever since we got rid of that weak-kneed Frenchman whose ear I nicked! There's bad luck waiting for me somewhere, as sure as my

name's Scarlett. No one ever pulled off a thing like the Drowning Valley gold without some kind of a set-back; and if we haven't had them all along, it's because they've been saving up for us. I suspect that from now on is about the time I had better keep my eyes open for Old Man Trouble."

Even if he had been obliged to put up with the usual half-starved Indian pony, it might have been a good omen; but he could not find it in his heart to regret the buckskin. He pulled out an old cap he had borrowed from Halliday, and put it on. He had made himself a marked man in Blaze Creek by never wearing hat or cap, and there was no sense in repeating it at Janesville. Then he steadied his horse to a walk, and cast scrutinizing eyes on the country in front of him.

The intervale kept on, Sabiel had told him, for about three miles, when the fording of a small stream would bring him into a rough pasture full of cattle-paths, any one of which debouched into the post-road. It was there that he must be careful. Yet Red Scarlett, usually reckless, was careful long before he drew near the road. The pasture was the half-cleared wilderness in which country cattle are supposed to pick up a living; a maze of trodden grazing-tracks between boulders and alder thickets. A place where two men might ride within shouting distance of each other and one of them never be seen, if that one were on his guard.

Scarlett calculated just how useful the place

would be if he were followed. Leading the buckskin, and taking advantage of the almost ceaseless cover, it would be a clever pursuer who should catch sight of him. As for plain tracking—he looked up with a laugh as he sighted a bunch of Indian ponies walking sedately down a side path. The buckskin was unshod, as they were, and small-footed besides; it would be no easy matter to pick out his trail from that of any other pony that ranged the place. As he thought it, unexpectedly, and by a quick turn of the cow-path, he saw before him the highroad to Janesville.

Red, narrow, and very dry, it lay in plain sight, and he drew aside behind a clump of spruces to investigate it. As far as he could see, it was absolutely empty; just a newly made, rather bad, country road, from one mining camp to another. Scarlett got off the buckskin, and led him carefully down a bare rock to the road. Once again his spirits gave a downward jolt at the ease with which he was getting out of Drowning Valley unobserved. There was nothing before him now but the twenty-five plain miles to Janesville; and as he started on them Scarlett sighed.

He might have been more comfortable about his ominous good luck if he had known two things concerning that bare road that stretched from Tabeak to Janesville.

First, Halliday had been right in saying Scarlett could never be inconspicuous. He passed but one

house on the way to Janesville; an ordinary road-house, with not a soul stirring about it; but he did not pass even that one house unseen. From behind a half-open door a girl watched him go by. The sun was full on him, sitting easy and somehow splendid on the buckskin; an exotic figure on the Janesville road. The girl who stood in the door noticed the long limbs, the bronze throat, the careless, clean-eyed face of the man who did not see her; took in even his canvas clothes and Halliday's old cap; unconsciously perhaps, but to remember again.

The second thing was that, just five miles behind the pasture from which Scarlett had emerged, an insignificant-looking Frenchman, with a nick out of his right ear, swore as he abandoned a worn-out pony to die by the roadside and began to trudge onward towards Janesville. But while he swore his eyes were everywhere, on every gully and track that came out of the wilderness on the left-hand side of the Janesville road. He was not used to riding, and he had ridden hard and fast to circle Drowning Valley since Scarlett had seen him at the other end of it, which might have been the reason that he walked on very slowly, and, by degrees, hesitantly. As he passed the pasture from which Scarlett had emerged nearly two hours before, he cast no glance at it: a gully, or at least a depression, would show where Drowning Valley led through to the Janesville road. He dallied at several likely-

looking hollows that led nowhere; but it was not till he came to a whitewashed roadhouse, standing alone with its yard and stables on the edge of the wilderness road, that the Frenchman stopped.

On leaving Tabeak, his mind had been set on getting to Janesville; but, after all, it was not Janesville he wanted to watch so much as the Janesville road. This was the only house on the whole twenty miles between him and the raw little town—if they had told him the truth in Tabeak. Ba'tiste Sabarin turned into its dooryard and limped over to a tall, blue-eyed girl who sat on the house-steps, just about the same time that Scarlett opened the swing-door of the Janesville bank.

CHAPTER VI

“EDGERLEY”

IT was more like a room than a bank, except for the orthodox counter and wire gratings. Scarlett, with a perfunctory inquiry as to the manager's seeing him, walked to the door at the end of the newly built place; and, at the indefinite voice that answered his knock, walked in—and stood paralyzed.

He knew the man who turned from his desk to stare at him! Only where and how he had known him would not come to him. Senselessly, the thought smote him that it had been in New York: that he knew all about him. He had a dreamy memory of having faced him at meals. If the bank manager had been a boarder in the house from which Scarlett had been taken away it was no wonder the man stared at him with puzzled surprise. If, so far, he had kept his shameful secret of Sing Sing even from Halliday, plenty of outside people knew it; but he had not been prepared to come across one of them in Janesville.

Mechanically Scarlett stiffened himself to face recognition, as he had faced it before he came back to the country where no man knew the blank in his history—and, like a knife in his side, remembered

the gold he had come to sell! If he so much as mentioned it, now, he might be held up for stealing his own gold. There would be searching inquiries as to his claim, its location, his partners—none of which he could dare to answer, if the secret of Drowning Valley was to be kept. His thoughts flashed through his head with such speed that he hardly realized there had been a blank pause till the bank manager spoke.

"Well," he exclaimed, "I couldn't believe it was you! How are you? I suppose you've come from Tabreak, since there isn't anywhere else to come from—but you did give me a shock, Edgerley!"

Edgerley! It was all Scarlett could do not to repeat it aloud. The name had relaxed every muscle in his body, as the sight of the manager's face had turned them rigid. He knew now where he had known the man; and he had nothing to do with New York. His name was Harris, and he had been a bank clerk in the little Canadian town where Scarlett had gone after his release from prison. He had never liked the man; but his personality was a heavenly relief after what he had expected.

"I'd like to say I looked you up, Harris," he returned quite easily, "but I never dreamed the bank had moved you here. How are you?"

"Pretty dull." Harris advanced to shake hands. "How did you leave the townships?"

"I left them over two years ago," said Scarlett slowly. That short-lived stay in the townships of

Quebec had been his one effort to make an honest living in the East, after his release from Sing Sing.

His own name had stunk in his nostrils then, and he had gone by his second one of Edgerley. When, in desperation, he had drifted back West to mine, the change was impossible; and useless besides. People who had known him as Scarlett the cowboy accepted him carelessly as Scarlett the nothing at all; but this was the first time he had ever met any one who had known him as Edgerley. He was hesitating what to say when Harris took all choice from him.

With the fine carelessness of successful merit, he embarked on the history of the newly established bank at Janesville, and the confidence of his directors in sending him out to start it.

"Though I'd have got out of it, if I could have imagined anything that was even *like* Janesville," he concluded. "As for business! I've been sitting here for two months, and——" He paused abruptly, not being the fool he looked.

"I've come on it, anyhow," Scarlett answered the pause. "I brought in my clean-up to see what the bank thought of it. I never imagined finding you!"

He upset his bag of gold on Harris's table, and Harris gasped in spite of himself.

"By Jove, that's something like gold!" he exclaimed. He handled the carefully broken pieces scrutinizingly, till Scarlett had a horrid wonder if

he would see how some of them fitted together like the bits of a puzzle. "If that's Tabeak, Tabeak's better than I thought," he commented, with an envious laugh. His salary, as bank manager, was twelve hundred dollars a year.

"It's from farther up the district than Tabeak," returned Scarlett; and if it were misleading it was true. "I came in to see if you'd buy it."

"What's it assay?"

Scarlett told him—with the rider that he supposed Harris had a tame assayer of his own in Janesville, and that he would prefer to abide by his tests. He had a few things to see to; Harris could settle what his gold was worth by to-morrow night or so, and let him know.

He had brought in no more than any fairly successful miner might; and, looking at Harris's face, he saw that he had done wisely. A real showing of what he could have got out of his mine would have started the whole of Janesville on a rush for claims surrounding his, with the smug bank manager at the head of them.

He stood by till his gold was weighed, and the receipt for it in his hand. It was made out to Charles Edgerley, but Scarlett was too relieved to have it made out without questions to care. It could be of no possible consequence, anyhow; unless Harris ran on him in the company of some one who knew him as Scarlett, and he was unlikely to do that. At the present moment, he was well out

of the ticklish business of getting rid of the Drowning Valley gold. He had no scruples about not enlightening Harris as to his proper name. The man had never been a friend of his.

Yet curiously, unaccountably, Scarlett did not know whether to swear at himself for a fool or not, when he found himself once more on the plank sidewalk of Janesville's only street. If he had known just what was to hang on his acceptance of that name of Edgerley he might have gone straight back to the bank and said flatly that he was Red Scarlett, who had been in Sing Sing, sooner than have chanced it.

As it was, he hung about Janesville, making himself as inconspicuous as possible, and trusting he would run against no one who knew him. It was true that he had things to do, but until Harris paid him for his gold he had no money to do them with. He had picketed the buckskin in a secluded meadow outside the town, lest he should attract attention, and a visit to him reminded Scarlett to find out the price of a couple of pack-ponies, and to ascertain just what, in the way of outfit and stores, Janesville was prepared to supply to put on them. That, with enduring an evening visit from Harris, with endless questions to parry, made up his day. After it, Scarlett was thankful to retire to bed.

The morning was easy, as he had known all along it would be easy. The assayer's results were practically the same as his own.

He received, in exchange for his gold, three thousand, two hundred and four dollars; half of which he banked in Halliday's name, arranging with Harris for the payment of a certain monthly sum out of it to Halliday's children at home. For part of his own share he bought one draft of imposing size, payable to a certain Lakewood sanatorium. Four three-figure notes Scarlett enclosed in a borrowed envelope directed to Mrs. Sophia Scarlett, at the same address that his draft bore. The rest of his money he bestowed about his person, and left the bank treading on air.

For the first time in five years he had not a worry to his name. As he dropped his two letters into the Janesville post office he never even thought it might be awkward if they brought answers not addressed to Charles Edgerley. Neither the Mrs. Scarlett to whom he had sent money, nor her keepers, were likely to write: since he was nothing but a source of supply to both of them. Care-free, he strolled up the street, and with the cheerful consciousness of ready cash in his pocket proceeded to stock up for Drowning Valley, dismissing all outside interests as business settled, and comfortably secure that for six months at least he would not need to think of any woman.

Yet, twenty miles off, a woman—or at least a girl—was thinking of him. Though, oddly enough, she did not know it!

CHAPTER VII

THE "ETHEL-GIRL"

OVER at the roadhouse the girl who had watched Scarlett ride by was managing it alone, except for a deaf old woman. It was only a house of call by accident: having been a backwoods farm before the gold fever set in at Tabeak. Even now guests were scarce; so scarce that Jim Welsh, its owner and the girl's uncle, a weak, kindly man more often muddled than sober, had gone off to Tabeak and taken his hired man with him to fetch home the whiskey he could not live without, in easy confidence that his niece would "get along" till his return.

She had got along, somehow; but looking after three horses and ten cows was heavy work. She was sitting on her doorstep in listless fatigue when the travel-worn Frenchman limped up to her and humbly requested board and lodging in return for any kind of work.

He did not look like a particularly valuable aid, but his answers to her few questions were truthful enough. His name was Ba'tiste Sabarin; he had come a long way; and he was tired. The girl let him stay, with placid kindness. The district was a

rough one, but women who live in lonely places seldom have any fears. Athol Gray certainly never thought of any in connection with an undersized Frenchman; yet he had not been about the place an hour before she found herself watching him—and as she did it she frowned.

The man was not like the ordinary tramp who does slipshod work with ostentation in return for his three meals a day. He did nothing; and he did it at the gate on the Tabeak road, hardly tearing himself away to eat.

The girl found him curious at first, then sinister. She was no fool, and the thought that grew on her that the man was not there for any good reason clenched to conviction when she rose the next morning to find the stock unfed and the Frenchman again glued to the gate, with his eyes fastened on the empty country road. Athol Gray stood unseen in the stable door and regarded him with interest.

"If he's running away from anything I'd help him, if he'd tell me about it," she mused, "but he looks far more as though he were expecting some one; and I don't think I want any more of his kind about the place while Uncle Jim's away! I believe I'll tell him to go."

She was moving to the gate to do it when she saw the man's head go up, as if he came to attention; and unconsciously came to attention herself. There were horses coming down the road. With an un-girlish frown Miss Gray decided that if her house

were to be used as a rendezvous it was her business to know why. She slipped noiselessly behind the absorbed Frenchman, and into a clump of spruces that commanded the road. She was barely out of sight there before the creak and jingle of a string of led horses stopping unexpectedly was within two yards of her. Two men at the head of them pulled up with a jerk.

"What are you doing *here?*" snapped one of them at the Frenchman, and Athol Gray did not like his voice. "I thought we'd never catch up to you! Seen him?"

"No," the Frenchman mumbled. "But it's too soon."

"Too soon!" The other swore. "You'll find it's too soon if you have made a mess of it here, like you did when Eldon sent you into Drowning Valley after Scarlett. How long have you been here, anyhow?"

The second sentence would have been a thunderbolt to Scarlett had he heard it, and coupled it with Halliday's story of Eldon's grudge against him; though, even so, he might have searched in vain for reason in Eldon's enmity. But to the girl who listened it meant nothing, even when the voice of the man on the second horse interrupted in corroboration, before the Frenchman could answer.

"Hold hard, Inkster," it ordered coldly. "It was me sent Sabarin to follow Scarlett when I heard him planning about his sneak-thief gold business; not

you; and I guess he's right. It is too early to look for Scarlett here. I'd sooner be waiting for him, anyhow, than have him waiting for me. I'd as lief be behind him." And he whistled softly.

Athol Gray very nearly whistled, too, but with relief. Ba'tiste's friends had not come to bother her; they were merely talking about a man she had never heard of. She was on the point of openly strolling away when Inkster's voice began again about something she had heard of, as he asked Sabarin a string of questions about the roadhouse—if it were square or crooked, and who kept it.

"Nobody's here but a girl," returned the Frenchman scornfully. "I'm working for her while the old man's away! Ethel, or something, her name is."

"Good little Ethel, she's a real convenience," Eldon chuckled. "I guess you couldn't have a better place to watch for Scarlett than at Ethel's! I believe I'll leave you here."

Behind the spruces the blood of the so-called Ethel boiled. She was not going to be a convenience to any man, above all a useless, sponging Frenchman, and two disreputable friends. Suddenly she was determined to find out what their business was with the man they called Scarlett. But for a long moment the three were silent.

"We can't miss Scarlett," Eldon said at last. "He's got to come out of Drowning Valley to sell the gold Sabarin heard him and Halliday shouting

about the day he got away from them, and he won't go to Tabeak. Janesville bank's his happy home, if what he told Halliday is true. But it won't do for us to be settling down at this place to wait for him: Sabarin's enough here. We'll go into camp some place where we'll be handy, when Scarlett does turn up. He won't have any horse, likely, and it'll be easy enough to trail him into his precious valley. Once he gets in," and the pause was sinister, "I bet he'll stay there. I've got it in for Scarlett, let alone getting hold of his gold. Mind now, Sabarin," with sudden crispness, "you don't want him to see you, and get scared off going to Janesville! You'll be done, from now, with making a show of yourself over this gate. What we've got to do is to get after Scarlett when he's coming *from* Janesville, and fix him then!"

"Fix him!" Inkster swore. "There'd be no sense in killing him till we got onto his mine! It's the gold I'm after him for. What's the matter with you about the man himself?"

Athol peered through the bushes to see what the speakers looked like. Inkster she hardly glanced at: he was leaden-faced, heavy-handed, and scowling; but at Eldon she stared. He was colorlessly good-looking, with a small fair mustache that did not hide his mouth. He seemed a mere boy beside Inkster, and a quiet boy at that, of whom she would never have had a suspicious thought if she had not happened to overhear his conversation.

Suddenly, she changed her mind about his face. His string of horses was leg-weary, in bad condition, and over-loaded, and as a couple of them happened to fidget Eldon turned and lashed them savagely with a murderous whip. Athol Gray saw his eyes as he did it: cold, old, and wicked. It was a small thing to make a girl determine to block whatever game the man had on hand, but it did. She did not lose a word, as Eldon turned on Inkster as savagely as he had on his horses.

"What have I got against Scarlett?" he snarled. "It was he cleared out Henshaw's gang five years ago, if you don't know it! If he didn't get the man behind them I was d—d well ruined—and I've Scarlett to thank for it. I guess I'm going to wipe out that score in Drowning Valley one day soon. It'll be our gold then, and no questions asked—for there'll be no one to ask them."

"Halliday is with him," the Frenchman observed.

"Halliday deserves all he'll get, too," returned Eldon coolly. "And he'll cut no ice, once Scarlett's done with this life. Come on out of this! Scarlett may be along any time, and it won't suit me to be seen blocking up his thoroughfare. Sabarin, you come along and show us somewhere to lie in the woods there," he pointed down the Janesville road, "and then go back to working for your Ethel-girl—till Scarlett goes by, and you're good and ready to leave her!"

"You're sure you'll know him again?" demanded

Inkster. "Duck coat, no hat—they say no one ever saw him in one—and——"

Sabarin cut him off fiercely. "Know him? By *gar*, I know all of him! His *sacré* bare head, his gun that nicked my ear, and his hands that tied me up with ropes. Do I know Scarlett?"

Eldon laughed. "Ropes were good," said he. "How many rope knots can you get out of, Ba'tiste?"

"All that ever were tied," dryly. "I make some little living at shows that way, sometimes. But Scarlett don't know that!"

"He may be here to know everything if we don't get out," said Eldon curtly. "I didn't send you dogging him into Drowning Valley and let you off when you made a hash of following him there, to be seen talking to you now. You come and show us a good place to camp while we wait for him. It'll be waiting for you, instead, mind, if he never comes, and you've lied about the valley leading out on this road!"

The threat was evil, but the Frenchman only smiled securely. He led the outfit down the road towards Janesville, but he did not lead it far. The Ethel-girl stood up and marked just where it turned into the woods, before she slipped back to her house. If she had not been stung by being called "the Ethel-girl" and made a convenience of by men who ill-treated horses, it might not have dawned on her, with vehemence, that she had anything to do with

strange men's quarrels. As it was, she stood for ten minutes in her own room, looking blankly at the dressing-glass without seeing her own face in it.

"If I can manage it," said she very softly, "the Ethel-girl is going to be a convenience that will work backwards. I don't know anything about those men's 'Scarlett'; but if he's one degree less vile than they are I'll stop him when he goes by, and warn him against them. If only I knew what they meant by Drowning Valley I'd go straight there to do it—but I never heard of the place! I don't see anything I really *can* do, except send away the Frenchman and watch the road for him myself."

Oddly enough, it no more dawned on her than it had on Eldon that Scarlett had already gone by to Janesville; nor did she connect him with the man on the buckskin. If she had, she would have started then and there for Janesville to warn him not to come back by the post road. But the only thought she had was that there was going to be murder done—mean murder—from ambush—and for robbery; and that from somewhere down the Janesville road a man was going to walk straight into a trap laid for him. She arraigned herself to the mirror pitilessly.

"And you're such a fool, Athol Gray, that you don't know how to stop it," said she. "But—you can try!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE ROADHOUSE

IT was not till nightfall that Scarlett saw fit to start on his return journey to Drowning Valley. He bade farewell to his friend, Mr. Harris, with a firm resolve not to avail himself again of his bank, unless it were absolutely necessary. Janesville was too apt to be visited by his late friends in Blaze Creek to make it wise to be known there as Edgerley, and Scarlett was glad to get out of it without meeting any one who knew his face. He whistled as he left the town, picked up the buckskin from his secluded pasture, and rode after his two pack-ponies up the Janesville road.

He met not one human soul, and the first fifteen miles slipped by. At the sixteenth it began to rain; prodigal spring rain, with a chill in it for a man who could not hurry laden horses. At the seventeenth the second pack-pony, which happened to be a chestnut with two white legs, gave out. It was either exhausted or sick; Scarlett thought a good deal of both. He transferred most of its load to the buckskin, and after a while the small cavalcade crawled on again; this time with no whistling. Scarlett,

leading the sick pony, knew that no matter what ailed it he could never make Sabiel's stable that night, and he had quixotic prejudices about leaving a beast to die in the rain.

"I'd sooner shoot it, and be done," he thought. And he did not dream that his too easy good luck was holding still, as he put his hand on his gun and withdrew it again, just as he passed a thicket of willows on the twentieth mile. The thought had come to him that, even without an ailing horse, the darkness was so thick now that he was as likely as not to muddle his way through the many-trailed pasture to Sabiel's, and that on his way to Janesville he had passed a house; a lonely-looking house, too, where there should be small danger of meeting any one.

"It ought to be somewhere about here," he reflected, staring at the woods that lay black on each side of the road. "I can't miss it, anyhow, since it's the only house on the road."

As he thought it he lifted his eyes to the highway in front of him, and was aware of a light; low, and at his left hand.

"Hurrah," cheered Scarlett soundlessly; for there was no question now about getting the sick pony any farther that night. From the sodden skies had burst a sudden roaring downpour of rain, rustling and clicking like shot on the mire of the road and on Scarlett's canvas coat. It did not dawn on him that the noise of it was the only thing answerable for the safety of himself and his horses, as,

holding his unlucky pack-pony by the head and softly dragging it, he passed the last bush of willows between him and the light.

If he had known the Frenchman sat in camp behind it, and in what company, he might have done differently; but all his thoughts were set on getting to that light in front of him before it went out. He said hurrah again when he reached it, and saw it was not in the house, but in the stable.

A lantern hung inside the open door, sending a welcome oblong of yellow light out into the streaming rain; but it intensified the dark as well. Scarlett, feeling for the fastening of the gate, all but sat down in the wet road. The buckskin, shying violently, did sit down; and picked himself up again as a figure appeared suddenly from somewhere and stood between him and the light.

To Scarlett's surprise it was a girl. She wore a man's slicker, and a sou'wester crammed down over her eyes, but she was a girl all the same. She said nothing. In the dead silence, broken only by the sound of the horses' breathing and the rushing rain, Scarlett had a curious impression of cold hostility in the stare he could feel more than see. He had time for the sharp thought that there was no reason that a girl might not be a sentinel as well as any one else, and that the Janesville road might not be as safe as it had seemed, before she spoke.

"What do you want?" she demanded: and her hand slipped to the pocket of her slicker. It struck

Scarlett, with what afterwards he knew to be the cold truth, that she took him for some one else; and he replied hastily:

"I'm from Janesville. I wouldn't bother you so late, only that I have a sick horse. I wanted to stable him for the night."

At his voice Athol Gray started.

"Janesville," she repeated with quick relief. "I—I beg your pardon. Till you spoke I thought you were some one else—in the dark!"

There was no need to tell a perfect stranger she had taken him for Eldon, come down with some of his horses to make more use of the Ethel-girl, who had so conveniently afforded a point of vantage for his Frenchman; nor that, thinking him Eldon, she had been weak with fright lest he might have guessed what she was about, watching the Janesville road in the dark. It had seemed to her the only way she could help the unknown Scarlett. All day long she had been at the gate as she was now, but no one had passed. This was only the man she had seen ride by to Janesville two days ago, so there was no use in asking him questions about one who must come from the Tabeak end of the road; but one slipped out involuntarily:

"You didn't meet any one, did you?"

"Not a soul," Scarlett answered absently, getting his ponies through the gate. "Why? Were you expecting any one?"

"Not exactly," She frowned, but he did not see

it. "You've come from the wrong end of the road to have met them, anyhow. Bring your horses in. There's room for them." She took the buckskin by the bridle and led him indoors. Scarlett saw her mouth pucker compassionately as she looked at the sick pony. "He's pretty bad," she commented. "If you'll get to work on him, I'll see to the others."

"You can't," returned Scarlett forbiddingly. He hated to see women at men's work.

The girl laughed. "I've done it for three days for my own," she said carelessly. "My uncle's in Tabeak, and the only man I have is no use. Are you going to stop here for the night yourself?"

Scarlett nodded. He had not meant to stay, but the knowledge that it had not been he the girl was waiting for at the gate, combined with the wet and the dark, had decided him that there was no sense in going on. It suited his book, too, that the man of the house was away: there would be less notice taken of him. He began to dry off the sick pony, and before he was half done was aware of the girl at his elbow with an old blanket, and a bucket of something that steamed.

"I think he's more worn out than anything," she said doubtfully. "You might try this for him—there's ginger in it! I'll give it to him if you'll unload the other pack. I've seen to the buckskin."

"You didn't unload him?" Scarlett glanced at her in surprise; but she had turned away.

"The things were light," she answered carelessly. "I can't lift the others, though."

It struck Scarlett that for a girl she was oddly grave and businesslike. If she had to do a man's work she had done it well, for the two horses already in the stable were neatly bedded down, and the whole place specklessly clean. Having no particular reason to believe in women, Scarlett might not have thought that she had done it, if he had not chanced to turn and see she had dried off the buckskin as well as he could have done it himself. After that he had no time for thoughts: the pack-pony was too sick.

Yet Athol Gray, flashing in and out of the stable with hot blankets and helping Scarlett like a man, was thinking hard; and listening hard, too, for a sound outside or down the road. If only this man were Scarlett, instead of just the stranger she had seen ride by to Janesville two days ago, how easy it would have been to warn him! But she supposed Scarlett, if he ever turned up to be warned, would be of the same stamp as Eldon, or little better. It was on her tongue to ask him if he had ever heard of a man called Scarlett, when a slight sound from the stableyard made her start.

It was a step, and it passed; quick and furtive, Athol Gray moved sharply to the door; but if she had been going to call some one she thought better of it. The passer-by was Sabarin. She had had no chance to dismiss him, since he was only now re-

turning from Eldon's camp down the road. A queer thought came over the girl that Sabarin's passing the lighted stable without even the curiosity to look in, was a sign that Providence did not mean him to see who was there. And the next moment she shrugged her shoulders at her own foolishness.

Whoever the man was who was working so hard to save his pony, it could not be Scarlett. Inkster had said he never wore a hat; and she had noticed this man's cap as he rode by in the morning sun—just as she was noticing it now.

"That was my man, sneaking by to bed," she said, coming back to Scarlett. "He's been away paying a visit all day, and he has never done any work since I took him on. I'm going to send him off to-morrow."

Scarlett only nodded. If she had said the man was a Frenchman whom she had taken in for charity, it might have set him thinking: but he had forgotten the Frenchman. The two worked on in silence, till at last Athol drew back against the stall with a sigh of weariness.

"Don't you think he'll do now?" she asked, pointing to the sick horse. "I do. He's standing quite well."

Scarlett looked round to answer, and what he saw surprised him. The stable was warm, and the girl had been working hard. She pulled off the sou'wester that had half hidden her face, and stood returning Scarlett's glance as unconsciously as a boy

—and she was beautiful! Somehow Scarlett had never expected her to be beautiful; he was confused—for Red Scarlett—as he answered:

“I think he’s saved; thanks to you, principally.” He said it as matter-of-factly as he could. He had never thought a girl’s face could make his heart turn over in him. “I’d no right to let you work over him. I’m ashamed of it, even while I’m more than grateful.”

“It wasn’t anything: I’m used to horses. I’d only just fed and bedded down when you came. I was going to bed, when I found my man hadn’t done it. I’m going in now. Do you want to sleep in the house?” She yawned as she said it, her teeth very white in the lantern light. Scarlett thought her eyes were gray. But it was not her looks that gave him a queer sort of feeling about her, but a quiet directness in her manner that was unlike a woman. He had a sudden and curious conviction that she was trustworthy.

“I’d sooner sleep here,” he returned, with late consciousness that he had paused, and she was waiting. “I must be off early. I would leave the sick pony here for a week if it wouldn’t inconvenience you.”

“Not a bit.”

“Then I’d better pay in advance now,” said Scarlett rather awkwardly. He held out a bundle of notes, and suddenly remembered he was still wearing Halliday’s cap. “I beg your pardon for talking

to you in a hat," he exclaimed, "but I forgot it! I never wear one."

At the simple speech Athol Gray had all she could do not to gasp. This man—who was not even of the same class as Eldon and Inkster—was Scarlett!

In her one swift, startled glance at him she saw—as women do see—what he was. His hard-cut face was thin, tanned by the weather, and lined, as if a little time ago it had been haggard; but it was a good face. He was tall, too, and clean-made. Altogether, he did not look the sort of man for an Eldon to waylay with impunity. She had seen for herself that he was capable, if she had also seen that he was kind. Her lips opened to say something, but she changed her mind. Scarlett or not, the man looked tired; and outside the rain came down pitilessly. There was no sense in giving him an impulsive warning that would send him off now, with spent horses in a dark night. The men who meant to kill him had missed him; should go on missing him while she had a tongue and two hands. The girl's plan to help Scarlett was made before she opened her mouth in a remarkably commonplace sentence:

"It will be two dollars if you leave the pony here a week, and for to-night it will be seventy-five cents; there's no need of all that money. Did you"—for she had to make sure of her man—"want your cap dried?"

Scarlett held the pulpy mass out gravely. "If you please, considering I borrowed it to go to Janes-

ville. No one ever saw me in one if I could help it."

They were Inkster's words to the Frenchman over again: "they say no one ever saw him in one," and what else he had said echoed mechanically in the girl's head. She kept in a queer little laugh of triumph over the men who had been going to use the "Ethel-girl" and were cruel to their horses. She had the man they were after, and they should never see him. But he must get his rest to-night. There would be time enough to tell him ugly news with the daylight.

"I'll dry the cap." She took it and a five-dollar note from his hand. "I can give it to you with your change in the morning, if you'll come to the kitchen door. I suppose," with a carelessness that covered suggestion, "you'll want to get off about three?"

"You won't be up at three!" There was a comfortable boyishness about her, but the fact remained that she was a girl.

"The cook will be, if I'm not." It was sharp, for she dared not let him loiter till sunrise; even warned as he was not warned now. "Good-night!" And she was gone before Scarlett could answer.

For a moment he looked after her, wondering how on earth that sort of girl came to be living in a roadhouse, and what kind of an uncle she had to leave her alone there; but the problem was no con-

cern of his. He yawned with weariness and cast himself down on some straw. It was nearly two. He would sleep a cat's sleep for an hour. And his last thought was of how Halliday would grin if he knew he had been talking to a girl!

He awoke with a start to find it four, but there was no special reason to worry about it. Scarlett fed his ponies and repaired leisurely to the house without an idea that he had not waked of himself; till in the kitchen door he met his hostess coming out with a steaming cup of coffee in her hand.

"I thought you'd never wake," she said, frowning. "I had to throw gravel at your window. What on earth made you lock the door? You should have been gone an hour ago."

She was pale, as well as nervous, but it was neither of those things that made Scarlett look at her, once, and then look away, so that his hand nearly missed the cup she held out to him. If she had been beautiful the night before, she was a wonder now. Taller than he had thought her, wide-shouldered, slim-waisted, she stood like a queen in her pale-blue cotton gown with the flush of coming sunrise on her face—that was like no other face Scarlett had ever seen. Her hair dazzled him with every color from ripe corn to gold, and under it her eyes were not gray, but blue; very blue and steady.

"Did you—you wake me?" he stammered. He was realizing, sickeningly, that what he had said

to Halliday about never looking at a woman had been just childish bluster.

"Yes." The girl glanced uneasily behind her, into the kitchen, where an old woman stood at the stove, and at a bolted door into what might have been a woodshed—and was Ba'tiste Sabarin's bedroom. No sound came from it, but listeners make no sounds. Athol Gray turned back to Scarlett with her heart pounding. It was no time, now, to tell him her long story: she must just warn him and let him get away. She pushed his change and Halliday's old cap into his hand.

"You ought to go," she muttered. "I'll see to your pony. You can send for it when you want it—*send*, mind—not come!"

"But, why?" ejaculated Scarlett stupidly.

With the chance of the Frenchman listening to her Athol dared not say why. Instead she leaned forward, and touched Scarlett's arm as a man might have done.

"If your name's Scarlett," she whispered, and it was so unexpected that Scarlett nearly dropped his coffee cup, "you know best if you want to be seen on the Janesville road! Hadn't you better go?"

For one long minute the man said nothing at all. His eyes were full on the girl's eyes, and perhaps each could read the other's; for suddenly he bent his tall head down to her.

"Which way?" he breathed.

"They're between you and Janesville." Her lips

were so close to his ear that he could almost feel the smoothness of them. "I've no time to tell you more, and that's all you really need. Oh, *go!*"

To her astonishment Scarlett straightened up as if he cast a load from his shoulders, and perhaps it was she who was dazzled now as he smiled.

"In spite of the Janesville road, I'll come back some day," he said slowly, "to thank you for your help. It's been mighty good of you to—trust a stranger, Miss——"

But if he paused for her to supply a name he got nothing by it. She pointed instead to the waiting ponies at the stable door, and at the unspoken command Scarlett turned away. Tall and straight against the morning sky, he was a figure any girl might have looked after; but this one's glance went like lightning to the door off the kitchen that shut in Ba'tiste Sabarin.

Perhaps she heard a sound there, for she moved cat-like to the old woman at the stove and spoke to her on her fingers—or else she was not the sort of girl to look after any man.

CHAPTER IX

THE FOOLHARDINESS OF REFLECTION

TRAMPING back to Sabiel's beside his remaining pack-pony, and leading the buckskin with the abandoned horse's load, Scarlett had ample time for reflection; mixed up with the suspicion that he had been an ass.

Something—and what he was not going to own to himself—had clouded his ordinary common sense that morning, or he would have asked at least one question in return for the warning delivered by the girl at the roadhouse like a bolt out of the blue. He had not asked it, and for all he knew he might have delivered himself into the hands of his enemies by tacitly admitting he was Scarlett, with excellent reasons to pass unseen on the Janesville road; and yet—Scarlett stopped dead in the middle of that same road.

“I'm hanged if I really think so,” he informed the buckskin explosively. “In the first place, I have no enemies except the Frenchman I let get away—and that girl could have nothing to do with *him!*” The enmity of Eldon, whom he had left behind in Blaze Creek, was such an impossible thought that

it never occurred to him. He had taken no real stock in Halliday's warning about the man. That it had been he who had overheard him settling with Halliday about going into Drowning Valley for gold, he who had sent a strange Frenchman to dog him there, would have seemed a plain fairy-tale to Scarlett, since he had never spoken ten words to Eldon in his life. The Frenchman, to his knowledge, was the only soul on earth excepting Halliday and Sabiel who could possibly have expected him to appear on the Janesville road. And he could not see how even the Frenchman could have been ready to cut him off there so soon.

"He must have managed it somehow," Scarlett mused, "for there is no one else who could know about it. How the girl knew I don't know, unless——" He glanced down at the road he stood on and scrutinized it with hawk eyes.

A string of horses had passed over it since he had; eight or ten loaded horses, whose tracks the heavy rain had only blurred. No string of horses had come into Janesville, nor had he met one on the road. Scarlett, staring at his feet, whistled.

"My hostess observed that they were lying up between me and Janesville," he said, "and I expect she told the cold truth. Only I'd like to know who 'they' are! One, of course, is the Frenchman, for I kindly informed him just how to find me while I was preaching to Halliday with my young friend's ear against the camp door. But for the rest, I can't

The Foolhardiness of Reflection 91

see daylight—unless the Frenchman's picked up a solid backing I didn't expect!"

And with the words an unpleasant thrill flashed through him. The girl who had warned him he had enemies was alone; and, if he knew anything, had been frightened when he ran on her at her gate.

"She thought I was some one she didn't want there," he muttered, "and putting two and two together I fancy that some one must have been in the gang that passed down with the horses, plus the Frenchman. If he, or any one else, asked that girl questions, she'd know they were looking for me. Now, I wonder——"

But what he wondered he did not say. Instead he straightened up and made good time to the pasture that led to Sabiel's. There he astonished the buckskin by casting his pack on the ground in a bit of bush that would shelter the other pony grazing on a tether, mounting him, and turning him back the way he had come.

"She was a good girl, Bucky," he explained as he walked the horse gently back to the Janesville road. "I haven't met such a lot of them that I'm likely to make a mistake. If there's anything dead up the creek, you and I aren't going away to leave her to deal with it. She may be fit to fight her own battles, but not yours and mine tacked on to them."

He might have changed his mind if he could have seen the girl in question at that precise minute. It was easy enough to ride a horse up and down the

road past Eldon's camp till Scarlett's tracks were effectually concealed; but it was not every girl who would have thought of it—any more than most girls would have ordered a deaf cook to be more than deaf to any poundings and howlings of a most reluctant prisoner while she was gone. It was not till eight o'clock that Athol returned, or saw fit to unbolt that stout door she had glanced at nervously when she said good-by to Scarlett. It did not lead from the kitchen into the main house, but just to the rough bedroom—with no other exit, and lit only by a window too high to see out of—where she had bestowed Ba'tiste Sabarin.

"What is all this noise about?" she inquired. But as she stood she blocked the doorway and the exit of the nick-eared Frenchman whom Scarlett had last seen at the other end of Drowning Valley.

"Let me out!" he yelled. He made a dash to pass, but something in Athol Gray's eyes stopped him.

"I will: when I'm ready," she said slowly, "and it's going to be once for all. I have no use for men like you about my place. You can go."

"Then what you lock me in for?" Sabarin had plenty of good English, but he could barely find a word for rage. He looked at the door in a fever of fury and impatience, but Athol was like a rock in it. "Who are you to lock me in?"

"I didn't, as it happens. It was deaf old Mary, the cook. You haven't been such an early riser

here that she worried about keeping you in your room for an hour or so. But"—and two stars of cold fire burned suddenly in her eyes—"it's I who am sending you off the place, and there is one thing I mean to say to you before you go. The next time you lie, be more careful about the person you lie to—you made a mistake with me.

"When you came here you said you were starving, had no friends, and would do any sort of work for a home. It was not half a day before I knew every bit of that was invention. I heard money clinking in your pockets while you said you had none, and you never did a stroke of work; I've looked after the horses and Mary has chopped the wood. As for friends, if you had none you made some pretty quickly at my gate yesterday, and I should advise you to go to them. I won't have you here. I——" But she bit her lip on it. "Here is your money," she added in a different voice. "It is more than I owe you. Have the goodness to go now, and do not dare to come back."

If Scarlett had thought her an angel she was not one now, for her breath came short with good honest rage as she left the doorway clear. The Frenchman looked at her with a curiously quieted face.

"You can't send me away," he observed insolently. "I'll wait to see Mr. Welsh."

"Then you'll wait elsewhere." Mr. Welsh's niece was quite unmoved. "He will do you no

good. I hired you, and I'm sending you away." For lazy, dissipated Jim Welsh might have a reputation for slack kindness on the Janesville road, but he could be stiff enough with Athol behind him.

Sabarin surveyed her where she stood. She was young, and very strong; not the sort of girl he dared to strike, even if he had not seen the ugly handle of a revolver half out of her pocket. But she was putting out all his calculations, and he burned to pay her out for it. As he passed her he turned, with a sudden venomous dart like a snake's.

"You locked me in," said he quite softly, "if it was not with your own hand. So I look out of the window. Very, very early I climb up there where you think I could not reach—about the time I hear a step—and whispering! *Hein?*" His smile held an untold significance, a satisfaction as of knowledge. He shrugged his shoulders as he looked at her. "Whispering—that is not my business, eh? Two horses and a man, I suppose were your business?"

To his flat and unutterable surprise Athol laughed. It was well done, and it routed him.

"They are the whole road's business," said she: and added a stinging rider, for the use that was to have been made of "the Ethel-girl" rankled in her. "Hadn't you better get off and see where they went? You're only four hours and a half too late!"

Sabarin exploded in a snarling string of oaths. She had goaded him into forgetting that all hope of

ever seeing the Drowning Valley gold depended on his following those horses; into standing talking, while each second mattered. And he was clever enough to see it was just what she had meant to do. He rushed out of the house, too blind with fury to glance at the shut stable that still held one horse too many, and disappeared down the road towards Janesville and Eldon's camp.

But there was no triumph on Athol Gray's face as she looked after him.

"I've been a fool," she muttered. "I didn't gain more than ten minutes by flying at him, and I did more harm than good by worrying him—judging by the way he swore. I wouldn't have said anything at all if I'd dreamed he knew so much about this morning. The trouble is"—she moved suddenly to the kitchen doorsteps and sat down there, as if she wanted air—"the real trouble is, that *I* don't know enough—of Scarlett or the other men! I've just gone on my instinct about them. I may be making up a plot out of plain coincidences—but I don't think so. There were too many, and they were too coincidence-y! First, there was the Frenchman; even the day he came it struck me he was off a long road, and that this house was the end of it for him. Second, there was his watching the road all day. Third, there were those vile men coming past who I'm sure sent him. And fourth, there was the man who rode by—Scarlett."

She said the name very softly, just as she had

softly checked off her coincidences on her fingers, sitting, a thoughtful, absorbed figure, on the sunny steps. A little color came to her smooth cheeks when the name was out. Whatever might be between him and the other men—if he were right, wrong, or a little of both in their quarrel—she was on his side, because— Oh, just because he was clean to look at, well-mannered, and kind.

She set narrowed blue eyes on the stable where his pack-pony stood; on the empty yard; the red road from Tabeak to Janesville; and on a certain hollow half a mile down it where a camp-fire smoked straight up into the still air. If the Frenchman really knew it had been Scarlett this morning it was a wonder there was no stir in that camp now; no bustle of men and horses starting after him.

“It’s not my fault that there isn’t,” the girl thought bitterly. “I believe I was mad, to let out to the Frenchman all I knew: he could have guessed the few things I didn’t say. There’s only one thing that he doesn’t guess: if he knew Scarlett had been here he didn’t dream he left a pack-pony that he will have to send for—and he shan’t, while I keep the stable key. He——” She sprang up, and did not know every muscle of her was rigid as she stood listening.

There was a stir on the road now. Horses’ feet coming up—— No; not up the road from Janesville and Eldon’s camp, but down it from the other end. They did not sound like the sloppy tread of

The Foolhardiness of Reflection 97

Jim Welsh's old horse, even if they had not been solitary instead of in duet with that of his hired man. Athol ran headlong to the gate, and confronted—not Uncle Jim, seated loosely on a saddle held together by Providence and some packthread—but Scarlett! Scarlett come back again!

Her face went dead-white as he flung himself from the saddle at sight of her; but her hand fell like steel on the buckskin's bridle.

“Come with me, if you want to save your life,” she said fiercely. “Quick, before they see you! Didn't you understand that they meant to kill you, when I warned you this morning? And they're coming now.”

For down the road towards Janesville she could hear, as people hear when they know every echo out of every hollow, two horses coming from Eldon's camp at a gallop; a dead run—that at sight of Scarlett would—stop!

CHAPTER X

"ELDON!"

FOR half a breath Scarlett stood listening to that clopping, nearing run of ridden horses beyond the turn of the road. In another he, Athol Gray, and the buckskin were huddled under cover of the thick clump of spruces by the gate. The girl snatched the buckskin's head to her breast for fear he might whinny, and waited rigidly for the horses to turn into her yard. But they passed.

Scarlett, coolly parting the spruce boughs to look after them, turned back with a queer thought that his brain had taken an instantaneous photograph of the bad luck that had at last caught up with him, though he had seen nothing but two men riding like mad.

But men did not ride like that for nothing on a lonely country road, even if one of them had not been the Frenchman he had left behind him at the other end of Drowning Valley.

"Were those the 'they' who mean to do for me?" he asked slowly.

"Yes! Don't you know them?"

"One," said Scarlett quietly. "That French-

man may be here on my account. I don't know about the other man; I never laid eyes on him before. Do you know who he is?”

“Only that his name is Inkster!”

“Never heard of him,” said Scarlett. He looked with a sudden curious intentness at Athol where she still clung to the buckskin, and, to his surprise, she turned on him.

“What possessed you to come back here?” she cried. “I warned you about the Janesville road this morning. I couldn't tell you all I knew because Sabarin, the Frenchman, was sleeping in the bedroom off my kitchen, and I was afraid he might hear. But you must have known it was madness to come back! Now I don't see what you're going to do,” despairingly.

Scarlett nodded at the road. “Follow the gentlemen who just passed by. Behind them is the last place they would ever look for me; and, judging by their pace, they won't turn round in a hurry.”

“You can't follow them,” Athol flashed. “Those two are not all you have to look out for. It may be only a blind their rushing by like that, for they've left the man you really have to watch behind them. You know him, for he said so. Eldon, they called him.”

“Eldon!” Scarlett repeated it stupidly. He supposed Halliday must have been right about the man's hatred for him, though he could not see any reason for it. But the gold would have been

enough to bring him here if the Frenchman had gone back and reported about it. "Yes," he said, "I know Eldon—a little!"

"I don't, and I don't want to," retorted the girl with sudden hardness. "Look here! It's no use for you and me to stand here and half-trust each other. You are no business of mine, but I'm going to tell you all I know. You can act on it or not, as you please. Three days ago a Frenchman with a nicked ear turned up here—— What are you nodding at?"

"I nicked it, that's all," returned Scarlett gravely. "Go on."

"Well"—she asked no question: Scarlett's affairs were, as she said, no business of hers—"he came here and asked for work. Uncle Jim was away and had taken our man, so I was glad to get even a Frenchman. But he did no work. He stood all day at the gate, watching the road, and it made me nervous. I fancied he'd come here for that very purpose; I can't tell you why; but I began to watch him. Yesterday morning two other men turned up with a string of horses, and they stopped the instant they saw Sabarin. I thought they might be horse-thieves, and I slipped into this very clump of spruces. If they were after our horses I didn't think it would do any harm to be ready; but they didn't talk of horses at all. They talked about *you*! Eldon said it was early to look for you, when the Frenchman told him you hadn't gone by, and that

they'd camp down the road and wait till you turned up.”

“Did he mention why I might be apt to come by?” Scarlett's face could be absolutely expressionless when he was displeased, and it seemed to him now that his secret was open property on the Janesville road.

“He did,” returned Athol, with a significance that made him wince. “And when I've told you I can forget about it, for it's no business of mine. Both he and Inkster said you'd a gold mine in Drowning Valley—wherever that is—and that they meant to have a share in it. Eldon sent the Frenchman to track you there, but he seemed to have made a mess of it——”

“I don't know,” Scarlett cut in dryly. “I thought so at the time, though! Well?”

“Oh, he went back and told Eldon he'd lost you, but you'd have to come out on this road, somewhere between Tabeak and Janesville, when you wanted to sell your gold. So they came round to catch you. They decided they could waylay you on your way back from Janesville if they camped in those willows down the road.” She pointed to the thicket he had passed the night before, unheard because of the rain. “Then it would be easy enough to follow you back to your mine. That,” quietly, “seemed to be all Inkster and the Frenchman wanted; but Eldon means to kill you. He said so, outright. And that—— Oh, yes—that if they did for you that

some one they called Halliday would cut no ice after you were dead! I thought," rather shakily, "that I'd warn you—if I could."

"Kill me—Eldon?" But Scarlett paused. Most girls would have thought of themselves, alone in a place like this, not of a strange man's peril; hardly any would have acted on the unselfish thought. "How did you ever guess I was the man you had to warn?" he demanded.

"I didn't, at first. And I don't believe I would ever have interfered in the horrid thing at all," frankly, "only you see they asked Sabarin the name of the girl he was working for, and he said Ethel. So when Eldon laughed and said 'the Ethel-girl' was a great convenience, I was furious—and I made up my mind she'd be something else! Besides, I hated him. He beat his poor horses over their heads for doing nothing at all, and I won't stand cruelty. So I just waited at this gate in case a man named Scarlett came by—that was how I was there when you arrived. Of course, if I'd guessed you were *you*, I'd have gone into Janesville to warn you," calmly.

"Janesville?" Scarlett stared.

"Oh, I saw you ride by that way," returned the girl carelessly. "But at first I never dreamt it could be you those men were talking about. It only came to me when you told me you never wore a hat—I'd heard Inkster telling the Frenchman that. And then I didn't tell you what I'd heard about you

because—— Well, I said to myself that as those men were waiting for you to go down the road to Janesville, and hadn't an idea you'd been there and back already, you might as well have a night's rest while you could! But I think I really didn't speak about them, for fear you would think I was interfering.”

“Interfering!” repeated Scarlett helplessly. “You—you don't begin to know what you've done for me now. I thought I had something to be grateful to you for this morning, but it wasn't a patch on this.”

“I expect I'm undoing it all by letting you stay here talking,” said the girl uneasily. “If Eldon came up the road—— Oh,” half angrily, “why did you come back? If you hadn't you'd have been safe by this time, wouldn't you?”

“Ye-es.” Scarlett's eyes lit whimsically. “But you see I was afraid you mightn't be. I guessed from the look of the road that a lot of horses had come down it, and—— Well, I just came back!”

“There was no need,” rather frostily.

“I don't know. It seems to me there was—for my own sake! I know now just where the niggers are in the woodpile.”

Something in the look that went with the half-truth must have been compelling, for the girl smiled back into the man's eyes—unwillingly, but still she smiled.

“Perhaps,” she said. “Only—what next?”

"Next? I fancy there must be a way I could get down the road and find out if it is really Eldon who's after me. Isn't there?"

Athol nodded considerably. "Without his seeing you? Yes! Put your horse in the stable and I'll show you."

"You're not coming," returned Mr. Scarlett firmly, and without emotion. Reconnoitring as to Eldon was no game for girls.

Athol locked the stable door on the buckskin, put the key in her pocket, and turned round.

"Mr. Scarlett," said she unexpectedly, "don't you think it would be a good idea for you to forget I'm only a girl? It won't hurt me to show you a way to a place where you can look down on Eldon comfortably; but if you go blundering about by yourself you may bring him on both of us."

She was right, and Scarlett knew it. He stood back and let her lead the way through a tangle of scrub to a high bank of clay on the edge of the road. She moved with a deft noiselessness that commended itself to him, and, as the bank heightened till it commanded the low-lying willows across the road, he spoke to her—irrelevantly, if both of them had not been reflecting on the same thing:—

"If you are a girl, you can beat me at scouting!"

Athol stopped short. Her face had flushed with the climb, and the gold of her hair was vivid against the dull green of the bushes that made a

thick screen between them and the Janesville road.

“I’m not a town girl,” said she simply. “I’m used to looking after myself. That was why it worried me to have you come back because you thought I was alone. I don’t see now how you’re going to get away from here—and all for bothering about me. I’m all right, truly. I hate that Eldon man, but I don’t think I’d be afraid of him. I have a revolver.”

“If I’d known that I’d have come back sooner,” commented Scarlett ruefully.

“Why?”

“Never saw the girl I’d trust with one. They usually ‘didn’t know it was loaded!’”

“‘They’ aren’t me, then,” said Athol sententiously; and Scarlett’s lifted hand turned her silent. The sound of a horse coming out on the road below them kept her so—a moveless, breathing statue. Scarlett crawled to the edge of the bank and looked over.

Below him, Eldon and no other—if he had scarcely believed it till now—sat on his horse in the middle of the road. The girl had made no mistake about him. And it flashed sharply on Scarlett that Halliday had made no mistake, either, when he said the man was dangerous. It was not the smooth-browed Eldon of Blaze Creek who suddenly wrenched his horse’s head towards Janesville, but a man who would never turn from whatever ugly

purpose it was that set his mouth. Scarlett watched him move away.

"And *yet* I'm hanged if I can find any reason for his dogging me, except for the chance of my gold," he thought perplexedly. He wondered uneasily if he had left any trail Eldon could pick up at Janesville and decided he had not. As he turned back to the girl behind him, he saw with astonishment that there were tears in her eyes.

"You were right to want to keep me out of this," she whispered miserably. "I *am* only a useless girl! I forgot the very thing I should have told you at once. Sabarin knew you were here this morning! He climbed up to his window and saw you. I kept him locked in his room till just before you came back; and then, like a fool, I lost my temper with him when I ordered him off the place. The only good thing was that I made him lose his, too, and own that he'd seen you. But of course he went straight off and told the other two, or they wouldn't be patrolling the road now. You've nothing to thank me for after all, Mr. Scarlett. You might have, if I'd had sense enough to tell you all I knew last night!"

Scarlett looked at her troubled face, and lied. He was probably going to be caught between two fires, but she should not know it.

"I have plenty to thank you for," he said coolly. "Eldon is out of the way for hours, if he goes to look for me in Janesville, which I think he'll do;

and the Frenchman, with his other friend, will probably go clear through to Tabeak on the other end of the road. My chance is to get away between them. That is——” He stopped in a hesitation that was comic—for Scarlett. How on earth was he going to leave this girl to face the men who would miss him and come back, knowing she must guess which way he had gone?

“That is—what? Are you afraid Inkster and Sabarin may run on your pack-pony?” That they might trouble her never entered her head.

“No. He’s too far off the road.” But as he spoke he wished he were sure that was true. He had forgotten the pony left to graze in the pasture.

Quite suddenly Scarlett was eaten by desire to be off and get to Halliday, before the Frenchman had a chance to blunder on his tethered pony or to pick up his trail. He could fairly see his cave and the great gobbets of gold in it, whose safety hung on his getting back to them unseen. Yet he made no move to follow Athol back to the stable.

“I don’t see what you’re waiting for,” she called back to him impatiently.

Scarlett made no direct answer.

“See here,” he demanded. “If I leave you alone here, will you have any trouble if Eldon comes asking questions about me?”

Athol shook her head. “No,” said she with finality. “You see Sabarin knows who you are, but he doesn’t know that *I* know; or that I listened

to him and Eldon. I can have no trouble at all, if only," with point-blank directness, "you'll take yourself off before any of the three do come back."

"Then I will." Scarlett thought it was exactly as if he smiled into the eyes of a boy; but perhaps it was not; for as he led out the buckskin he paused with one foot in the stirrup. "You're taking me a good deal on credit," he said. "For all you know, I might be another Eldon!"

"If you are, I shan't find it out. I'm not likely to see you again," returned Athol composedly.

The obvious fact startled Mr. Scarlett.

"I—suppose not," said he rather flatly: and for a moment he forgot even Halliday and his mine that was hanging in the balance. "If your name is not Ethel, would you mind telling me what it is?" he inquired with a sudden gentleness.

"Athol," briefly. "Athol Gray! Please go. And if you meet Uncle Jim Welsh riding along the road with an old man, don't even *look* at either of them!"

"Do you mean——" Scarlett was startled. The girl had saved him, but that was not saying her uncle might not be a friend of Eldon's.

"That he's likely to help Eldon?" She finished his sentence indignantly. "I should think not. Uncle Jim is too good for this life, and that's just the trouble. He always thinks every one means well, just as he always tells everything he knows—

and I don't suppose you pine for him to know about you!"

She was a sight Scarlett had never dreamed of as she stood looking up at him, her gold-bronze hair curling back from her brow, her blue eyes half rueful, half anxious, and the rose of her cheeks deepening. But it was the clear sincerity of her face that kept Scarlett's eyes on it; not her looks. He harked back to Uncle Jim with an effort.

"I don't pine for any one to know about me, to tell the truth," he allowed carelessly, though the eyes that met hers were anything but careless. "But if ever I can come back again it will be to thank you for all you've done for me to-day, Miss—Athol."

But as he turned the buckskin out of her gate the smile with which he had lifted Halliday's cap to her tightened to an ironical grin. It was all very well to talk of coming back—but for now, he was not at all certain he would even get away.

"Things might be a trifle simplified," Mr. Scarlett reflected, "if I knew just where Inkster and the Frenchman were hung up, waiting for me down this road."

CHAPTER XI

HALLIDAY SEES A GHOST

WHEREVER they were, he got no sight of them. Yet even when he found his pack-pony waiting just where he had left it, and had cleared the intervale leading to Sabiel's stable without seeing as much as a startled bird, Scarlett's mind was not easy. He knew nothing about Inkster; but the Frenchman was quite cunning enough to have watched his every motion from the time he hoisted the cast-off load once more on the buckskin till now, and to have followed him in catlike silence.

"If he has, I can't help it," said Scarlett musingly. "But I expect I'd better think of the one chance against his having followed me, instead of the ninety-nine for it," and he lit a cigarette. If the Frenchman and his friend were on his trail, going smokeless would not stop them—yet he put his extinguished match into his pocket all the same, instead of throwing it away.

Sabiel, waiting at his still empty house, received the wanderer with a frown that covered relief.

"Most I thought you'd got trouble," he said,

"you stay so long." His eyes were sharp, for there was a question in the statement.

"I did, and I didn't," returned Scarlett slowly. He had no intention of mentioning the roadhouse, nor the girl there; if, in common fairness, he had to tell the rest of his story to Sabiel. But even at the certainty of the Frenchman having brought himself and two allies to patrol the Janesville road, that worthy only smiled.

"They don't see you," he returned comfortably, "or that Frenchman he pay you back for his ear long ago."

Scarlett was not so sure. With the knowledge of the gold to inspire him, Sabarin's vengeance was not likely to be so simple as that. But his spirits rose in spite of him as he and the Indian led the two loaded horses over the devious way to Drowning Valley lake. If the Frenchman had tracked him, it would only mean a fight sooner or later. On the other hand, the debt that had worried his soul out for two months was paid, and the care that went with it fallen off him. Also, he had money in his pocket.

"I should think those things were enough to make up for a problematical Frenchman on my trail," he reflected, "or they ought to be." Yet it was queer that underneath the rise of his spirits was a stubborn thought of the girl he had left at the roadhouse, alone. That new Eldon he had seen on the Janesville road, whom he had never dreamed lay

under the man's smooth mask, was no man to be in the neighborhood of a girl who was alone. Scarlett was so astounded to find himself worrying about it that he swore. "If she wasn't troubled about him, I don't suppose there's any reason I should be," he thought uneasily. "But I don't believe I'll be comfortable in my mind till I can stampede Eldon and his French friend off that road."

He had not mentioned the girl to Sabiel, and he would not air her to Halliday, who was not accustomed to Red Scarlett consorting with girls and would certainly not believe in one who had betrayed no tremor at the possible prospect of having to confront three men, returned angry and suspicious from a fruitless chase, with no better ally than the Uncle Jim who—"believed in everybody;" and anyhow, might not have seen fit to come home. Scarlett, standing on the last ridge between him and the lake that held his cave of gold, had a horrid wonder if even that gold were worth having left one girl to face Eldon's questions; perhaps his insolence.

Sabiel, glancing at his preoccupied face, came out with something he had been turning over in his head for half an hour. He was no fool, if he was an Indian, and he had read something between the lines of Scarlett's condensed adventures.

"You see that girl who lives over at Welsh's?" he inquired so carelessly that Scarlett was taken by surprise, and said yes.

"Good girl, that," Sabiel added emphatically. "Good shot, too—oh, splendid! She fight off one gang that try to take her horses away last winter; hit every man just where she wanted to. No trouble at that house with horse-thieves since."

"She fought them? Why, she can't be twenty!"

"Good as a man, all the same."

The anecdote did not please Mr. Scarlett, but it relieved his mind; as perhaps it had been meant to do. If Athol Gray had got on without his protection so far, she would probably continue to do it. He abandoned the thought of her with abruptness as he found himself suddenly close on Sabiel's camp by their own lake side, and on Halliday cooking over the fire—for, at the first sight of Halliday, the man took all Scarlett's attention.

His stolid face looked drawn, was absolutely thin—and in all the years Scarlett had known him Halliday had never looked thin. His manner was just as usual, yet somehow Scarlett did not like his silence when he gave no more than a thoughtful whistle to his expurgated account of his adventures on the Janesville road.

"I didn't know whether I'd shaken off the Frenchman's friends or not," the latter concluded, "but I expect I did." He looked round the great deserted valley and over the empty lake to the black mountains beyond. "I believe I've come in behind them while they were going towards Tabeak. What do you think, Halliday?"

"I told you, in the first place, that it was Eldon who was after you! As for the other two, I guess you were about as safe from them on the Janesville road as you are here," returned Halliday enigmatically. He rose with a yawn that might have concealed anxiety. "I'm going to bunk up," he announced shortly. "I've had my dinner, and I haven't had a night's sleep since you left. At least," in hasty addition, "since the mosquitoes came."

Scarlett eyed him for a moment; then he ate his own dinner in silence, and went to bed: Halliday's grouch, whatever it was, could wait till morning. But by the morning Scarlett had forgotten it. He was dog-tired, and it seemed as if he had just closed his eyes when Halliday shook him up to see bare dawn and the canoe waiting in it; ready loaded with what meager items of a smelting outfit Scarlett had been able to collect at Janesville.

"What's the hurry?" he inquired sleepily; but Halliday made no answer.

Scarlett, eating a hasty breakfast, thought the gold fever had bitten more deeply into his partner than was good for him; but it was none of his business. It was not till they were well out on the cold lake that he noticed something more than Halliday's haste that was unusual of a morning. The sun was just rising over the hill behind the camp they had left, and it looked queerly deserted.

"Where's Sabiel gone?" he inquired.

Halliday turned half round where he knelt in the bow of the canoe.

"I guess he's getting ready to account for that Frenchman, if he should happen to snake after us," he answered slowly. "He wasn't so unimpressed by your story as he seemed—not by a long chalk! I guess it would mean any old trouble for him if other white men got in here. You'd never think that sweet-looking spruce patch behind the camp held an Indian and a gun—but it does! I saw him settling down into it after he'd fixed up a corral for the horses. I wish he'd taken that buckskin out to his own house again," he finished irrelevantly. "He'd be a dead giveaway here if any one had noticed him in the Janesville road."

"No one did—who mattered," answered Scarlett briefly. The buckskin reminded him of Athol Gray, and he did not want to think of her. "I suppose you've pulled out an extra half-million or so from the lode while I've been playing round on the Janesville road," he added hastily.

It was the first mention either man had made of the gold; and to Scarlett's surprise Halliday only paddled on in silence.

"No," he grunted at last; and before Scarlett could get out an astonished question pitched down his paddle, and turned round. "I haven't taken out an ounce," said he; and somehow the unexpectedness of it—from Halliday, who had been so eager to be rich—made Scarlett stop paddling too.

"Do you mean you haven't even been over there?" he cried incredulously.

Halliday laughed, with a curious effect of fierceness.

"I've never been out of there, till last night! I only went back to camp then, to get something to eat. I wouldn't have stayed there only I knew I had got to have a night's rest, and the cave wasn't any place to sleep in. I didn't say anything about it, but——"

"Say anything about what?" demanded Scarlett blankly.

"I'll tell you. No, don't go on paddling; the cave's no place to talk in! We'd better have the whole thing out here, where no one can hear us."

"Hang it, man! There's no one in the *cave* to hear," exploded Scarlett.

Halliday looked him full in the eyes. "That's just what I wish *I* thought," said he. "Hold your horses a second now—I haven't gone silly. I didn't want to tell you this before Sabiel, even, because he'd have begun on some darned rot about spirits; but"—he lowered his voice as if, even fifty yards from the cave's mouth, some one might hear him—"*there's somebody in the cave!*"

"There's *what?*"

Halliday nodded. "I've been after him for two days. I didn't see him, didn't hear him, mind you—but I know he was there!"

"And you came out and held your tongue to me,

when you thought some one else was after our gold!"

The comment bit; but Halliday only nodded again.

"I made things as safe as I could before I left," he returned stolidly. "Remember, Red, I'd been sitting in there with a gun ever since you left, and I was kind of sleepy and empty. Besides, I'd looked all through the place till I was silly, and I began to feel that even if I knew what I was looking for, down there in the dark, I'd feel better. You see, there wasn't anything *sensible* in the things that happened; and when I saw you last night I realized that you weren't any fitter to go over and deal with them all night than I was."

"You might have given me the chance," said Scarlett, with some exasperation. "Get out with them now, man!"

"Well, recollect the day you were talking in there about the back way out, and gold, and women?"

Scarlett nodded impatiently.

"Well, if I hadn't been a tom-fool, I'd have told you something that kind of startled me that day. Or if you hadn't been mad, and stalked away with the lantern, you'd have noticed it yourself. I was sitting behind you, you remember, kind of pondering, when I heard a trickle of loose stones somewhere. You hadn't kicked any small stones, neither had I; and one brought up suddenly against my foot,

from the back passage you thought was a way out! I gave a quick look round at it, and I fancied I saw a light flash up, way back in the dark of it. I didn't say anything, because it was gone so quick that I thought it was just a trick of my eyes; and——”

“And?”

“It wasn't,” said Halliday simply, “though, then, I just got up and followed you out. I didn't have any one to follow when next I saw it—but that's not what comes next. I forgot about thinking I'd seen a light. I went in to work the morning you started for Janesville, and—by golly, I stood there just crazy with rage! Somebody'd been working there in the night, using our tools—they were all chucked round any way—and that big hunk of gold we didn't bother to cut up, was *gone!* I tell you I waltzed round the cave considerable for a time. I didn't have any frights on me then, and I clawed up that back way till I stuck in it and had to back out again, but I never came on one single thing in it to show me I wasn't alone there—only I was dead sure all the time that there was some one watching me. And there must have been. For, when I got back to the lode again, and was still swearing round, our own big chunk of gold came whizzing out of that back alley and all but took me square on the head. If it had, it would have been 'out of business' on my sign, but it missed me. I kind of lay still and waited, and it was then I saw the light again. It was sharp, like a match, but——”

Scarlett interrupted with a flat stare. "Couldn't you hear anything, even?" he demanded blankly.

"No; nor I guess nobody else could." Halliday swore. "I was making too much of a noise shooting up that passage myself the second I saw the light! It went out the second shot. I don't know if the man did, but I couldn't find him anywhere. I sat and waited after that till there didn't seem to be anything to wait for. It got to be too kind of dead silent to live in, so,—well, last night I came out! But I made sure first that nobody else could—anyhow, by the front way."

In the silence Scarlett could have put his head in his hands and groaned aloud with sheer fury. Halliday, of all men, to have come away, even for one night, from the gold that meant all the difference between heaven and hell to both of them; knowing too, that he must have left some one behind him. And supposing he had blocked the front exit from the caves it was not going to help, if other men were using the back one. But there was no sense in reproaches, even if Halliday had not cut them off.

"I guess I see it now, if I didn't last night," he broke out bitterly. "I believe it was nobody else but the Frenchman in the cave. Oh, I know you suppose he'd come all the way round this valley, from the lower entrance where we left him, to catch you on the Janesville road—but there's nothing to *prove* that he did! And this cave business goes to

show it was the other way. I guess he was straight on our heels all the way up here; sitting in that back passage, for all we know, the very first day we saw the gold. I believe he tried scaring me, and then followed you out somehow, and just happened to lose you before you got on the Janesville road. It was *after* you passed that roadhouse you spoke about that he turned up there! And if he did want to meet Eldon, wasn't he likely to try for a look at the gold first?"

"Doesn't hold water," said Scarlett trenchantly. "If he'd followed me out, wouldn't he have caught me coming in? It may be another of his gang inside the cave; it's not he. Come on! While we're talking they're working."

But as he said it Scarlett went pale under his tan. For all he knew he might not have seen the whole of Eldon's outfit on the Janesville road. "They"—who were working in the cave—might mean men whose horses Eldon had been leading, not Eldon himself or the two others Scarlett had left on the road. He picked up his paddle and swung the canoe along as if he were finishing in a race. When he and Halliday got down to the lower cave it would probably be to find it full of men who had got ahead of them, and were taking out their gold; men who would have to be fought off somehow, or—Scarlett set his teeth.

"There isn't any *or!*" he thought fiercely. "I won't have Sabiel shoved between the two fires of

white men and his tribe, and I'll have my gold if I swing for it."

He was not the same man who had talked with Athol Gray in the soft spring sunshine; and it was not only the gold hunger, that is like to nothing else on earth, that bit into him till he was a living flame of rage. Sabiel had trusted him and Halliday, and to Sabiel he was going to keep his word—that no other white man should see what he had seen, and go away to tell of it. Even Halliday dared not speak to him as he flung down the barricade at the top of the long downward tunnel. That it was still there was no hopeful sign to him—merely a proof that the other way in was usable.

But, rage or no rage, Scarlett made no noise as he crept down the silent, sloping tunnel in front of Halliday, feeling his way by his fingers, the lantern he dared not use hanging shut on his arm. At the first rush of fresh air on his face he stopped, and was put to it not to speak. The cave, that he had expected to find lighted, full of men working at his gold, was black dark and silent; the very feel of the air in it was empty, not like that of a closed place where men are waiting hostilely. Listen as he might there was no sound; no ghost of a sound. Scarlett opened his lantern and swung it high with one motion, his other hand on his revolver, and stood dumb at what he saw.

There was no one there. There had been no one

there since Halliday left; and if there had been, it could not have been the Frenchman or any of his gang. For there was no gold gone; and Halliday, dumfounded, was pointing to the round mass like a golden paving-stone, that was still lying where he had left it on the floor.

"Wouldn't that beat you?" he muttered helplessly. "To have that *gone*, then thrown back at you out of nothing, and be left lying like a lump of muck in the end?"

Scarlett stared round the cave, wondering if Halliday's nerves could have been responsible for his whole story, and saw in the same instant that they had not. Some one had been working at the stope; very feebly; but working there.

"Nothing beats me, if we aren't rushed," said he matter-of-factly. "Light some candles, Billy, and wait for me. I'm going to explore that back way. You keep guard on this end of the passage, and see that no one comes out of it. I don't want to be caught from behind."

"I'll wait," said Halliday feebly, "but unless I killed whoever was in that tunnel, Red, the thing *ain't natural!* No man would leave that lump of gold lying behind him, even if he wanted to get to the outside air in a hurry," pointing to the incredible nugget lying neglected on the ground. "Do you suppose I just saw *ghosts?*"

"I don't suppose anything," returned Scarlett dryly, "but there is one thing you can bank on.

If there is any man spying on us from that back tunnel, he's going to come out!"

He shut up the lantern till only a narrow thread of light oozed from it, and disappeared noiselessly up the passage that he had been sure all along meant another way out.

Halliday, resting his great shoulders against the driest part of the stope, sat, revolver in hand, watching and waiting. He had been prepared for Scarlett's being gone a good while; but when his second candle guttered to a smoky end and there was still no sign of him, he moved anxiously to the entrance of the back tunnel.

"Scarlett," he said in a long, carrying whisper. "Red!"

There was no answer. Halliday, listening with all his ears, heard something with sickening indistinctness; something that might only have been the rattle of falling stones.

"By glory," he thought electrically, "it's fighting! Somebody *is* there. And there's nobody to come except Eldon's gang!"

On the word he disappeared after Scarlett up the narrow flume.

CHAPTER XII

A CHESTNUT PONY

BUT as it happened Halliday, climbing and sweating after Scarlett in the darkness of Drowning Valley caves, was wrong. If any one were fighting in the depths of that tortuous place, it was not Eldon, nor any of his gang.

At the precise moment Inkster and the Frenchman sat in the one tent of their outfit, dead beat from an exhausting—and useless—search of the road to Tabeak. Scarlett's guess about their overshooting the turn into the pasture had been right: they had not even glanced at so simple and open a place as they thundered past it to Tabeak. Coming back in the early morning their luck had been no better, and they sat now in sullen silence—Inkster in a black rage, and Sabarin subdued to cringing.

Hope was dead in both of them. There was not likely to be another chance to track Scarlett to his gold; and, on Inkster's part, the Frenchman's story of having seen him at the roadhouse seemed apparently a plain lie. Yet both men, hearing the tramp of a leg-weary horse through the willows, pricked their ears. It could only be Eldon coming back

from Janesville, and it was not Eldon's way to return empty-handed when he went out for news. But neither his face nor his manner invited inquiry.

For a moment he sat motionless in his saddle in the natural clearing where his camp was set, and his string of horses hobbled, taking in the faces of the two men awaiting him. Then he swung himself down.

"I needn't ask what luck you've had," he remarked contemptuously. "So you didn't even see Scarlett!"

"No," Inkster snarled, "nor smell him, either. It's my opinion that he was never here. We've been all the way to Tabeak, and he hadn't been there, either; and, what's more, there wasn't a track leading off the road anywhere between here and there that he could have gone off by."

"Not that a grown man could find!" Eldon threw his saddle on the ground and let his horse go loose, without so much as a glance at its mired legs and spurred sides. "I'll send a child next time."

"You'd better preach about your own luck before you take to sneering," retorted Inkster darkly. "P'r'aps you shook hands with Scarlett in Janesville!"

"He hadn't been there," answered Eldon slowly.

"How d'ye know?"

Eldon made no reply but a scowl. Janesville had been interested neither in him, nor his inquiries for

a friend named Scarlett. The whole town had gone mad over the rumor of some gold brought in by a man from Tabeak, and every soul in it who had the use of his legs was getting ready to go over there. None of them had ever seen such gold. Harris's assayer had been given more drinks than any one man had a use for, so long as it pleased him to hold forth on its purity, its color, and its worth.

No one seemed to have seen or noticed the man who had brought it in. He had sold his gold, bought a bay and a chestnut pack-pony, and departed to Tabeak without so much as mentioning his claim there: it was the assayer who had done that. The man himself he, too, did not happen to have seen, but Janesville cared little for the man: it was gold like his its citizens wanted, and they talked of nothing else.

Eldon, in the back of the hotel bar, listened with a curious, growing excitement. He knew Tabeak—lock, stock, and barrel—and the gold that was setting Janesville agog had never come out of it. There was but one place in the country where such gold could have been found; and that was Drowning Valley. It was just possible, taking the Frenchman's story for truth, that the strange man who had been in Janesville was Scarlett; and that he had crept, under Eldon's very nose in the dark, back to whence he came—which was certainly not Tabeak. Yet the two pack-ponies bought in Janesville were against it.

Sabarin had sworn to seeing Scarlett that very morning; but he had also sworn he was riding a buckskin horse. The stories did not tally, yet a biting hope gnawed at Eldon. He turned abruptly from the assayer and the citizens of Janesville, and repaired to the bank, with a face that was calm enough if his nostrils had not quivered.

The bank must know if Scarlett had been in Janesville. No one knew better than Eldon that Scarlett and Halliday had been down to their last six cents when they left Blaze Creek; and, if Scarlett had been the strange man who paid in money for two pack-ponies, he must have gone to the bank to do it. But at the bank Eldon got his first check.

The almost forgotten name of Edgerley had served Scarlett better there than he knew. To Eldon's inquiry, as to a friend named Scarlett, the teller merely jerked his head towards the ledger-keeper, who snapped that he knew no such person. Mr. Harris, happening to stand in the door of his own office, had cared neither for the too-guileless countenance of Mr. Eldon nor for the way in which he was inspecting the physical geography of the bank. He announced stiffly that no one named Scarlett was a customer of his, nor had sold him any gold; and that if his questioner had any business of his own he could state what it was.

But Eldon had none, except to turn and go out. And to his further inquiries round a preoccupied Janesville as to a man having ridden a buckskin out

of it the day before, he got nothing but profane denials. No such man or no such horse had been seen, and the only person who had left that center had been the Tabeak man with his recently acquired pack-ponies.

Eldon had cursed and spurred all the way home. For all that he had discovered the Tabeak man might be real, and the Frenchman's story of Scarlett a lie; and the latter seemed the more likely.

"Well," said Inkster, driven desperate by his silence, "I suppose you know if Scarlett was there or he wasn't! Get it out."

Eldon turned on him and the Frenchman with the fury he had been obliged to repress all day.

"The united bank staff told me he hadn't been there, and nobody had even seen a man on a buckskin. By heaven, Sabarin," he cried thickly, "if you've brought me here all the way from Blaze Creek with a lie, and you've lied again about having seen Scarlett yesterday morning, I'll put a bullet through your head!" And he meant it: the Janesville road would tell no tales.

Sabarin sprang to his feet, but Eldon's hard fist sent him down again.

"I tell no lies," he screeched from the ground. "I did see Scarlett! If he doesn't go to Janesville, is that my fault? He was *here*; at the road-house!"

"Riding a buckskin, I suppose?" Eldon sneered into the glaring, terrified eyes, and Ba'tiste Sabarin

knew suddenly that death stood at his elbow. Terror lent him coherence, and instinct told him to make time.

"Can I help it that you miss him?" he asked hoarsely. "I track Scarlett into the lower end of Drowning Valley like you say," summing up his case like a man tried for his life, "I hear him arrange with that Indian how he'd come out at this end, between Tabeak and Janesville. I see him ride out of that roadhouse yard with my own eyes yesterday morning. That accursed young cat of a girl over there locked me up till the road was tramped all over the tracks of him and his pack-pony, but——"

"His what?" snapped Eldon. "You didn't say he'd pack-ponies!" His hand came out of his hip pocket. "What were they like?"

"There was only one," answered the Frenchman sullenly. "It was a bay."

Eldon's strong nerves jerked incontinently through his body. One of the ponies sold at Janesville had been a bay; the other a chestnut with two white legs. If he could find the pack-ponies, he had found Scarlett in the man all Janesville had thought came from Tabeak.

"His other horse?" he roared.

"I told you—it was a buckskin."

"Get out what's in your head, Eldon," Inkster cut in impatiently. But when he heard it his face fell.

"P'r'aps Sabarin's Ethel-girl lent him the buckskin," he observed doubtfully.

The Frenchman would have lied, but he did not dare.

"She had no buckskin," he said.

Eldon cut him off with an uplifted finger. "Was it that girl you meant when you said some one had tramped up all the road?" he asked.

"There was nobody else to do it! Nobody passed. She knew Scarlett. He and she stood whispering—whispering—yesterday morning," the Frenchman answered viciously.

Eldon, for a long minute, sat absolutely still.

"I met a girl on the road just now," he said at last, "kind of yellow about the head, and talking to an old vegetable on a saddle that was held together with packthread. She looked at me as if I were dirt. Was that your Ethel-girl?"

"Yes. She talked to the uncle come back from Tabeak. We passed them on the road."

"So that's her"—Elden gave a sudden jerking laugh—"that's her! And she was whispering to Scarlett. By heaven," irrelevantly, "she had eyes!"

Inkster cast down the pipe he was smoking, in a sudden access of rage.

"There you go," he said bitterly, "running off on girls; when we've come all the way from Blaze Creek for nothing! There's not one thing to say that Scarlett was the man who took that gold to Janesville: bay ponies are as common as dirt!

Whether Ba'tiste's lied about seeing him here or not doesn't matter, either, as far as we're concerned. What does, is that we're not a foot nearer the gold he's stealing—and that's what I'm after if you're not! I don't care a darn for something that happened 'way back when you were colts, and fool revenges on Scarlett. I want to get after his mine!"

Eldon laughed in his face. "He and his mine are in Drowning Valley," he said, "and *if* he was the man that girl I saw was whispering to, we've got both of them!"

"I don't see how we've got them," growled Inkster. "I guess for all we'll ever see of Scarlett and his gold—if it *was* Scarlett here and in Janesville, and not some fool from Tabeak—we may as well go home. Where are you going?" he added sharply. For Eldon had risen and was turning away.

"Visiting," returned the other sententiously. "You sit here till I come back, and if Sabarin's got any intention of leaving you snick a bullet through him. He's seeing this thing through till I find out if he's lied, and make up *my* mind," with a sneer, "to go home! If the trail's false, it's false; but, if it isn't, I bet I'm on Scarlett's heels."

He grinned enigmatically in Inkster's stupid face, and disappeared in the willows that hid his camp from the Janesville road.

The Frenchman's "Ethel-girl" had acquired a new significance for him since he had seen her.

"Kind of yellow about the head" he had called her, when, in sober truth, the molten gold of her hair in the sun had burned into his senses; the cold eyes she had lifted for one moment to his started the fierce passion that stood for attraction with him.

He was a man to whom every girl was fair game, till he had tired of her; a man, too, who had usually only to hold up his finger to any woman of the kind he was wont to meet. Beauty like the "Ethel-girl's"—at a roadhouse—would probably not even require that lifted finger. It was not the first time Eldon had used a girl to track a man; yet he walked slowly toward the roadhouse, and thought hard.

This girl was his only chance, of course, of finding out whether the man who had left her house in the red dawn had or had not been Scarlett; but, though to make love to her might be the quickest way to discover it, there might be—others!

"If Scarlett hadn't been burned to a char by a woman he'd be back to see this kind of a girl," he thought coarsely, "but Scarlett won't even remember her. If it's another man, he'll"—and he swore over it—"come back! I would, if she'd whispered to me. But I guess I won't have to wait long to find out which it was—from a roadhouse girl!"

His grin and his thoughtful progress stopped dead. From the roadhouse yard had come the crack of a rifle. It was so unexpected, and Mr. Eldon knew so little about the inhabitants, that he could not be blamed for thinking it might have a

personal significance. He took cover abruptly behind a gatepost, peered round it, and laughed sheepishly.

In the yard, with their backs toward him, stood a tall, slack-jointed man apparently trying a new rifle, and beside him was the "Ethel-girl"!

Eldon heard her laugh as Welsh fired again at something, and missed. Then he stepped casually forward and hailed the shooter. He explained glibly that he and a friend were camping across the road, resting up a string of horses for Janesville, and that they were out of salt.

Jim Welsh turned with shy cordiality. Drunk or sober, and over half his time he was the former, his fellow creatures were welcome to him; even such as chose to camp instead of patronizing his roadhouse. Not that the latter thought occurred to him: keeping a roadhouse at all was too much of an accident to be taken seriously. It had been just a backwoods farm till the Janesville road cut past it, and stray travelers, wishing to stay there, stayed.

"Glad to see you," he said simply. He had been an educated man when first he buried himself in the wilderness, and, when he was not drinking, he was one still. "You can have all the salt you want. Athol—my niece here—has plenty."

Athol! The unusual name struck Eldon oddly: to have found her a real "Ethel-girl" would have suited him better. But as she turned he forgot the trifle of her name. Scarlett had merely realized

that she was beautiful. Eldon took in her every point like a slave-dealer.

Her hair, that was pure gold threaded with copper; her apricot-flushed skin; her arrow-straight figure, and her eyes, which were blue, set in black lashes. They met his—and checked them. For their glance was hard as a man's, and far more searching.

Eldon realized with a shock that, however she came there, she was no roadhouse girl. He turned to Welsh with an effort.

“New gun?” he drawled, glancing at the rifle.

“Yes! Throws a trifle high. Want to try it?”

Eldon could shoot, and he knew it. An angry impulse made him want the girl who had turned away from him with that one hard look to know it, too. Half an old bottle glittered in the sun, not too far off. Eldon took up Welsh's rifle and fired the instant it touched his shoulder. The bottle shattered, and Welsh said something civil; but without the astonishment at his quickness and apparent lack of aim to which Eldon was used.

“Your turn next, Athol,” he added to the girl; and it struck Eldon oddly that, so far, she had never said a word.

“Oh, why?” she returned carelessly. “But if you like,” as Welsh's face fell, “I'll write my name on the fence.”

It was fifty yards further off than Eldon's bottle, and he smiled incredulously as she lifted the rifle—

but the smile died. He was quick as men go—but he had never imagined such quickness as this girl's. Five shots had rung out almost as one, and in the fence-rail stood an "A," pierced with the five bullets. Looking at her shooting, Eldon liked still less her silence when she had put down the rifle.

"It's no sort of distance for her," said Welsh with proud apology. "But there's no chance of mistake in Athol's shooting."

Eldon needed no telling. He was too sore at having been beaten by a girl. Oddly enough, it sowed in his mind the first seeds of a curious hatred for her, that was to crush out all thought of her beauty. He stood wishing viciously that he could pick her up bodily and shake the truth out of her as to whether or not Sabarin's stranger had been Scarlett when he saw her start past him; just as a horse might start under the sudden cut of a whip.

With Welsh's coming she had had no chance to keep the stable key; and Welsh, going unnoticed behind her and Eldon, had flung the stable door wide open.

"The salt's in the house, Uncle Jim," she cried sharply, "if Mr. Eldon wants salt!"

As she spoke she had pushed the door shut, and in a breath was leaning against it; but it was too late. Inside the stable, clear in the hot light, Eldon had seen a chestnut pony, white on two legs from the hock down—the pony which had been bought in Janesville! It was no sham miner from Tabreak

who had left it here, but Scarlett: and the girl with the hard eyes knew it.

For there had been one—just one—half-second when Athol's look had met his with fear, and—what was worse—comprehension. She had gripped herself to stolidity almost instantly, but the mischief was done. Eldon sucked in both cheeks between his strong teeth before he spoke. He had taken Jim Welsh in from head to heels, and Jim Welsh's testimony should clinch what his niece's face had betrayed.

"I just need a little man's salt, not horse's," he said mildly. "That chestnut yours, Mr. Welsh?"

"No, it's a stranger," returned Welsh carelessly. He had heard nothing of Scarlett beyond the bare fact of an unknown man having stayed a night, and was not interested. "A man left it here because it was sick. He's coming back for it shortly."

"Oh!" The hand that held Eldon's cigarette jerked infinitesimally. "One of the Tabeak rush, I suppose! I hear there's been a strike there."

"Tabeak rush!" Welsh stared. "There's no rush in Tabeak," he exclaimed, "it's the deadest place I ever saw! I've just been there, and there hasn't been a man made a dollar a day out of a claim. Don't let anybody tell you differently, because it isn't so."

Eldon had hoped it, if he had not dared to believe it. He had to keep his eyes on the ground

to hide the triumph in them. Welsh's niece might be a high and mighty, contemptuous lady, but Scarlett had been the man who had left the pony, and he knew it; if Welsh did not. And Scarlett, who would never come back for a woman, would come back twice over for a horse.

It seemed to Mr. Eldon that even Inkster would not go home just yet, nor without the Drowning Valley gold; and that he had made no unfounded boast himself when he announced his fingers were already on Red Scarlett. He looked up so suddenly that for the second time he caught Athol Gray with unguarded eyes full on his face—and for once Eldon stood taken aback, with a new light cast on his calculations.

“It isn't the horse Scarlett's coming back for,” he thought; and it was pure intuition; “*it's the girl.*”

Then and there he gave up all intention of making love to her. Even if he had not really taken a dislike to her, she was not the kind who would listen to his speeches; and besides, the sight of the pack-pony had put something else into his head. All he had to do now to get Scarlett would be to stay beside it and the girl, and wait till he came.

But to the assortment of weapons that already adorned his body Mr. Eldon added that night, and thoughtfully, a raw-hide rope—after he had tried a few experiments with it on Sabarin; whom, as was well known except by Scarlett, no rope could hold.

CHAPTER XIII

“BURNS!”

HALLIDAY, struggling up the narrow flume, candle in hand, had suddenly a queer sensation as if his heart were standing still. He stopped, snatching for breath, and knew it was the silence in the passage that had struck him physically, before his mind sensed it. He had come tearing up to the sound of a struggle, of Heaven knew who or what, fighting in the dark with Scarlett, and now there was only silence—so dead that it gripped him.

“Scarlett,” he called chokingly, “Red!” And on the very word his checked blood came tearing back through his veins. From somewhere, far or near he could not tell, there was an answer; muffled, yet Scarlett’s voice.

“Hallo,” it called. “Come on!”

Halliday was coming on already, up places and down places he could only guess were right, for three or four ways opened up before his guttering light. Plain luck, more than anything else, kept him to the main one; and suddenly rounding a turn he saw the unmistakable light of Scarlett’s lantern. It shone on Scarlett himself, standing up; and on

something else that lay down, lax and uninterested. Halliday jerked up at five yards' distance.

“ Is it the Frenchy? ” he panted. “ Lord, Scarlett, you gave me a fright! When I heard rocks tumbling round I made sure they'd got you. D'ye mean to say this man's here alone? ”

“ I think so, ” Scarlett answered grimly. “ There didn't seem to be any others. But—he isn't the Frenchman—and I don't think he can be any of his hangers-on. Heaven alone knows who he is! ”

“ I bet he's cut from the same cloth, ” Halliday growled. He strode over to the figure that lay prostrate on its face. “ Why, the man's a skeleton! ” he exclaimed. He stared at the thin shoulder blades that stood out like knives under the man's old shirt, at the emaciated bare feet sticking out from his ragged trousers. “ Why, he's starved! ”

Scarlett nodded. “ Didn't prevent his trying to stun me with a stone from behind, though, ” he answered dryly. “ Whoever he is, he fought like a cat. I don't wonder you heard the row. I'd have felt easier in it, ” with a glance round the dark passage, “ if I'd known just where we were rolling over and over to before I had to choke him. ”

“ Pity you hadn't killed him, ” said Halliday uneasily. “ He must be one of Eldon's gang. But even if he is, I wouldn't fancy the job of getting rid of him in cold blood, now. How did he get in here, anyway? ”

“ I didn't have much chance to converse with

him," returned Scarlett crossly: the rock that had missed his head had glanced down on his knee-cap, and it hurt. "I suppose he came in the back way, somehow, and all we can do is to put him out of it; given that we can find it. Look out," and it was only half from the knock Halliday had given his bruises as he bounced past him, "where you're going! What on earth are you shouting at?"

"*Him*," gasped Halliday. "I know him—of course I know him! I've been trying to recollect where I ever saw that before." He passed a thick finger over a white scar that ran like a parting down the back of the insensible man's head; and lifted it suddenly, as if it had touched something he had not expected. There was a two days' old wound beside the scar.

"What's that?" asked Scarlett sharply. "I didn't do it."

"You'd no need to, if you did," said Halliday simply. "Why, Red, he hasn't got anything to do with the Frenchman—and he's the only man besides us who ever saw this gold! I told you I knew him, and I do. It's Burns!"

"It's *who*?"

Halliday turned the limp figure over, and the gaunt face rolled into the white lantern light.

"Burns," he said. "The crazy man I told you about, that Sabiel told you about, too; that was in here before us, and the Indians thought was drowned. I knew he'd got out the back way all

right, as soon as I knew there could be a back way, for I was one of the men who helped get him into a Toronto asylum when he was going round the country jabbering crazy. He got out of there again, that's all, and got back here, like only crazy people can. It would be him that fired that nugget at me: any sane man would have kept it." He sat back on his heels and looked at Scarlett over the heap of rag-covered bones that was Burns.

"I don't know when I've felt such a heap of relief all at once," he added simply. "You were right, you did slip the Frenchman on the Janesville road; and he don't know any more of you to tell Eldon than if you'd gone into the ground—any more than he can guess at, anyway. I feel—well, it's kind of like thinking you're besieged, and suddenly knowing you ain't! I guess Sabiel won't need to sit up any more nights, holding a gun."

"Do you mean he did last night?"

Halliday nodded. "I believe he'd give his skin for you," he returned. "Look here, Red; seeing this is Burns, what are we going to do with him?"

Scarlett knelt down and scrutinized the unconscious face. Burns's skull bones showed through the skin, through his scalp covered with gray hair. His face might have been wild once; it was only exhausted now.

"He's all but starved," Scarlett commented, "and I choked him too, in mistake for the Frenchman. Do?" he stood up again, "there's only one thing to

do! This was his gold before it was ours, though I suppose even a crazy man can take in that there's enough of it to go round if we were three hundred, instead of three. We'll carry him down to the lower cave, and keep him there till we see how he is when he comes round. We can't take him to camp. Sabiel may be a guardian angel for you and me, but he'd put a bullet through a white man he'd think risen from the dead. Go slow, Billy, when we lift him. I've hurt my knee."

"I'll carry him: he's only skin! You hold the lantern," grunted Halliday. He slung the miserable body over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. "And don't miss the way, Scarlett, for goodness' sake! I passed about twenty turns coming up here."

But four hours' hunting in the said turns had made them plain to Scarlett. He and Halliday brought up inside the lower cave within twenty minutes. But somehow the great lode there struck Scarlett's eyes differently, looked at over the body of the man who had found it first, and got nothing out of it but to escape with his bare life and be locked in an asylum. For a man who had presumably led a free life Scarlett had a curious sympathy with one who had known what it was to be locked in.

"He's earned his share, however he got back here," he said. "Give me the water can, Halliday. I'll get him to, and hear what he says."

But Burns, opening red-rimmed eyes under the

cold water, said nothing. Scarlett had seen starvation before. He handed out, morsel by morsel, the cold meat meant for his own lunch; and, with a queer sensation at his heart, saw the man's eyes grow steady with the food.

"He isn't crazy now, whatever he may have been," he thought. Yet, seeing the look Burns gave at Halliday, then at the gold, he was not so sure. "It's yours," he said reassuringly. "At least, all you want of it. You found it before we did. These are your tools we found here. But we came on the gold fairly, too. There's no reason we shouldn't take our share as well as you."

"Share," repeated Burns stupidly. He jerked out a trembling hand to Scarlett, who was lighting a cigarette. "Gimme—for Heaven's sake—to-bacco!" and it was as if his stiff tongue were unused to making words. "Tobacco."

Scarlett hastily relinquished his fresh-made cigarette to the claw-like fingers. Burns, with his head against the incredible gold behind him, smoked avidly, and Halliday waited for him to be sick. But the tobacco had lifted his nerves more than wine.

"I don't know who you are," he said hesitatingly, "nor how you got here. Are the Indians dead and gone, or how did they let you come in?"

Scarlett told him, from the double rescue of Sabiel and the reward for it, to the following-up of the Frenchman, for whom he had taken Burns himself.

"I don't take any stock in Indians," the man commented listlessly. "You'll find yours turn on you, yet. They'd have killed me when I was here before if they hadn't thought I was drowned. It's no good worrying about the Frenchman, either: he can't find this place. Why, it took me two years, first time I came!" He sat staring in front of him with a curious detachment.

"I shouldn't have thought you'd exactly pine to get back here," Halliday put in dryly. "Say, didn't you know me, that you plugged that nugget there at my head? I'm Halliday. I knew you as soon as I set eyes on you."

"No." Burns stared at him as detachedly as ever. "I don't know you." And he stared again. "I seem to remember, and then I don't," he muttered. "Was it you shot at me when I was in the tunnel? I thought you were a gang of men from the noise. I guess"—he lit another cigarette with an effort—"I'd got kind of lonely and hungry going round here in the dark."

"It was just me shot at you, and I'm sorry," returned Halliday handsomely; but Burns made no answer. Scarlett watched him with cool, grave eyes.

"How did you get in?" he asked suddenly. "Of course I know that"—he nodded at the dark passage behind Burns—"leads out of doors somewhere, but I haven't taken the time to find out where."

"I forget," said Burns slowly. "I—I guess I came in that way, but I forget how! I couldn't get

out again when I lost my grub, and I've starved. I don't know; perhaps there was a passage," vaguely.

But, crazy or not crazy, it seemed to Scarlett the vagueness in his speech was intentional. At the mention of the back way out he had seen the intelligence in the man's eyes light, and go out, as a match goes out.

"It doesn't signify," he returned sharply. His eyes met Burns's, and at the expression in them the man shrank into himself. "We'd better get down to business first, and arrange things with you. You discovered this place before we did, but Halliday and I got here as fairly as you did. You can have all the gold you want, but it's understood that we do no giving up to you. We'll work with you, in lays or shares or whatever you like, or every man for himself; but we're going to work. For one thing, you couldn't stay here without us, if you've forgotten the back way out, as you say. Sabiel would finish you off if you dared use the front one, and, unless he sees you—or we bring it to you—you can't get food."

Burns stared at his bare feet, and said nothing.

"I've heard you've had hard luck, and been ill, and all that," Scarlett went on significantly, "but I'm talking to you as if you were well, now. We'll work the gold, anyway—it's as much ours as yours, for we were here days before you got back—but, if you're wise, we'll work it on good terms with you! We're making no objection to your working it, too.

Heaven knows, there's enough of it, and I've no stomach for useless quarreling. If the Frenchman's outfit gets here we'll have plenty that's necessary."

"That's true," said Burns slowly. He paused, as if he were turning Scarlett's terms over in his mind. They were better than any one else would have given him over gold he had not seen for ten years, but they were bitter. "You're pretty fair," he said at last. "But as for talking to me as if I were sane," coolly, "so I am! I guess there was no craziness in getting out of an asylum to come back to gold like this: and saying that there was such gold in the world was the only reason they had for calling me crazy. Halliday," he added unexpectedly, "knows that!"

Scarlett's eyes narrowed. It was not five minutes since Burns had refused to recognize Halliday. Sane or not sane, he did not trust him. But to go shares with him was unavoidable.

"Is it a bargain, or not?" he asked brusquely. "We say nothing about you to Sabiel; you stay here, and we feed you—and you can either work the stope on your own account, or go in with us on a lay of a third all round! Whichever you say."

"I'll work on the third: the lay," said Burns. He looked up so quietly that for the first time Scarlett thought him normal. "You see, you're stronger than I am, yet; I'll get more by taking a third. I've had a hard time getting back here, and—— You've seen the gold," he interrupted himself abruptly.

“ You know how you’d feel if you’d been me and come here to find some one had jumped you! I guess if I went crazy again, so would you have done. I’ll tell you what it was like some day, sitting up there in the dark and listening to your picks. Sometimes I’d light a match and crawl down to you—as far as I dared. I thought of every way of getting you out; but you see, I couldn’t tell how many of you were in. I got here two days before Halliday shot at me, and when I first heard voices I thought you two were twenty people, what with the echoes and all. I guess just two’s a kind of a relief! ”

But somehow Scarlett fancied the pale-lipped smile under the ragged mustache was snarling.

“ Well,” he commented, as though he had noticed nothing and without a look at Halliday, “ that’s all right, then. We’ll get to our work now, and you’d better take a sleep. I’ll bring over a blanket for you to-morrow.”

“ You’ve acted mighty white,” cried Burns suddenly. But it sounded curiously insincere.

“ You can thank Halliday, then,” Scarlett responded dryly. “ I don’t know that I wouldn’t have put you out where you came in.”

“ Just so,” said Burns. And this time Scarlett could have sworn the man grinned, as he curled himself round to sleep.

“ See here,” he said to Halliday sharply, as the two emerged into the cave’s mouth after a long day’s work, through the clamor of which Burns had

slept like an infant, "we couldn't have done otherwise than we have done, but I don't like your friend Burns. He may be too near the line of insanity to know it, but the man's a liar. I would not feel easy to hear his pick going too close behind me, either. He doesn't impress me as safe."

"Sho," returned Halliday stolidly. "He's nothing but a softy: always was! Seems kind of hard now that I helped shove him into an asylum for talking loony about the very gold that's been the saving of me. I guess it's true, too, about the hard time he had getting back to this place. What makes you call him a liar?"

"The back way out, that he says he forgets. Why, I *saw* him remember every turn of it, before he said he didn't!"

"Don't see how it matters!"

"Well, I do"—Scarlett slid the canoe into the lake to go back to Sabiel—"and I only hope you won't have to find out. It's queer, but ever since I knew there was a back way out of the cave at all, I've felt it mattered more than anything—to men working in there! I'm going to find it to-morrow, Burns or no Burns. He can't have forgotten it long, either," weightily, "for there were grass stains on his hands—not a week old at the most. For goodness' sake, Halliday, don't trust the man! I know it's luck for us that he's turned out not to belong to Eldon's lot, but——" He broke off with a dismayed oath.

“ But what? ” asked Halliday, staring.

“ Nothing. ” Scarlett dug his paddle into the water viciously. Something had flashed over him that did not please him. It was all very well to be relieved that Burns was only Burns, and that Eldon and the Frenchman had really lost his trail—but what about the girl at the roadhouse who had warned him of them?

They had not lost her trail; and if that new Eldon whom Scarlett had seen on the Janesville road guessed that it was through her he and his gold had escaped him and his friends, he would have no scruples in paying her out for it. It was very probable that he had discovered nothing about her share in the game, but there was the off chance that he might have. And against all his common sense, for there did not seem any particular way in which he could manage it, there swept over Scarlett the conviction that he was bound to go and look after Athol Gray. The only thing that did not cross his mind was that he, Red Scarlett, who hated women, was thinking of a girl—as a girl—night and day!

CHAPTER XIV

THE BACK WAY

BUT think of her as he might, Scarlett's care for the roadhouse girl had to wait, like the search for the back way out of the caves, that came next in importance to it. The gold had to be the first thing; and there were awful arrears of labor to make up. At the rate they had been getting it out they would not be rich in a year, and there was no saying when Sabiel would get restless and want them to go. Scarlett worked at the lode like three men, at first with one eye on Burns. But the man puzzled him. In the certainty of his gold, with food and companionship, he had lost his wildness. He talked quite simply and openly about his return to the great lode no one had ever believed in, and of his release from the asylum; yet somehow he was not natural.

To Scarlett's question about how he had re-entered the caves, the first morning he had leisure for questions, Burns gave merely a cunning stare.

"I don't know," he said carelessly—"not to explain. All I do know is you don't have to come up Drowning Valley; you kind of strike across the

mountains behind it, and there's a gully you can't mistake. You can find your way in here behind the caves by it all right, if you know how; but out again, in the dark"—his face twitched as if he wanted to laugh—"is different! Though it doesn't matter," he added hastily, "to any one but me. You and Halliday can use the front door."

Scarlett nodded. He watched the man turn back to work with a curious expert trick about him that he and Halliday lacked. He was weak, but he knew his business as they did not; and half a dozen words from him had changed Halliday's childish tinkering at the ruined forge into intelligent repairs. Yet, oddly enough, his very inertness about the back exit from the place reminded Scarlett afresh of the importance of finding it; and with half a nod to Halliday he disappeared unostentatiously while Burns's back was turned. In spite of the man's altered manner he had a feeling that Burns was not playing fair about the back way that had let him in.

"Heaven knows why," Scarlett reflected, "unless the crazy streak in him makes him think he may want to slip out that way yet without me or Halliday!"

Even the curious facility with which Burns, coming back after untold hardships to the gold he had dreamed of for years, had adapted himself to the changed conditions of sharing it with two other men, made Scarlett suspicious. The energy which must have animated that frail body did not tally with the

man's supineness now. But there was no sense in worrying over Burns's attitude. Scarlett went easily enough to the place where that gentleman's rock had so nearly been the end of him, and stared round him by the light of one of Halliday's candles.

Where he stood was the center of four—no, five passages. To Scarlett's surprise no draught of fresh air seemed to come from any of them. The entrance to each was dark, slimy, and uninviting. Scarlett chose the dryest as the most promising, and went down it. Before a hundred paces the place had narrowed till it squeezed on him, and the end of it was plainly blocked. He backed out till he could turn, and tried another passage; which ran upward and ended tamely in a heap of gravel. Two more were mere blinds like it; but at the fifth Scarlett was insensibly cheered.

This new alley was wider than he liked, for the gloom of it ate up his candle-light, and it twisted and turned fantastically; but it seemed to lead somewhere. At first it ascended sharply; then its slant descended, and up it came the unmistakable scent of running water. The floor under Scarlett's feet turned slippery, like stone polished by pressure; but the only thing which made him notice it was that the effort of keeping his feet on the glassy incline was hurting his bruised knee. He knelt down to rest it; and in the dead silence caught his breath.

He had felt, more than thought, that some one moved in the darkness behind him; and at first he

put the soft movement down to fancy. But it was not. Somewhere, too close to him, a man breathed hard, as if he had been running.

Scarlett swung round on his sound knee, and the light of his candle fell on Burns; shrunk against the wall and holding to it with one hand. The other was down at his side. With one glance at the man's face Scarlett took time to call himself a fool for leaving his gun behind him before he spoke.

"What do you want?" he asked roughly. "Why aren't you working?"

But Burns took no notice of the questions.

"Crawl," he cried fiercely, "crawl over to me!"

"What for?" Scarlett was suddenly aware of the slipperiness of the incline he knelt on, and that Burns stood well above him.

"Your life! It's gone in two minutes if you don't."

There was fierce passion of some sort in his voice, and Scarlett waited to see his hidden hand come out with a revolver in it; but instead it was flung out empty, so that it almost—not quite—reached him. His eyes went instinctively to the other hand, that had not moved. It was not clutching the wall, as he had thought, but holding something black; like a stone.

"It won't do, Burns," he said quietly.

In the candle-light the man's eyes flashed, and dulled again.

"You're like everybody else, Mr. Scarlett," he

cried darkly. "You think I'm a liar because I said I'd forgotten the way out, and because I laughed when I told you so! I wouldn't have laughed if I'd remembered it. It was thinking of this way, and you trusting to get out by it made me laugh—but I never thought you'd find it. Are you," irrelevantly, "leaning your weight against a knob of stone?"

"Partly," said Scarlett, puzzled.

"Get off from it then! It's loose. Don't stand. *Crawl!*"

Scarlett, moving the fraction of an inch back and not forward, knew suddenly that Burns was at least not lying now. The round knob of rock that stood up in the glassy slope was not part of it; only socketed there—and it was giving; infinitesimally, but giving.

He flung himself forward, up towards Burns; clutching not at the hand held out to him, but at the smooth floor. The instantaneous conviction that shot through him that the half-crazy hand held out to him might push and not pull might have been wrong, but he acted on it. If Burns were taken aback, he was quick as well as cunning.

"Look!" he cried. But not till the sharply opened light of it cut into his eyes did Scarlett realize that the dark thing Burns held was his own lantern. "Listen, too! Your candle wasn't any good in a place like this."

In the sudden glare Scarlett could see nothing; but there was no need to listen. The sharp slither of

something in motion had startled him like a rifle bullet. He sickened as he realized it was the very stone he had had his weight on that was flying down the slope where he had knelt, gathering velocity till it whizzed like a rocket. Very sharply there was no sound at all. Scarlett had time to get on his feet and stand by Burns before a queer dead "plop" broke the heavy silence. The stone had taken water, with a straight cutting fall that made no splash.

Burns nodded into his face. "That's where you'd have gone! After that one stone, there was nothing to catch to. Look!"

He swung the lantern high, and Scarlett saw what the candle had not shown him. The steep passage, that he had thought ran on into unexplored depths of darkness, stopped, fifty feet below him; cut off in a smooth lip. What he had thought the widening of the already wide tunnel was space; the floorless emptiness of a pit blacker than the grave.

"It's the way the water gets off when the lower cave's flooded!" Scarlett exclaimed sharply.

Burns nodded. "It gets out underground somewhere. I ought to know—it nearly caught me once! I'd have told you so, if I'd ever thought you'd try these tunnels with only a candle."

It struck Scarlett that in that case it was odd for Burns to follow him in silence, carrying a shut lantern. Before he could say so Halliday's voice came from behind him.

"What the dickens," he began angrily. "Say, Burns, when next you take a fit to grab the only lantern and clear out, on what's none of your business, p'r'aps you'll give me warning! I'd a dog of a fright when you left me in the dark. No thanks to you I haven't killed myself getting after you."

Scarlett whistled: he had been right in thinking Burns had meant to have no followers. But it was no time to say so.

"I've been making an ass of myself," he announced hastily. "It's just as well Burns did come. See here!" He tossed a pebble down the inclined plane grimly. Burns in solid fact had saved his life; yet he wondered why he was not more grateful, and why it was not convincing. "It's the way the floods get out," he added, to get rid of the thought.

Halliday hummed a tune; glanced at the smooth roof above him; and hummed again.

"They don't have much room to spare," he observed. "No wonder the rock's smooth: they've cleaned it off like—like Niagara put into a drain! Say, Red, they've come up to the roof—and I guess we are still lower than the lake level! If a flood came now there wouldn't be much place here for you and me, unless we fancied going down there." He glanced with a shudder at the depths they stood over.

"It's taken a good while to strike you," Scarlett answered dryly. Burns had set down the lantern

and faded quietly away, and Scarlett moved to Halliday's side. "What made you follow him?" he breathed.

"What you said about not trusting him, for one thing,—besides, he'd no business to grab up the lantern and leave me in the dark! I came as close on him as I could."

"What d'ye think about it, then?"

"I don't—know," Halliday hesitated irresolutely. "He couldn't be as crazy as that, Red!"

"What did you put him in the asylum for?"

Halliday flushed. "Well, he flew like a wildcat at anybody who laughed at him! But that was kind of natural."

Scarlett opened his lips and closed them again. There was no good in putting suspicions into Halliday's head that were probably there already; and besides, they had caught up to Burns. The three men moved back in silence to where the five passages joined in one central chamber, and Scarlett's thoughts jolted like a tram-car feeling for a switch.

Five passages were all there were; he had made sure of that—and none of them led up to the outside air. His eyes caught the back of Burns's head as the man walked listlessly in front of him; and saw, not the old scar Halliday had recognized, but something else. Above it was that jagged clot of dried blood that was new, yet too old to have been any of Scarlett's making.

"I never hit him; and, anyhow, he fell on his

face," Scarlett mused. "Besides"—and another factor in the sum he was doing in his head came to him with more force and suddenness than he liked.

The heavy draft of fresh air, that had come down to the lower cave from the very place where he stood now was gone; it had changed to a languid, fitful trickle, that even now was less than when he had come up here, two hours ago. That and the wound on Burns's head came to a solid, appalling fact that made Scarlett stop dead.

There had been a back way out, by which Burns had come in—had been, only! Coming in by it, he must have dislodged some stone that was the keystone of the entrance, and either that or the rubble that came after it had hit him on the back of the head as it closed up the way he had come in by. Each minute must be closing it more and more as the fine stuff silted after the large into what had been an opening.

Scarlett suddenly forgave Burns all he might or might not have meant to do. To a man who had found other men sharing his gold, able to come out and in at their own will, while his one poor avenue of escape was blocked for him, anything might seem forgivable. He moved forward to Burns, and put his hand on the man's arm.

"See here," he said impulsively, "there's something you don't seem to have thought of. If another flood came, Halliday and I'd be ready for it—we'd take you out like we'd take ourselves—I'd an-

swer for Sabiel! Did you think we'd leave you here to die?"

"I—didn't know," Burns muttered very slowly, and, it seemed to Scarlett, agonizingly. He was pulling himself together, trying to make the cog-wheels of his shattered brain click, catch, and go on. "Don't speak about—the way out!" he exclaimed. "It makes that pit draw me, like I once saw it draw the water, all smooth and oily. Don't remind me! There was another way, and it's gone—something hit me on the head when it went."

"Well, you won't need it"—Scarlett's pulses jumped, for his guess was right—"so long as you stick to us! See?"

Burns wheeled; and awkwardly, as if he had forgotten how, held out his hand.

"I came to save you, just now," he said tremulously. "I didn't dare show the lantern, for fear of what I saw. I could only do it in the dark, till I knew you were there! But you needn't believe me."

Scarlett had a curious pity for him as he shuffled away to the lode; but he had brought more trouble on them than the presence of his shaky personality. He and Halliday stood looking at each other with that trouble in their minds, and it was not the lack of a back way of escape from the bowels of the earth, but the lack of air.

Burns's entrance must have disorganized the whole scheme of ventilation that had freshened the

cave. In the absence of the wholesome draft from outside, the place was suffocating, and, worse still, they could never make gold into bars without air for the furnace. With one consent, the two men turned once more to the four passages that did not end in a pit. Two were plainly impossible; of the other two, the first ended in bed-rock, and, after an hour's toil at the second, Halliday recoiled.

" Might as well try to dig through to China," he said, as he spat on his hands viciously, then on the rolling rubble that faced him. " This wall's a mile through."

" Then we'll dig a mile!" Scarlett's bruised knee might be sore, but his soul was sorer at being beaten. " There couldn't be a lateral opening, anyhow. Move! I'm going to try straight over my head." He swung his pick upward savagely, felt it catch, and, even as he wrenched at it, sprang back. " The lantern!" he yelled. " Mind the lantern."

But it was too late. Halliday had just time to jump clear as Scarlett's pick, and the rock it had caught in, came down together. There was a crunch of tin, a shatter of glass, and darkness where the lantern stood. In the darkness a clatter of small pebbles and gravel hit Scarlett's shoulder. After them came the blessed smell of fresh air.

" We're through," he gasped—" through!" He whipped a candle from his pocket. It went out in the draft of the hole that was certainly through to something, for the wind came out of it as from an

inlet pipe. Backing into a corner, he relit the candle, shielding it with his hands. "We've got the air," he commented grimly, "but we haven't got a way out—even for Burns's bones! Look." And Halliday followed his gaze.

Over their heads was a slab of rock like a flagstone; firmly set, except at the end, where the smaller stones and gravel had been wrenched away like loose mortar by Scarlett's pick. He set down the candle, and shoved at the slab doubtfully with a crowbar; then with his hands, standing on Halliday's shoulders.

"Best let well alone," he muttered. "If this comes down on us, Heaven knows what'll be after it. We've got what we want most, and that's air!"

"I dunno," said Halliday dryly, as he held up a shapeless mass he had retrieved from the rubbish. "That's the lantern," he added with some finality.

"Broken! Well, it can't be helped. We'll work with candles."

Halliday's face might have been comic elsewhere. "Candles," he repeated. "I guess I ought to be killed, Red! I never told you to get 'em in Janesville, and we're on the last one."

"What?" said Scarlett. It meant he would have to go out for them, and it was a chance to see Eldon was not worrying that girl. A queer excitement flashed through him at the thought of her, such as he had never felt in his life. He looked up unguardedly, and Halliday's face pulled him up in

162 Out of Drowning Valley

his purpose like a saw-bit. He had no right to jeopardize Halliday's gold by letting Eldon see him, for the sake of any girl.

"All right," he said shortly. "We'll work the gold with torches!"

CHAPTER XV

HENSHAW'S GANG

BUT to mine by torchlight was not so easy as it sounded; even Burns cursed as he trod out the last of the contrivances that gave no light. There was nothing for it but a fire, and, between the heat, the flicker, and the maddening smoke of it, the men were frantic. Red-eyed and sore-throated, Scarlett came out at the end of the day's wasted toil and threw the situation at Sabiel.

"You don't know how, that's the matter," commented the man placidly; "but I get you something for light from my house. If I go now, I am back by the morning."

But in the morning there was no sign of him, nor the next morning either. Time, Scarlett knew, was nothing to Indians; but something worse than Sabiel's delay worried him. Food was low, without the man to fish and shoot; and, even with heartrending toil, they were doing bad work on the gold. It was his chance to make for the roadhouse, and set his mind at ease about the girl there; but he never thought of it as, with a wrathful heart, he flung himself on the buckskin and made for Sabiel's—only

to pull up, dumfounded, at the door. There was no one in the house, and there had been no one. Cobwebs covered the unused door-latch, and even the straying cows and ponies were gone.

It was so utterly unforeseen that Scarlett sat motionless with a queer feeling of apprehension at his heart. That Indians were kittle cattle to drive, no man knew better than he. Yet he could not think Sabiel had deserted him. It came over him uneasily that Eldon might have kidnapped him—the Frenchman would know Scarlett's Indian as easily as Scarlett himself—and he turned the buckskin into the intervale that led to the pasture giving on the Janesville road. But search the place as he might he came on no sign of Sabiel, nor any track of a shod horse to show he had been waylaid. An irresistible impulse to push on to the roadhouse, and ask if he had been seen there, rushed over Scarlett; but his buckskin had not advanced two strides into the pasture when he stopped him, as the muffled sound caught his ears of a horse at a walk. That stopped, too; with startling suddenness. Scarlett slipped behind a clump of spruces and began to edge the buckskin down to where the noise had ceased.

"Eldon," he thought swiftly. But as a horse's head came into his vision he checked the buckskin and stared incredulously. It was not Eldon in the pasture: it was Athol Gray!

She had not seen him; and she sat motionless on

her pony, staring at nothing—white, and somehow lifeless-looking. Things were not going as she liked at the roadhouse, and they were making her nervous. Eldon had wound Jim Welsh round his finger like a wet rag, and had sat down at the house as a hound sits at a fox's earth.

He was as certain that Scarlett would come back there as he was of being alive, or of beating Welsh at pinochle. It had been quite simple to be a boarder at the roadhouse, and it was just as simple to keep an untiring eye on Athol Gray. It had taken the girl just one day to realize that if Eldon were not watching her, Inkster was—and, for all she knew, the Frenchman. It was no good speaking to Jim Welsh about it. To his simple soul it would have seemed that Eldon's occupation was to play pinochle, and that Inkster's promenades were a coincidence; but the silent girl on the pony knew better.

It had been by a trick that she had got out unnoticed to-day, and one that probably could not be tried twice. She turned in her saddle as she thought it, and listened long and hard for sounds of pursuit. As she turned round again she started in every nerve in her body. Scarlett, leading the buckskin, had come out close beside her; but, before she realized him, her hand had gone to her pocket with the quick gesture that was somehow pathetic, in a girl.

"You," she said, in a queer, shocked whisper.

"Just me," Scarlett laughed from pure pleasure,

but his laugh died as he took in the change in her face since last he had seen her. It was white, in spite of the heat and the riotous joy of new summer in the air, and she had not even the semblance of a smile. "I hate to see you so handy with a gun," he said abruptly. "What's the reason? I know there'd have to be one, with you."

"Nothing!" She smiled now, but she forced it. "Only I didn't see who you were at first, and——"

"Have you been needing guns?" with a sudden queer sternness. "Is Eldon——"

But she cut off the question. "No," she said gravely. "That is—Mr. Scarlett, I'm puzzled; I don't know what to do. I think it's safe here—I don't know—but I've got to speak to you!"

Scarlett led her pony into cover beside the buckskin, and for a moment she said nothing. Something in her face gave him a raging impatience.

"Well," he said gently, "you may as well say it. I've brought trouble on you, and you're bothered!"

"I was: I'm not now," she returned thoughtfully. She lifted her eyes to his face, not girlishly, but as a man might have. "You weren't coming to our house, were you?"

He nodded, rather guiltily.

"After all I've told you! It's madness," trenchantly. "You must never come there: Eldon's living in our house!"

"Worrying you?" sharply.

"No! Playing pinochle with Uncle Jim. And,"

slowly, "he's going to stay. He says his tent's crowded enough, with Inkster and the Frenchman."

Scarlett frowned. "If Eldon's troubling you, please say so," he commanded shortly.

But she shook her head. "Not one bit, now that I've met you. You see, what bothered me was that I didn't know what to do on your account. I don't know what Eldon heard about you in Janesville; but he must have heard something, for he saw your pack-pony in the stable before I could stop him, and he knew it was yours. I could see it in his face! I think he's just sat down to wait for you to come for it, and I was sick with fright that you might come. There was no way to send you word not to. But if you think he's given up hunting for you and your mine, he hasn't. I'm certain he has some scheme to track you to it that I can't make out."

Scarlett shook his head. It was not like Eldon to sit down and wait for anything, judging from the little he had seen of him in Blaze Creek.

"My Indian's disappeared," he said suddenly. "You don't think Eldon got hold of him?"

"No! He hasn't got hold of any one," Athol returned positively. "How do you mean, your Indian?" she asked.

Scarlett told her; with the rider that he had been nearly coming to the roadhouse to ask about him.

"They haven't got him," Athol said thoughtfully. "I wouldn't worry; he'll probably turn up.

But," she laughed, and Scarlett saw the sweet color had come back to her face, "it seems to me it's a mercy I sneaked out to-day and happened to meet you!"

"I wasn't exactly going to ride up to your front door," responded Scarlett dryly. "And just what do you mean by—sneaking out?"

Athol laughed. If she had been nervous ten minutes ago she was not nervous now; nor had she the faintest idea of answering Scarlett truthfully. She was pretty certain that at the present moment Eldon was hunting high and low for her on some excellent pretext Uncle Jim would never see through; and that Inkster, a motionless prey to mosquitoes, was doing sentry on the Tabeak road.

She had escaped both of them by the devious method of going in the front door and out by her own bedroom window at the back of the house. She had got herself and her pony out of the stable through a cowshed that opened on a bush-road that was commanded neither by Eldon nor any of his friends. But Scarlett was no person to tell those things to.

"I feel as if Mr. Eldon rather kept me in view," she said lightly. "I could understand it if he had an eye on your pack-pony, but I can't see why he should on me."

Scarlett could, and he swore inwardly. But he was not going to translate, to this kind of a girl, the thoughts in Eldon's head.

"I think I'll go along and clear him out of your neighborhood," he announced, and if he had known all she did, it would have been a certainty, not a thought. "If he chooses to follow me round I can't help it; but I'm not going to have him a nuisance to my friends."

"You'll do no such thing," said Athol calmly. "When I want people cleared out I can tell you so. I'm not afraid of Eldon; and if I was worried when I met you, it was because I thought there was something you ought to know, and"—the admission she was making never dawned on her—"because I was terrified, day and night, that you'd come for your pony and they'd get you. I've taken care of myself," with a half-smile, "from harder men than Eldon."

Scarlett, remembering Sabiel's tale of the horse-thieves, liked the speech no better because it was true.

"I can't sit grubbing gold in a cave while you're doing it, though," he returned doggedly. "It takes away the flavor." And he was not prepared to see the girl start.

"A cave! You don't mean you've found the caves in Indian Valley—that they're really true?" she exclaimed. "Was that the place Eldon meant by Drowning Valley?"

Scarlett nodded. He was taken aback, for he had not meant to tell her so much. "I thought no one knew of them up here," he said uncomfortably.

"No one does, except"—she bit her lip on it—"Uncle Jim! And he's safe enough; he thinks the gold in them is only a legend." But her teeth were still on her lip as she stared at her pony's ears.

"That's another thing," said Scarlett hastily. "I don't mean your uncle's knowing: Eldon knows as much almost as he does. But the thing that took my Indian out was that we smashed our lantern. Heaven knows where he's gone to get another!"

"Whew," said the girl, with an ungirlish whistle, "you'd better build fires, or work in the dark, sooner than send anywhere round here for lanterns, if you've found those caves! Why, all Janesville would be after you, let alone Eldon, if they knew where you were! How on earth did you ever manage the Indians?"

Scarlett told her. He was trusting her in earnest now, as he had never thought to trust any woman in his life. If he said nothing about the actual gold he had found, it was because he had promised Sabel not to. But the girl interrupted him brusquely.

"Look here, I daresay the report of the Drowning Valley gold is enough to put Eldon on your heels, but he has more against you than a hankering after what you may find. What have you ever had to do with him—how well do you know him?"

"Hardly at all." Scarlett frowned. "I never knew him to speak to till I ran on him at Blaze Creek—but I've known him by sight a good while. Let's see—I believe the first time I ever saw Eldon

was about five years ago—when I was helping the mounted police to break up a gang of cattle-thieves that were ruining the ranchers I was working for.” He said it with a crooked smile of recollection: life had been very sweet to Red Scarlett till he had stopped being a cowboy to be something else. “Eldon was round town all the time of the trial; but most people about there were. I used to notice him, though, standing about by himself as if it didn’t interest him. Every one else was interested right enough; for though we’d caught the actual rustlers, we knew we’d missed the man who was the brains of them. They stuck to him well, poor chaps; not one of them peached, even when the whole gang was convicted.”

“Henshaw’s gang?” quietly.

“Yes!” Scarlett stared. “How did you know?”

“Eldon told me. No—be quiet, and listen! When he sent Sabarin into Drowning Valley to spy on you it wasn’t altogether for your gold: he wanted a chance to do for you. I heard him say so. When Inkster asked him why, he said you’d cleared out Henshaw’s gang and spoiled a business it had taken him years to get going—*him*, remember—and that if you didn’t get Henshaw himself, he was ruined all the same; and it was you he thanked for it.”

“You mean”—Scarlett had really jumped—“the Henshaw we never could find was Eldon? Eldon!” incredulously.

"He said so."

"He has a cooler head than I gave him credit for, then! Why, every soul in the territory was out looking for the mainspring of Henshaw's gang—and you think he just stood round and let them look!"

"Just as he's standing round and watching for you now," coolly.

But Scarlett did not hear her. His mind had gone back to the few times he had seen Eldon since his cowboy days, but they were hazy; except a clear remembrance of once meeting the man in a street in New York—a street he could not yet bear to think of. But that had no bearing on the present, and he cast it aside. So far as he was concerned Eldon was welcome to hang round the roadhouse forever, if it had not been for the girl there.

"Couldn't you go to Tabeak or somewhere," he demanded, "and leave Eldon to watch the pony I'm not coming for?"

"That's another thing I forgot to tell you. A cat couldn't get houseroom at Tabeak: there's a rush there! Eldon," demurely, "told Uncle Jim that the man who bought that chestnut pony had sold such gold out of Tabeak that the whole of Janesville's gone there!"

But Scarlett did not laugh. The whole of Janesville, furious and disappointed, would probably be scouring the country in a week for the claim that gold had really come from. He wondered if Eldon

were waiting at the roadhouse for that, as well as for him.

"It's just as well you told me that," he remarked grimly. "I mightn't have found it healthy to go there for candles, and I fancy it would be worse in Janesville. Don't you think you could sell me some, under the circumstances?"

"You're not coming to our house for anything at all," said Athol forbiddingly.

"Why?" He had not known his hand was so near hers.

"Eldon," she murmured, not too steadily.

"He's just a reason for going there!" The man's eyes were suddenly very sweet and deep. "Don't you know I'd give up Drowning Valley and everything in it, just to clear him out of your way? *Athol!*"

His face was so near hers that she saw the clean, fine grain of his skin, the sweetness of his lips; but she dared not look at them. It would kill her if he came to the roadhouse. It would be like letting him walk into a trap. She put all her wits into keeping him away.

"Don't you think my house is about the best place for him to be?" she asked sensibly. "He's out of your way, and there's no need to worry about me. I'm not used to being taken care of."

"More reason I want to do it," he answered gently. "Besides, I want some candles."

"Have you really got to have them?"

"Pretty well."

"Then I'll leave some here for you to-morrow. I won't have you come to our house."

Scarlett looked at her. "You'll do no such thing," said he. "You'll do none of my errands. If you'll put some candles out behind your house, I'll get them somehow. Getting out gold in Drowning Valley may matter more than anything to Halliday, but it doesn't to me—not quite! See?"

"No." But it was not true. A thrill of strange joy had run through her at that "not quite." For a minute she was just a girl obeying the man she knows is her master. "I don't like it," she said, "but I'll do it. I'll put all the candles you can carry out behind our cowshed; you can come for them the way I'll go now. But you mustn't come till it's dark; and if anything is wrong I'll fire two shots and you must run for all you know. Promise!"

"Ye-es," said Scarlett, and then he laughed; she had not said which way he was to run. "Oh, I'll run all right!"

"I'm wrong to let you near the house," Athol informed him bluntly. "I wouldn't, if there were any other way for you to get your candles. But wait here till dark; and two shots, remember, will mean you're to go away at once."

"It seems to me it isn't you who's being taken care of!" exclaimed Scarlett.

"Well, you need it," and something in the sober

warning of her eyes startled him. She cared! It was not just a stray man's life she was taking thought for, but his—Red Scarlett's. He turned to say he was not sure what, but Athol was too quick for him. She had pushed her pony out through the bushes and was gone.

Scarlett mounted the buckskin and leaned forward to look after her, forgetful of his gold, of Halliday, his friend; of everything but that there should be in the world a girl like Athol Gray. If there were a rustle behind him he did not hear it. The buckskin did; but his plunge was too late. Something that rasped like fire had ringed Scarlett's throat and jerked him to the ground with a snap that just missed breaking his neck. Mr. Eldon, appearing out of the bushes, realized the fact; and thoughtfully slackened his rawhide rope.

"I guess I've got you right now, Scarlett; and it suits me better than waiting for dark and shots," he muttered; and knelt down beside the fallen man.

CHAPTER XVI

"HENSHAW"

HE certainly had "got" Scarlett, and, potentially, his mine; but though Mr. Eldon quite realized his luck he forbore to gloat over it till he had secured his prisoner's arms and legs with the rawhide he had used to rope him. It was not accomplished without trouble, even though he tightened the neck-loop savagely. But it was done at last, and in a certain peculiar way that left Scarlett absolutely helpless. Panting, Eldon loosened the slip-knot that was turning his captive's face purple, watched him take a sobbing breath, and turned to take stock of something not so satisfactory.

Scarlett's buckskin, with one terrified plunge, had snapped Sabiel's old bridle from the tree Eldon had attached it to, and was gone. Where, Eldon had no means of knowing: the spruce clump was too thick. But gone the horse was, and the vanishing sound of his gallop was all that told of him.

"Well!" said Eldon; profanely and unprintably.

His capture of Scarlett had been clever; but also exhausting, having been performed on his own legs in the sweltering May heat; and he had relied on

Scarlett's horse to return for supports from his own camp. Athol Gray had been right in thinking Eldon watched her, and wrong in imagining she had slipped him to-day; but he had not dared to take one of Welsh's horses to follow her, nor to risk losing track of her by going to camp for his own. It was on foot, and sweating, that Eldon had trailed her from the roadhouse; and if he had had time to get his breath after crawling on his stomach to within a suitable distance of her and Scarlett, he had also had time to hear things so unexpected that they made him grit his teeth. It was his recognition as the unknown head of Henshaw's gang that had spurred him to immediate action: he knew better than to think it would be safe to let his identity be spread round the country. Yet even in his flush of triumph at capturing Scarlett single-handed, Eldon cursed.

Without the buckskin he would have to return on his own legs to fetch Inkster, Sabarin, and such articles as he required to persuade Scarlett into leading them to his gold mine; and it would take time.

"I guess he's safe enough here, though," he thought, taking a reflective stare at Scarlett, tied up like a bale with rawhide; and looking very long and slack with his eyes shut and his breath coming audibly. "He's dead to the world, all right, with the fall or the jerk or something, and his throat ain't in condition to make noise enough to matter. You can kind of wait round here, Red Scarlett, till I get

my outfit rounded up and come back to you—and then we'll see," he added aloud for the pleasure of hearing his own voice being contemptuous; and he was not prepared to have Scarlett open his eyes.

Eldon had made sure of Scarlett's two pistols when first he captured him, but even so he fell back a pace, involuntarily. But Scarlett's eyes closed again. His neck pained violently from his choking, but otherwise he was sound enough, since instinct had made him come off his horse like a sack of potatoes; but he had no desire to look at Eldon. As for speaking, there did not seem much to say.

"Trifle unexpected, wasn't it?" Eldon jeered. It was not his first effort to get even with Scarlett for the business the latter had never connected with him till to-day; but it was his first successful one, and he wanted all the triumph he could get out of it.

"Remember the time you tied up the Frenchman?" he inquired suddenly. "You kind of wasted time over that, Scarlett: Sabarin makes his living, winters, getting out of any kind of knots at shows! Yours weren't any worry to him. But there's one knot he can't get out of, and I've used it on you, like he showed me—it'll be a help to him to forget his nicked ear! The knot that keeps your hands behind you draws on your throat, like the one on your legs; and if you struggle you'll hang yourself. You see the idea?"

Scarlett made no answer. Helpless rage was working in him, but Eldon should not have the satis-

faction of knowing it. His own careless idiocy had got him into this mess, and he knew better than to hope it would get him out again. He waited to hear Inkster and the Frenchman come up; but the place was still.

"Wake up," cried Eldon trenchantly, "you'll have plenty of time to be dead in!" He pricked Scarlett's wrist with the point of a knife savagely, and it opened his eyes as he meant it to. "Pay attention to what I'm saying," he snarled, "for I'm going to give you time to think over it. I'm Henshaw's gang—what's left of it," bitterly, "for I'm Henshaw, if you did only have sense enough to find it out this afternoon! If you'll go back five years you'll remember that it was through you four of my men were hanged and the rest found themselves in a penitentiary. But," and he laughed meaningly, "you'll know how to sympathize with that!"

Scarlett's body, for all his stoicism, jerked with fury. He did know, with a knowledge that went to the bone. Suddenly he was devoured with curiosity as to how Eldon had ever heard he had been in Sing Sing, and why he had kept it to himself till now. Even Halliday had never guessed it, any more than Harris in the bank, when he had run on him as a stranger named Edgerley, trying to find employment in the townships of Quebec. But all he said was:

"If I do know what a prison is, it doesn't concern you."

"Excepting that it was I got you there," responded Eldon, so unexpectedly that it had the effect of a bomb. "You needn't try to jump," he added scornfully, at his captive's incredulous start, "it's true—and any one but you would have guessed it. A certain lady would never have thought of coveting diamond necklaces if I hadn't put her on to it. Why, you young fool, you met me in the street outside her boarding-house, the very day before you were run in! I thought you might have put two and two together then, but you didn't. In her way," reflectively, "your Sophia was clever."

If his meaning was covert, it was clear at least to Scarlett. The man went white to his very lips.

Eldon grinned. "I'm telling the truth. You can amuse yourself thinking about it, till I'm ready to settle with you. I got Sophia into that diamond necklace business that you—paid for! It was the first settlement against you for breaking up Henshaw's gang. I'm ready for the next now; and it'll be the last you'll take any intelligent interest in, if you don't fall in with my ideas on it. I could have shot you half a dozen times this afternoon; but you see you'd stopped my making a fortune once, and I'd an idea I'd do the same to you. Afterwards—well, hand over your mine, or whatever it is you've struck in Drowning Valley, and we'll see about the afterwards! You hanged my men, you see!"

The man's coolness was somehow catching. Furi-

ous as he was with himself for being caught napping, Scarlett spoke without emotion.

“ You’re as near my mine as you’re ever likely to get.”

“ I don’t know.” Eldon’s eyes narrowed cruelly. “ There were ways in Henshaw’s gang—if you haven’t forgotten them.”

“ I’m not the kind Henshaw practised on.” Scarlett had not forgotten the said ways, which concerned thin twine and red-hot gun barrels; and one man who crawled away from them to walk the world a lame idiot for the rest of his life. But oddly enough, his mind was not on that horror, but on a fly that dragged sticky legs across his face.

Eldon regarded him with the sudden viciousness with which Athol had seen him lash a horse across the face.

“ You can’t tell what you’ll be! But if you want your life you’ll hand over your gold mine without talking about it. I’m going to have that if I have to finish you for it. I’ve been laying for it, ever since I heard you making your little arrangements with Halliday at Blaze Creek about meeting an Indian in Drowning Valley. You’re going to pay—do you hear me?—pay for the fortune in rustled cattle you took away from me when I was Henshaw.” He put his face close to Scarlett’s and grinned at him. “ You chose a good quiet place for your date this afternoon,” he said significantly. “ No one’s likely to come on you, and I guess you

won't find the time long till I come back. You can thank the Ethel-girl for being dropped on, by the way. That's another thing you can put in your pipe and smoke!"

Scarlett writhed in the inferno that stood for his mind. If he had been free, he could have killed Eldon with his hands. But he was not free. He was a dizzy, helpless bundle for Eldon to play with, as the backer of Henshaw's gang knew how. His muscles swelled under the rawhide as he kept himself silent.

"It's the way with girls at a roadhouse," Eldon laughed at the success of his shot. "Johnny come up; Jacky get down. I didn't think you'd be soft enough to trust her—with me around! It's queer that I got ahead of you with both of them—your Sophia in New York, and"—he laughed again—"our Ethel-girl here!"

Athol's name on Eldon's lips was the last straw to Scarlett.

"You've said some things that may be true, but that last you know to be a lie," he said. "And," he added slowly, "I'll knock your black teeth down your throat for it yet!"

Eldon glared. His teeth were black, and he seldom showed them: but every one of them was uncovered now.

"First time I ever heard you make a fool of yourself," he snarled. "You're not doing any knocking, and you've put something into my head that I'd

never thought of. How you'll look when you're dead is not going to get me into trouble, because I'm not likely to leave your corpse where it can be run on—with or without teeth in its head. So long! Take your choice whether you think of that or the Ethel-girl till I get back—and taking me to your sneaked mine is your only chance of ever seeing either her or your gold again."

He turned away, whistling. Scarlett might roll a little, but not far; and if he shouted till he was black in the face there was no one to hear him. Mr. Eldon stared about him till he got his bearings; then, instead of retracing the devious track by which he had followed the Ethel-girl from the roadhouse, took a slanting line across country, which would bring him out just across the road from the camp he had left to Inkster and the Frenchman.

He had no desire for Athol Gray, nor even a simpton like Jim Welsh, to see him coming out of their pasture, and every desire to get hold of his two men and come back to settle with Scarlett. Yet under his hurry was a queer doubt if, after all, he would be able to do it. The man's death would be nothing to him without the secret of his mine; and Eldon had an uneasy remembrance that one man, among the men that Henshaw's gang had played with, had died game—and silent.

It might have been a satisfaction to Scarlett if he had known that more than unaccustomed walking was making Eldon sweat as he traveled through

the pasture to gather up reinforcements; but the second the man was out of sight Scarlett's thoughts were all on himself.

Somehow, he had to be gone when Eldon got back; thinking could come afterwards. He knew better than to believe he could save his mine except by the life that was so newly sweet to him, and he desired fiercely to keep both of them. But, squinting down at the thongs that went round him, he could not see how it was to be done. His arms were secured behind his back, then strapped there till they were of one piece with his body; his legs were numb already where they were laced together; and, with fiendish art, every movement he made threatened to choke him, as Eldon had said. He might roll, but no more. Yet he must be able to walk away in twenty minutes or lie where he was forever.

With an exertion that would have moved the heaviest boulder in his cave Scarlett raised himself muscle by muscle, till he was almost sitting, with his heels almost pushing against the ground; but it was almost only. The draw of the rawhide on his throat choked him back again. Then he rolled on his face to push himself forward with his toes and his chest muscles like a snake, and in the very effort knew it was useless. In an hour he might make twenty yards—and have Eldon see he had tried to get away, and failed! The feel of his pockets between him and the ground told him they

had been emptied; he had not so much as a match left, even if he could get at it; and the spruce stems round him would never fray through rawhide. He thought of his gold and Halliday's; of Athol Gray. One thing his honor was in, and the other——

" I expect it's my soul that will have to be interested there," Scarlett thought involuntarily. " My body won't have much show when Eldon's done with it! "

The thought was so sickish that he heaved at himself; got, somehow, to his feet, a tottering, unbalanced bundle; and fell. The black flies walked on him, the mosquitoes bit, the innumerable things that crawl, crawled; but he noticed none of them as he slackened his arms and tried to draw them up. But Eldon had been ready for just that thing; and it was with full knowledge of it that Scarlett suddenly lay quiet. He would need all his strength presently, without wasting it now. It was then that he began to think.

First, oddly enough, of that Mrs. Sophia Scarlett to whom he had sent the first money he had got out of Drowning Valley, who had been a millstone round his neck till he found his gold; though he had not laid eyes on her since what Eldon called " the diamond necklace business," that had landed him in the penitentiary and left the gap in his life that even Halliday had never accounted for. Whether Eldon had lied about being concerned in that he could not tell; he thought it extremely likely, though there had

never been any counting on what Sophia did or who her acquaintances were. But a furious pang of apprehension startled Scarlett. Whether Eldon were a liar or not, he could tell the truth about Sing Sing to Athol Gray!

It was only that afternoon he had known he had loved the girl—with all his body and all his mind. He had never thought he could love or respect any woman, but he did both with Athol; and he would never have a chance to tell her so. And suddenly he felt sick and cold with the wonder if it would be any good if he did tell her; if his history—that would have to be told—would not be enough to turn any girl against the man who had lived through it; a fool and a jailbird.

Yet surely a woman like Sophia, for whom he had been forced to make a home—Heaven knew without his own will—could never come between him and the girl he loved. There could be no justice in earth or heaven if she could! But there was no telling. Anyhow, what Athol Gray thought of him would not concern him much when Eldon was done with him. But at the thought Scarlett strained every muscle in his body. He had not meant to waste his strength on the rope again, but—there was somebody coming!

“One—two horses,” Scarlett counted; and set his teeth. Eldon and Inkster would probably ride up first; the Frenchman would see his humiliation later. “I could manage the two if I were free,” he mut-

tered; but he knew better than to think he would have a chance. As the unseen horses neared him his only conscious emotion was that he would sell his soul to be able to kill Eldon before he died himself; when startlingly, incredibly, a voice that was not Eldon's called his name.

"Athol," said Scarlett; his heart turned over in him with the revulsion from the passion of hatred that had possessed him. "Athol!" In unbelieving joy he heard her answer him; heard the blessed crash of horses' feet breaking through the bushes where he lay.

But he was a better man than perhaps any one but Halliday knew. For, as Athol sprang to the ground and stood looking at him between her own pony's head and the buckskin's mild nose, he swore that if he had to be tortured to death ten times over Eldon should never come back to find her there.

CHAPTER XVII

ONE MAN RIDES INTO THE ROADHOUSE YARD

"My heavens," gasped the girl between the horses, as Scarlett dawned on her; grass and earth stains from head to foot, bloody with scratches and trussed up like a chicken. "Who——" But she left the question unfinished, as with one lightning movement she secured her two horses and dropped to her knees by Scarlett's side.

"Eldon," said Scarlett; and he never even thought how ridiculous he must look. "Get away, quickly, before he comes back! I couldn't stand it if he got you, too."

"I believe he's a devil," cried Athol passionately; she took no notice of the order to go. "He—why, you're bleeding!" Her fingers were working swiftly at Eldon's knots, but they were not tied for a girl to undo. "How did he ever get you like this?" she demanded.

"Roped me from behind like a two-year-old calf." Scarlett was not the kind to have a false shame about it: he rather admired Eldon for pulling it off.

"And if you haven't a knife about you, he'll find me just so when he comes back again."

"I haven't one." The girl was oddly white. "But lie still; I think this knot's giving!"

But Scarlett knew better.

"There's no time to undo it if it is," he drawled, "and this cow pasture doesn't grow a rock that would cut butter. Haven't you anything that will saw the thing through?"

"My teeth," she answered fiercely.

"They don't touch his filthy rope! No; we've got to think of something else—and think quick, before I send you away."

"I won't go—not if Eldon came and killed me," said Athol darkly. "I'm a better shot than he is, and——" She hesitated; her hand went to the bulge in her pocket that always meant her revolver, and stopped there with a curious, jerked shock. "I'm a better shot than Eldon," she repeated lamely, in a secret horror that made her hands shake as she worked on at the knots.

Scarlett's heart leaped. He had forgotten her revolver, though he was not the kind to lie passive while a girl shot three men for him.

"You'll have to be, if it comes to that," he said dryly. "But it hasn't, yet. For now, perhaps you could just blow through the ropes on my ankles?"

"There's no"—once more Athol hesitated, this time with agony at a knowledge he had not—"no room! Oh, why didn't I bring something sensible,

instead of just candles, when I found every one out of the way and made up my mind to come straight back to you?" she said with despair.

"Instead of what?" asked Scarlett electrically; and she thought he was losing his wits. "You couldn't have brought anything better, unless it was a knife! Light a couple, and if Eldon isn't coming back here by wireless I'll be burned out of his rope first."

His triumph was catching. Athol sprang to her saddle and back again, but, when the tiny candle flames quivered in the still air, hope died in her.

"They'll never do it," she groaned. "They're too little."

"I've seen it done!" And he had; for fun, and a bet. "Try my hands first: I can stand it if you burn me. I'd feel better if I could attend to a gun."

Once more the word turned Athol ghastly. "I couldn't," she faltered. "I don't mind burning your boots—it doesn't matter where I begin!"

"Provided there's time enough." But Scarlett did not say it. He listened instead—for Eldon. If he and Inkster came up softly enough they might yet have both him and the girl. "My God," he breathed voicelessly: and it came near to being a prayer.

Down at his ankles Athol's hands were steady; yet it seemed an hour before he felt the feeble flames warm the boot they were close against. The

One Man Rides Into the Yard 191

business had been deadly slow the only time he had seen it done; but then he had not happened to care.

"Couldn't you light one more?" he asked, very gently.

"I couldn't hold it." Her first sob broke from her. "They're doing no good anyhow. The hide's wet; it's not even charred, only curling at the edges."

How little it was even curling she dared not think. Despair took her, and she swept it away. There would be time enough for it when she had to tell Scarlett the thing she must: there was, for once, no gun in her pocket, and she had lied when she let him think otherwise. There was no hope of defeating Eldon but the feeble candles that hardly showed a flame.

The whole pasture seemed full of sounds that normally Scarlet never would have noticed; the crack of a stick as though some one trod on it; small stealthy rustlings; then drumming that must surely be the nearing gallop of horses' feet. Scents came to Red Scarlett, too; hot strawberry leaves; cool moss; stinging balsam; but, though he sniffed the air like a dog, not a hint of the singeing hide that would mean release.

Suddenly, just as he had given up all hope of it, it did come; and with it a sharp smart on his ankle.

"My boot's going," he cried, "and the hide, too! I don't think I ever smelt anything much sweeter. Move back till I take a pull on it."

"Lie still." The girl caught his foot. "It's—oh, it's charring, going! How did you know it would do it? It's white and dry inside like tinder, under the char." Her fingers strained furiously at the places that had blackened; the curled edges gave under them; tore. Two strands were gone. There were only three more.

"If Eldon stays away long enough we shan't need that gun?" she stammered nervously.

"It will be the second time you've saved me!"

"Don't; till I've done it," and her face was drawn with a fear that had not yet been on it. There was so little left to do, but it might take so long. Any minute Eldon might be on them, with Scarlett relying on the pistol she had not brought; and Eldon was not likely to be shamed into mercy by a girl. Athol's burned fingers shook as she tried to hurry the work of the faithful candles, and unexpectedly she knelt upright. "It's done," she gasped. "Roll away from me; I'll hold the rope ends. I—I can't do any more for a minute."

Nor could she; knowing there was no pistol, no anything but the horses and the chance of getting away before Eldon came. She could not even look at Scarlett as he stood up, racked, stiff, but free; all save the hands, still bound behind his back.

"Oh, child," he said thickly, "you brave little child!"

But if she heard the love in his voice Athol gave no sign of it. She flung up a forbidding hand for

silence and stood listening wanly. From far off, but nearing them, came the echoing gallop of horses.

"Hush," she gulped; "what's that? Oh, if it's Eldon what can we do?"

Scarlett forgot his hands were tied.

"Give me your gun," he began; and remembered he could not use it. "You'll have to stand behind me, and shoot when you must," he substituted bitterly. He could put his body between her and Eldon, but that was all; and his helplessness maddened him. "Come back here, behind me! Do you hear?"

But Athol dropped on her knees and crawled forward instead till her head was clear of the thicket.

"It's not Eldon," she whispered over her shoulder, "it's just some loose ponies; I can see them. Oh, can't we go? You could sit in the saddle. I'm afraid to wait here till I free your hands."

She trembled as she turned to face him, but in the relief that flooded Scarlett's soul he did not wonder why.

"We won't worry about hands," he responded. "Seems to me, too, that there isn't time for trifles. Get up on your horse, quick!"

"But you?"

"Get up; I can manage." And how he did manage he best knew, but he did.

Coming softly in Indian file out of the bushes the two might have been on any ordinary expedition if it had not been that the foremost of them held his

reins in his teeth. Time was everything; and it took a hard stare at the sun before Scarlett realized they had not been hours at the rope-burning, but barely ninety minutes.

"You didn't see anything of Eldon as you came in?" he asked.

"No! Your horse met me, and I brought it back to you; that was all."

"Then I believe we're clear," said Scarlett slowly. "Go ahead, and go slow till we can make a rush for open country and your own back door."

"We?" She turned round on him. "You're not coming!"

"I'm not proposing to make Drowning Valley with tied hands." He had his old sudden smile at her. "I have to come; besides, I'm going to."

But no smile could deceive Athol. "It's for me you're coming—for fear Eldon comes on me!" she cried.

"Not altogether," quietly. "You see most things; you must see he has gone too far with me this time to be just run away from. Besides, I want to know what in Heaven's name brought you back to me, and I'll have to wait for that till we get somewhere that it's safe to stop and talk."

Athol nodded silently, against her will; and rode on.

After the pasture that Scarlett knew came a road through heavy bush. The girl's heart knocked on her sides as she led him through it; from anywhere

might come Eldon's shot, or Inkster's, and she had nothing to fight them off with. Where the road ended abruptly in a cleared field and a distant view of the back premises of the roadhouse she motioned to Scarlett to stop.

"You can't cross this till we know if Eldon has gone back for you or not," she said sensibly. "Stay here till I find out if he's at the house, or if I can get back to you with a knife."

Scarlett assented, realizing the off chance that Eldon might be waiting round the roadhouse till darkness made it safe to return to his prey, and that, with his hands tied, he and the girl with him might be too tempting a target. But he swore softly as he drew back to wait for her in the thick bush. If Eldon were at the house he would not dare to touch her, yet Scarlett had never felt that pang of terror for any woman's safety; he was abjectly thankful when he saw Athol beside him again, this time on foot.

"Get down," she said quickly, "it's safe here. There's no one in the house but old Mary. I've brought a—a knife." And Scarlett felt her fumble with what was left of the rawhide.

As she cut him free, and he could rub his arms where the stagnant blood moved agonizingly, he had no care for the quietude of the roadhouse premises. When he could look up with a straight face it was to be aware of a queer shrinking on the face of the girl, who stood back from him, the cut ends of El-

don's rawhide in her hands. It was the second time that day he had seen her look sick with fear, and it cut his soul. Involuntarily, his love of her sprang to his tongue.

"You're tired out, and I don't wonder," he said sharply. "It makes me ashamed. I can't thank you for what you've done for a stranger—but I can't be a stranger any more. I—Athol, there's something I've got to say!"

"Not now," she said bleakly, "and you won't want to—presently! Here"—she held out in one hand the knife that had cut his last bond, and with the other drew out her revolver—not from the pocket he had thought bulged with it, but from one that had hung slack—"take these; and don't thank me for saving you. I couldn't have done it if it had come to the pinch: I lied when I said I could! I had no gun. That pocket had just biscuits in it, and I lied about it because"—suddenly she was white and shaking—"I knew if I told you the truth you'd make me go away, and"—with a caught sob—"leave you to Eldon!"

"Athol!" Scarlett could not say one other word. Somehow, he and she were close together, clinging wordlessly, the man's head bent over the girl's golden one, his cheek on hers. Yet, when at last he let her draw away from him, it was without a kiss. He dared not kiss her till she—knew. "I'm not fit to love you, but I do," he said thickly. "I don't suppose you—can care?"

For an instant the girl's eyes were sweet and full on his. She made no other answer, but the man quivered as the dead thing that had been his heart came alive in him. He was not just a money-making slave any more: he was a man, to love and live, and be happy with the one woman in the world.

But the old things came back to him even with the new life in him—he would have no secrets between him and Athol Gray. She should know all there was to know about him, and then—then if he had to go away and leave her for a better man he supposed he could! But his lips went white on it.

"I'm not good enough for you," he murmured. "I—Athol love—I'm not fit. I've been—I was——" But if he meant to say "in Sing Sing" she stopped him with a slim hand on his lips.

"Not fit," she repeated scornfully. She knew better, looking at his grave eyes, the worship on his face. But there was no time to talk of those things now. "You ought to go," she said nervously. "Oh, please go!"

"Not till I know what brought you back to me this day," swiftly.

"I—just came." She glanced apprehensively at the roadhouse, but nothing stirred there. "You see, I knew you ought not to come where Eldon was; I didn't want you to try. So when I found every soul out but old Mary, I just got all the candles I could carry, and those—those hateful biscuits I took my gun out of my pocket to make room for—

and went back to tell you to hurry home to your gold. It wasn't till your buckskin came to me half-way that I thought anything was wrong; even then I hadn't sense enough to think of Eldon, or that he'd tracked me to you the first time I came. His coming on you at all was through me, so never," bitterly, "dare to thank me that you didn't meet your death and worse this day!"

"I do, though." His straight gaze met hers. "But there are things I've got to talk to you about. I'm a stranger. You may hear bad things about me; and some of them are true."

"I shouldn't care!"

Scarlett shook his head; thinking, not of what Eldon had told him in the pasture, but of the gray walls of a penitentiary.

"You don't know—whether you'd care or not—till you hear them! But there's no time to tell you now. You've got to get home, and I must get to business."

"You won't go after Eldon?" she asked sharply. "Not alone?"

"I'm settling with him before I go back to Drowning Valley; if I can."

"If you'd tell me how I might help!"

"You couldn't," returned Scarlett simply. "You've helped enough in my quarrels, anyway. It's my turn to take care of you. Go home, won't you?"

"Not till I know what you mean to do!"

"I don't know myself, yet." Nor did he. When she had given in and was gone, he stood irresolute by the buckskin, till suddenly he did know what he was going to do.

One man, alone, was riding into the roadhouse yard; his face, even at that distance, full of fury. It was Eldon, mad with disappointment at finding Scarlett gone from where he had left him in the pasture, going straight to where Athol Gray was alone, except for a deaf old woman.

Whether he guessed at the girl's share in his escape or not, Scarlett did not wait to consider. He left the buckskin standing, crossed the field like a streak, and disappeared in Welsh's cowshed.

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. HARRIS KNOWS NO SUCH NAME AS SCARLETT

It led, as Athol had said, into the stable, and the stable door commanded the roadhouse yard; and Eldon! Eldon, off his horse, with his rifle slung on his saddle, one hand raised to the latch of the house door, the other tapping at it impatiently. Scarlett stood for an instant staring at him. Revenge was not uppermost in him. He did not quite know what was, except the thought that the girl inside the roadhouse had seen enough of men's quarrels to be wholesome.

He glanced into the empty sunlight of the trodden yard, and moved across it without even much care; but Eldon heard nothing till Athol's little pistol pressed into the burnt skin on the back of his neck, and the voice of Red Scarlett, whom he had thought escaped into the recesses of Drowning Valley, came almost tranquilly in his ear.

"Your hands suit me just as they are, Eldon," it said; and Eldon knew better than to turn. He felt his revolver come out of his hip pocket before Scarlett's hand reached back and relieved his saddle of

the rifle that was slung to it. But not having been shot on sight he was suddenly cool.

"I've got to thank that girl for this," he exclaimed, and was instantly sorry. But Scarlett's finger had only tightened on the trigger.

"You'll have nothing to thank her for in another minute, if you name her again! Turn round. I told you I was going to settle with you, and I am. First, you could have killed me a little while ago, and you didn't; I owe you something for that. We'll leave out what else you meant to do for me, since it didn't come off—but what is to come off is that you get out of this place with your whole outfit, and stay out! I don't mind your wasting time trying to meddle in my business, but I won't have you a nuisance to my friends—and you made a mistake this afternoon when you gave me a handle to stop it!"

Eldon knew it: to have Scarlett told he might be Henshaw was one thing; to boast of it himself another. For Henshaw, who had been only a name behind a gang, had had at least five murders brought home to him. The man's personality was the only mystery: his deeds were none; and the knowledge of them both put together lay cold in Scarlett's eyes. For once in his life Eldon was cowed.

"I haven't hurt what you call your friends," he muttered; and took courage from the sound of his own voice. "I played rough on you to-day; but I

can't see why, if you have found a mine, I can't so much as look at it."

Scarlett laughed. "Henshaw, *alias* Jimmy Leadbetter and the rest, can't afford to do anything I don't want!"

"You've no proof," but for the moment Eldon faltered.

"Plenty, once the police put their finger on you. Their arm is long, Eldon, even over five years. Here are my terms, and you can take them or leave them. Come round, or follow me—and it applies to your Frenchman and the other man, I don't know his name—and I'll shoot you on sight; come back to this house, and I'll do the same. You caught me fairly enough to-day, but you know me well enough to know you can't do it twice! If it's any help to you, from now on you'll never know where I am to catch. I may be here, and I may be—elsewhere; but it will be all the same to you. Trail me, no matter where, and I'll give you up for Henshaw or I'll shoot you; if you have any stomach for following me on those terms, why, do it!"

"You—informer!" Eldon's lips were livid.

"Any name you like—words don't matter to me," retorted Scarlett grimly. "But I don't call it informing when I help to rid the world of a snake!" He turned his eyes the fraction of an inch to the roadhouse gate. "You can shout to your Frenchman out there that if he doesn't drop his gun in the road I'll put your brains on this doorstep," he re-

marked evenly, observing Sabarin ride up to the gate and stop there, staring at him and Eldon. "After that, you can go!"

Eldon shouted; hastily. Sabarin, gazing bewilderedly at the two, dropped his gun. He had been told the news of the afternoon; had been left behind his masters to break camp and follow with the extra horses to where Eldon and Inkster would await him in the pasture with the captured Scarlett; and it seemed instead that Scarlett had captured Eldon. Sabarin's jaw fell as he sat loose in his saddle on the empty road.

"Get on out of that," yelled Eldon furiously: if he had to be humiliated, it should not be with Sabarin staring at him. And it was well he had given the order, for not till the Frenchman had disappeared with his string of laden horses did Scarlett remove the revolver muzzle from his neck, and let him back past him towards his waiting horse. But with that very release from imminent death venom rose once more in Eldon. He turned round where he stood with one hand on his saddle.

"You've got me beaten, and you've got your mine; but there's one thing you haven't thought of," he said with his sudden malice. "Your girl's done a deal to help you, but I guess she'll stop when she hears about you and Mrs. Scarlett—even if road-house girls aren't particular!"

"Take that back!" All Scarlett's half measures were over. "Take it back, quick!"

Eldon was very near his horse. He had no more sense than to laugh insultingly, before he caught Scarlett's meaning. Then he screeched, ducking. But it would have been his last moment on earth if the roadhouse door had not flown open, and Athol Gray flung herself bodily on Scarlett. His pistol hand jerked high and harmless, but his other was free. The next second Eldon was scrambling from the ground to his saddle, spitting blood, and endeavoring to spit two front teeth. Scarlett had said he would knock them down his throat, and he had.

Athol clutched Scarlett as Eldon stuck spurs into his jaded horse and made for the gate.

"You'd have killed him," she cried.

"I suppose so. I ought to have! Why did you stop me?"

"I couldn't bear you to," she shuddered, "in cold blood."

"It wasn't exactly cold," returned Scarlett grimly. "But— Oh, well, I've let him go now, and there's no good in talking about it. Only I ought not to have done it." For supposing Eldon should yet dare to find his way into Drowning Valley he and Halliday would be pretty defenseless against surprise there without even Sabiel to do scout for them. And a second thought made Scarlett more uneasy still over Eldon's freedom. The man must guess, by common sense, that the pasture where he had roped Scarlett was a highway to Drowning Valley; what if he slipped back there be-

fore him, and came on Halliday, unsuspecting and alone? As he stood cursing himself for a fool, Athol's voice brought him back to the present.

"It wouldn't have been common sense to have shot Eldon," she reminded him practically. "You couldn't have got out of it without trouble and explaining. And it seems to me that to get your own and your partner's gold out of Drowning Valley *without* explaining is what has to come first with you. To go was what you wanted of Eldon: and he's gone."

"To go was what I wanted of him," assented Scarlett; there was no need to worry Athol with other thoughts. But he looked at a mark on his knuckle and wiped it away fastidiously, wondering if he had given Eldon enough to make him stay gone. "Only in case he should come back I'd like to speak to your uncle, Athol, before I go myself."

"Old Mary says Uncle Jim's gone out fishing," said Athol doubtfully. "I don't know when he'll be back. Do you want to wait for him?"

Scarlett shook his head. He did want to; but it was not himself of whom he could afford to think, with Eldon let go scot-free, and Halliday alone with a half-crazed man in the caves of Drowning Valley.

"I can't wait now," he returned. "I have to find out where Eldon's gone, and then get back to my mine with the candles. Halliday's there without even a light. But what troubles me is that I don't know when I may be able to get back here

to see your uncle, or you. Can you," very gently, "trust me till I do come?"

The girl held out her hand in silence. But in spite of the mute answer the man persisted.

"Listen to me a moment first." He advanced gravely. "If it turns out that we're really rid of Eldon, and you're left in peace and I can work at my mine, I may not get back here for weeks. In that case don't you think you ought to tell Welsh about you and me—and the game Eldon's been playing here?"

Athol frowned uneasily. Uncle Jim Welsh was an angel when he was sober, but half the time he was not. Supposing she told him about Scarlett and Eldon, and he were to go away and drink somewhere with that knowledge in his head—he would certainly be most unlikely to keep it there. He was a born gambler; he would remember forgotten rumors of Drowning Valley gold—and she did not forget herself that if he thought the gold in the caves there was merely a legend he knew where those same caves lay—and curiosity about Scarlett's luck there might work in any way with him. Somehow—somehow she dared not trust Uncle Jim with any one's secrets, even her own.

"I couldn't explain you and your business to Uncle Jim," she said slowly. "You can see why, if you think a minute. As for telling him about Eldon and the kind he is— Oh, I don't know what's best! I couldn't begin to talk about him

without dragging you in—and Uncle Jim isn't the kind that would hold his tongue about you. I don't believe I'd better even mention Eldon to him unless he comes back.'

Scarlett was a direct person. The method did not suit him, yet he saw the reason in it. Any talk about a stranger named Scarlett who was in Drowning Valley must betray the trust Sabiel had put in him, and open up the old man's secret to Welsh and his friends. He nodded unwilling assent to the girl's silence.

"But if Eldon does come here again, you'll have to let Welsh know he's a scoundrel," he added in an authoritative rider. "You can be as vague as you like about it, but Welsh ought not to have him about the place in ignorance. I don't like your uncle's not knowing anything about me either, now"—with his straight gaze at her—"but I suppose that can't be helped till I'm done with Drowning Valley. Only, if Eldon should come here and loathe you, you will have to tell Welsh he's Henshaw. I don't see," thoughtfully, "why you can't trust your uncle that far at least!"

Athol flushed wretchedly. "I can—when he's sober," she said under her breath. "But oh, you don't know Uncle Jim: there are days when I daren't trust him with anything. In every other way he's an angel; no one knows how good he has been to me. He adopted me when I was five, he went without everything to send me to school. I owe

him everything, and I haven't the least bit of claim on him except that my mother was his sister. But good and dear as he is, he's— Oh, sometimes he's impossible! He never sees trouble till he's in it, he trusts every one he happens to be with, and if he were to go off and drink knowing about you— Well, I don't know what line he might take!"

She had had no wish to speak out about Welsh, but she dared do nothing else. Scarlett, looking at her troubled face, changed the subject hastily.

"Well, there's one thing you can tell him that's true, if you do make up your mind to speak about me," he said. "And that's that I never thought of any one on earth as I do of you. You're sure," irrelevantly, "that you're not afraid to be left here alone till Welsh comes?"

"I'm not afraid. Where are you going, though?"

"Up the road a bit," he answered vaguely, "and then back to the valley. When I come again I'm going to ask you something—after you hear what you've got to know about me."

"I'll be thinking you have some frightful past, soon."

She smiled as she said it, but the man's answering look was grave. He had to tell her of Sing Sing and other things, and she might not regard them as he did.

"I have in a way," he said slowly. "But I think

perhaps you won't see it in that way: I don't myself." He bent over her with a sudden access of anxiety for her. "Don't run any risks for me, will you, till I come back again?" he begged of her.

"There are none to run, now Eldon's gone," said Athol lightly.

Scarlett came back to hard reality. His past, for the second time that day, must wait; he had not finished the day's work with Eldon yet, though he had no intention of saying so. He laid his hand on the girl's shoulder, smooth and strong through the cotton of her gown.

"Good-night," he said gently. "I won't be leaving you some day, if you can take me as I am and let me stay."

The words took away the girl's breath. Only yesterday Scarlett had been almost a stranger; to-day she belonged to him like the buttons on his coat. She could not answer him; before she even looked up she heard him whistle the buckskin across the yard and ride away. When at last she did lift her eyes it was not the boyish Athol Gray of a month ago who looked after him, but a woman.

Yet she was not woman enough to guess instinctively what her man had in his head. She watched him out of sight in the pasture behind the cowshed without the faintest thought that once her eyes were off him he turned the buckskin at a right angle, and pushed him boldly out into the road

down which his enemy had disappeared. He was bound to see what had become of Eldon; and—rather sooner than he had expected—he did.

Rounding a sudden turn in the road he caught sight of him, and reined noiselessly into the bushes. He was not alone, for the Frenchman was ahead, plodding through the red dust with his string of packhorses; but Eldon himself had pulled up, and sat loose in his saddle at one side of the road as though he were waiting for some one.

“Inkster, of course; Gad, I’d forgotten him!” Scarlett thought swiftly, and was suddenly glad he and his horse had got so far into the bushes, as not five yards away Inkster’s horse crashed unexpectedly through them with that individual on his back. It was not Scarlett’s idea to have his presence suspected, and he sat still.

Eldon shouted to Inkster to hurry. It had been with the cold conviction that he had made a fool of himself that he had fled from the roadhouse door. By laying hands on Scarlett, he had probably lost all chance of ever seeing the Drowning Valley gold. But he was not the kind to waste time on regrets; as at last he managed to spit his damaged teeth out on the road he spat his defeat from him. He could come between Scarlett and his girl, even if he lost the gold—and he felt comfortably at a fat letter in his pocket.

He had ridden into Janesville one day during his stay at the roadhouse, and a bit of gorgeous luck

Mr. Harris Knows No Such Name 211

had come his way. He had once more bearded Mr. Harris with inquiries for Scarlett, and Scarlett's passing as Edgerley had borne unexpected and, for that gentleman, bitter fruit.

Mr. Harris had frowned at his pertinacious visitor.

"I told you I knew no such person," he said disgustedly. "But I was just about to send a letter of his back to the post office. The bank does not undertake the correspondence of unknown people. If you're a friend of this Scarlett, you can take his letter to him and tell him I said so."

Eldon, hastily retiring round the corner, had stood in the open street and gloated; for the letter handed to him was from that Sophia Scarlett to whom Scarlett had sent money. There were two inclosures in it. The thick one he read profanely; but the letter from Sophia herself would finish Scarlett with Athol Gray. From sheer pleasure at what he could do if he liked he had so far forborne to show it to her; but he could manage to do it yet—when she would give no more help to Scarlett! The thicker letter he meant to destroy, yet it was still in his pocket as he sat and yelled at Inkster:

"Hurry up. I'm not going to wait for you all night!"

"I didn't know where you'd got to," Inkster returned wrathfully. "I've been all over that pasture where you left Scarlett, and I couldn't find a track leading out of it anywhere, except to the roadhouse;

and Scarlett ain't there, for I've looked. How in Moses did he ever get away from you?" He rode up to Eldon and gave an enlightened start at the sight of that gentleman's mouth. "I guess it was you got away from him," he remarked succinctly.

"Oh, we're skinned all right, for now," Eldon assented with a kind of ferocious indifference, "but I'm not kicking yet. Come on!" He jerked his horse forward.

"Where to? And what about the camp?" blankly.

Scarlett was too far off to hear the answer.

"Broke up," said Eldon. "We're going to Tabreak."

For even without the letters in Eldon's pocket that were addressed to Scarlett—and one of those, cleverly used, could ruin him with the girl he loved—there was something that might yet be accomplished against him in Tabreak. The only trouble was that Eldon lacked the concrete means of doing it. The miners who had followed a false scent of gold there might easily be persuaded to rush the real claim of the man who had made them waste a journey from Janesville; but, unluckily, Eldon did not know where the said claim was to rush.

Yet he had learned one fact that afternoon that might be some assistance in finding it. Jim Welsh knew about the Drowning Valley gold. He had had it from his niece's own lips as he lay crouched in the pasture behind her and Scarlett, listening to

their conversation with all his might. Even if it were true that Welsh thought the gold in them just a legend, at least he knew where the caves lay; only unfortunately Eldon, who had been Henshaw, dared not go back to Jim Welsh's house as yet to open up the subject. But it would be time enough when he had sounded the temper of Tabeak. For now he would not even mention his plans to Inkster, and in silence the two jingled off down the Tabeak road; black figures in a halo of dust that was blood-red in the late sunset.

Scarlett, still ensconced in the bushes, watched them out of sight.

"Well, Heaven send that's the last of them," he murmured. "I wish I'd heard where they were going, but they're away from Athol, anyhow!" With which comforting reflection he turned his horse's head toward Drowning Valley—and would have done better to have followed Eldon another half mile; where a piece of luck occurred to him before which the holding of Sophia's letter to Scarlett paled.

For the Tabeak miners, and their potential aid against Scarlett, dropped suddenly into Eldon's hand.

As he rode thither there came out of the woods, bearing a string of fish on his old saddle, Jim Welsh; and to Jim Welsh Eldon spoke at length, confidentially; and presently triumphantly. The interview was cheap at the price of the flask of

whisky that Welsh emptied, and the half dozen bottles of the same fluid the grumbling Sabarin had to unload from his leading horse—for when it was over Eldon was once more within sight of Scarlett's gold.

CHAPTER XIX

SABIEL GIVES A WARNING

IN spite of his ignorance of that unlooked for fact, Scarlett was not easy in his mind when he returned to the caves. Athol might be all right, but Sabiel was still missing, and there was no saying what had become of him. Search the valley as he might, Scarlett came on no sign of the old Indian: he had begun to be sure he was either dead or had, fallen into Eldon's hands, when, one evening at the end of a week, he suddenly appeared.

"Hang it, man," shouted Scarlett in the rage of relief. "I've been worried blue about you! I've been hunting you for ten days. Where in the mischief have you been?"

"Some Indian things going on down the valley, and we had to go," explained the Indian simply. "If we weren't there they'd come to look for us—some old men, most likely, that would be angry seeing you in here—so we go off in a hurry."

"Well, I wish I'd known all that! I thought Eldon had caught you."

"Eldon? That man is in Tabeak," said Sabiel

unexpectedly. He sat down on the grass without looking at Scarlett.

"How do you know?"

"Oh, we hear! Indian telegraph you call it."

"Well, Tabeak's a good place for him," returned Scarlett with some relief. But there was a change in Sabiel, for he only grunted. Halliday, with one look at him, disappeared, and left Scarlett to hear what was wrong. But for a long time the Indian sat silent. Then:

"You must get through here and go," he announced suddenly.

"Why?" As suddenly Scarlett supposed he was getting tired of them. "Are the Indians getting wind of us?"

"Not yet! But it is going to rain." And the anti-climax sounded ludicrous.

"Rain!" Scarlett confronted the pink afterglow incredulously. There was no rain in that sky, and if there had been he saw no reason to dread it. "What does it matter if it does rain?" he demanded.

"Because in a week we shall have floods," returned the Indian quietly.

"Floods! Now? In summer?"

Sabiel nodded. "I know the signs here, and I say it will rain much, now," he said gloomily. "Besides, there are other things. Those men who look for you are at Tabeak. There is a great talk there about what they call Indian Valley, and gold.

If twenty, thirty miners find their way in here, what difference will it make to you if there is no flood? Just a different kind of fight, and," heavily, "the same ending! I say that in another week you and Halliday must be gone. We take you out somewhere where no one see, and you and me say good-by."

Scarlett drew a slow breath. He had no apprehension of a flood, considering it used merely as a pretext to get rid of him; but if Eldon should lead a rush of Tabeak miners into Drowning Valley—

"D'you think any Tabeak men could get into this place?" he asked sharply.

Sabiell nodded. "In, p'r'aps: not out," he returned coolly. "They never heard of floods: they will not go away from here with any gold. Me and you two, we save ourselves. By and by we come back. P'r'aps we find those Tabeak men's bones, p'r'aps not—but we don't find them."

"You mean they'd get drowned in the caves," said Scarlett slowly. "I'd rather fight them!"

Sabiell shook his head. "Indian trouble begins then, and some of it comes down pretty hard on me. I get killed both sides. No; we go; and the water finishes those Tabeak men like all before them!"

"But you're banking on a flood there isn't a sign of," Scarlett exclaimed wrathfully. "You can't be sure of any such thing!"

"Sure as no man ever lived through one in those caves," responded Sabiell quietly.

Scarlett controlled an impulse to tell him about Burns, whom the last flood had certainly not drowned. The old man had enough to worry him without any knowledge of Burns; Scarlett would have to manage that individual in his own way. The man had grown much saner with companionship: he thought he could make him hear reason and slip off quietly. As for leaving Drowning Valley himself he had never expected his lode to be a lasting possession, like claims that were taken up openly: he had always known it must be temporary. He looked down at Sabiel's face; and, whether it were really the dread of a great flood, or just the more likely fear of a white invasion, the Indian looked twenty years older.

"We can go inside of a week," Scarlett assured him quickly. "You have been mighty good to let us stay here as long as you have. But if I'm going to take out all I can carry I'll want that week clear to work in, and"—something that flashed across his mind gave him pause. He could not leave Drowning Valley for good without letting Athol Gray know, nor without an assurance of her safety. "I can't go away from here without sending word to some one," he announced abruptly. "Could you go out for me, do you think, and give a message to that girl in the house on the Janesville road?"

Sabiel nodded, showing no surprise. "Spring is for spring flowering: I said that long ago—first time you went out on the road!"

Scarlett nodded, coloring. "But there's more than that," said he. "That girl has saved my life from Eldon twice," and he sketched in briefly the two stories of her that Sabiell did not know. "After those things I can't just go away without letting her know what's become of me," he added. "Besides, I want to know if she's all right or if Eldon shows signs of coming back to the roadhouse to worry her. Ask her that, and tell her I have to leave here, and that if I can I'll come over to say good-by to her before I go. That would be"—he frowned, calculating what gold could be picked out of the great lode and packed for transportation in a week—"say Wednesday! Tell Miss Gray I'll come over next Thursday if it's possible to come at all. If it isn't, she shall know where I am as soon as I can get word to her."

"That last way is the best," cut in Sabiell dryly. He would have flatly forbidden Scarlett to venture into the Janesville end of the valley at all, even for a girl, if he had not known it would be useless. He rose heavily and pointed to the sky. "You see, it clouds already! In the morning I will go see that girl and bring back word of her—then you do your work quick, and go. That way will be best for me; better than fighting, or I do not ask it."

The white man's hand met the Indian's as Scarlett nodded. He would have liked to stay out the summer by his gold, and claim-jumpers' lives taken in fair fight would not have worried him; but to be-

tray Sabiel's trust and linger against his will was another thing. There was nothing for it but to go.

Halliday heard the news philosophically. He had taken out already what would be a fortune to his children, and comfort for the rest of his life.

"If you've got enough I'm not kicking," he observed easily. "But I expect you'll have your work cut out to dislodge Burns."

"Oh, if Burns won't hear reason we'll just dump him out of the caves bodily; take him down the lake while Sabiel's away on an errand I sent him on; but I fancy he will do anything we say by now. As for the gold, my share's enough——" Scarlett hesitated, flushing red under his tan as he thought he had enough already to keep the Mrs. Scarlett to whom he had sent money in comfort for the rest of her life, and provide for Athol too. "I expect my share's big enough," he ended lamely.

For a second Halliday regarded him curiously. The flush, the hesitation were not like Scarlett; but the elder man had no key to either of them. He nodded silently, and turned away.

When the two came out of the camp at dawn Sabiel had gone, and it was raining; fine, steady rain that caused Halliday to stand at gaze.

"I guess the old chap mayn't be lying about his flood after all," he observed. "And if you can lam that into Burns we could have him safe down the valley, where he knows his way, before Sabiel gets

back. It's the only chance to get him out of this! Sabel wouldn't trust any promise he'd give about silence, except through sudden death."

But Burns, on being confronted with the circumstances, took no stock in even that threat. He received the news of their dismissal quite sanely, saw the reasonableness of it; and refused to budge.

"You've done white by me," he remarked gently, "and I've got kind of used to you. I'll wait and go out with you. If I got wandering alone through this valley I'd go crazy again. I'd sooner take chances with your Indian."

"You've got no chances with him, man; and you'll make ours pretty slim when he finds out you're here and we haven't told him," Halliday blurted impatiently.

"Then I can stay in the caves and let you two go off alone." Burns's weak mouth set. "I'm not afraid of a Tabeak rush, and I've weathered one flood here!"

"You got out of that," retorted Scarlett sharply, "by that back way you've forgotten, that caved in on you as you came in by it this last time—and it's filled clean up! Don't make any mistake about weathering another flood by that means; for there isn't any passage left for you to get out by."

But he got no answer, and he turned away; realizing that short of putting Burns out of the caves by force and having Sabel or some other Indian drop on him there was nothing to do but to let him stay

and go out with himself and Halliday. As for abandoning the man, neither Scarlett nor Halliday was the kind to do it. They would just have to manage to make Sabiel accept him somehow.

But, all the same, Burns's obstinacy made a hard day harder. Hacking and hewing at his gold in the bowels of the earth, Scarlett felt as if he could not draw a free breath till he heard news of Athol, and could be sure Eldon had not dared to return from Tabeak to revenge himself for her afternoon's work on his rawhide. It was barely five o'clock when he hurried Halliday across the lake to camp, and saw with relief that Sabiel was back there.

"She is well," the Indian said quietly as Scarlett reached him. "She says that man has never come back, nor any of them; and she will be angry if you come to see her. She tells you good-by!"

It was not quite all there was to know; but Athol had seen no reason to confide any more to the Indian. There had been no sign of trouble from Eldon; but if there had been, Jim Welsh would have been no help to his niece in it. He had returned sodden drunk from his sunset consultation with Eldon on the Tabeak road, to shut himself in his room and keep on drinking. If she had known that he had talked with Eldon after that worthy fled from the roadhouse, Athol could not have sent word to Scarlett quickly enough; but wanting that knowledge she held her tongue to his messenger.

Scarlett, unwitting of reservations as to Jim

Welsh or any one else, felt a load fall from his shoulders.

"Tells me good-by," he thought with tender scorn. "Not if I see my way to saying it!" Aloud he said simply: "I'm obliged to you, Sabiell. I can work at the gold now like something with sense."

He needed to, for he had to think for the four of them. The mere transport of the gold proved easier than he had imagined: it could go by canoe first to the end of the lake; where Sabiell, by a long circuit, would meet it with the two horses and carry it to some gully where it would be safe to cache it to take out by degrees. Having horses to use meant getting out twice the amount the men themselves could have carried, and Sabiell had made deerskin bags that would load easily on both men and beasts. Even so divided the weight would be no joke, but Scarlett had no mind to leave any of his gold behind. He toiled like a navvy to pack every ounce he could carry. Burns, to his surprise, was an invaluable aid to him. Besides being a trained miner, which Halliday and Scarlett were not, he had a knack for doing things neatly.

By the night of the next Tuesday, a day before Scarlett had expected, not a pennyworth of loose gold lay in the cave. Every bit of it was packed ready for departure, and Scarlett regarded the heavy sacks with relief. For the last two days he had been as anxious to be gone from the valley as

Sabiel himself: there had been no sign of the Ta-beak rush the Indian dreaded, but his other prophecy looked more like fulfilment with every hour.

The rain, that had begun so gently, had turned to a ceaseless, sluicing downpour. In the daytime Scarlett forgot it in the caves where no sound penetrated; but at night the bark camp was like a drum under the torrential fall that was making Sabiel like a pea on a hot shovel. The only thing Scarlett did not understand was that so far the lake had not risen perceptibly; but Sabiel heard his comment on it with a sudden fire in his oily eyes.

"Neither it will rise," he retorted, "till it rises for good. Up in the mountains above us are lakes, too; it is when they burst the ground that this lake rises—and then there will be no time for measuring! In four hours after, the water will be where that stands." He pointed to a sapling fifty feet above the camp.

"Burst the ground!" repeated Scarlett. "D'you mean there will be landslides?"

"That's it—the word I forgot! When the clay in that mountain melts, she goes h-r-r"—the guttural threatening was indescribable—"and the water is on you!"

"H-m," muttered Scarlett blankly. Landslides altered the situation: he had no desire to be caught in the caves by one. He worked against time to beat them, and as he tied up the last bag of gold knew that even the incredible wealth of the yet un-

touched lode would not have made him stand another day of it.

"We're done," he said, straightening himself and regarding Burns and Halliday, "and we may as well go. There's nothing to stay here for, and we're better outside."

But Burns shook his head; and with some show of reason. It had turned out impossible to load all the gold and themselves in the one canoe that was to go down to the end of the lake to meet Sabiel and the horses. The arrangement they had finally come to was to ferry over the lake to camp just what would pack on the two horses, and let Sabiel get off on his long round with them in the morning; then the three men left behind—one of whom the Indian had not yet heard of—could load the canoe again with what was left of the gold and meet Sabiel with it at the lower end of the lake.

"There's no need for me to show up yet," advanced Burns mildly. "It might put your Indian off taking out the pack-horses for you if I were sprung on him to-night. Best let him see me first when we're clear of his caves. I'd sooner wait here with the rest of the gold till you come back for it in the morning, anyhow."

Scarlett hesitated. But at the upper cave's mouth the water had not risen a fraction since the morning, and it was true enough that it would be wiser to have no trouble with Sabiel over Burns till they were at least out of the valley.

"All right," he assented, "you can stay here! Halliday'll be over for you and the rest of the gold as soon as Sabiel gets off to-morrow, and you can both go to camp and wait there for me. I have some things to do before I leave," with the exultant consciousness that, after all, it was not through Sabiel that he must say good-by to Athol Gray. There was something else he had to say good-by to, too; and he lifted his hand in the salute with a sudden impulse as he took his place in the canoe. "Good-by, old lode," he said gently. "We've just about scratched you, and I'll never see you again—but I'm grateful for every inch of gold you've given me!"

"What! D'ye mean you aren't coming back here at all?" sputtered Halliday.

"No. I've something else to do to-morrow! Besides"—Scarlett regarded the streaming darkness distastefully—"don't you make any mistake, my son, as to those caves being a safe place to stay in! Burns is all right there for to-night; but by the time I get to camp to meet you and him to-morrow night I expect I'd only go back to the lode if Eldon cut Tabeak loose on me, or you'd forgotten to go for Burns!"

And if he had known what exact truth he was speaking, Mr. Scarlett would have returned to the caves there and then, extracted Burns, and faced with equanimity that row that would have followed with Sabiel. But the future was as dark to him as

it is to you or me, and the only thought in his head to get Sabiell off early on Wednesday morning, and have the whole day free to spend with Athol.

To his rage, he could not manage either thing. Indian-like, there were countless jobs Sabiell had left to the last moment. He had spent the two months of their stay in making canoes to sell at Tabeak, and insisted on shifting them himself to a high-water mark on the hillside, lest the flood should come and wreck them. He fussed over loading his precious buckskin till even Scarlett was fretted to profanity. It was late on Wednesday afternoon when he was finally got off, and Scarlett looked at his watch despairingly.

It was six o'clock; and for a moment he wondered if he dared take the time to go to Athol's. He decided the impending flood might hold off for twelve hours; twenty-four he would not bank on, but the twelve were his. He would never have given a thought to the journey between him and the girl he loved if he had had the buckskin, but it was a different matter to trust to his own two feet. And suddenly he laughed, knowing he would see her if he had to crawl. He turned to Halliday with unaccustomed command:

"I'm going off now. You go over for Burns before supper, and then the two of you wait here in camp for me. We'll leave with the canoe to-night."

Halliday wiped off the hard rain that was stinging his face.

"That old idiot, Sabiel, can't fetch the end of the lake before to-morrow night now," he said carelessly. "I don't see the good of starting out of a dry camp to wait for him in the rain! Where'd you say you were going?"

"Over past Sabiel's!" Scarlett flushed on it. "But don't imagine it's safe to wait here past to-night, Halliday, for it isn't. Sabiel's flood is coming for certain. You get Burns and the rest of the gold over here, and I'll be back to join you by—say eleven to-night!" For his own pack-pony, long ago recovered, was still in Athol's stable; and he could ride it back to Drowning Valley.

"I'll see to Burns, don't you worry," said Halliday easily. He saw no sense in the expedition "past Sabiel's," but it was none of his affair. He turned into the bark camp, cast off his dripping slicker, and sank luxuriously on the spruce bed. "If you knew how good it felt to take a plumb rest after all that gold-grubbing you'd let Sabiel's alone," he shouted. "Don't be an ass, Red! Stay here and keep dry."

But Scarlett was out of hearing already, jogging up the sodden track towards the roadhouse under a sky heavy with clouds, ominous with ceaseless, blinding rain. It was light when he passed Sabiel's deserted dwelling, but the dusk had come upon him by the time he turned into the many-pathed pasture.

He heaved a sigh of relief as he gained it; and before it was well out of his mouth slid noiselessly into a clump of spruces. It had been too soon to count on security; too soon to congratulate himself that, unnoticed, he had got halfway to Athol's. Not fifty yards away a mounted figure stood ahead of him, lurking in the lee of a rock; a man who listened rigidly, peering into the rain.

"I might have guessed they'd not stay in Ta-beak," Scarlett thought blankly. "If that's Eldon the other two are somewhere!" He leaned forward from his cover to look for them; and the black shadow of man and horse in front of him jerked, spurred to a gallop, and circled in and out of the islands of bushes that dotted the pasture—aimlessly, to all appearance. But it was not aimlessly. There was some one else coming at the top of a pony's run—some one the waiting man was there to meet.

Instinctively Scarlett moved to make certain who it was. But all he could distinguish in the dusk was a second rider on a second horse, who might be any one, and who was certainly making dead for the place where he stood. He leant against the spruce boughs motionless, meaning to slip aside with a matador's trick when the newcomer was all but on him. But there was no need. For suddenly, like a thing in a dream, the on-coming horse floundered in its tearing gallop; and fell. A shot rang out, to Scarlett's stark astonishment; then a

yell of triumph; and if he had ever doubted that Eldon's followers were in the pasture, he did so no longer, for he knew the voice.

"The Frenchman!" he thought sharply. But he had no guess at the figure on the second horse. He flung himself, quick as light, from his sheltering bushes, and gripped it by the shoulder.

CHAPTER XX

JIM WELSH

At the roadhouse that Wednesday it was deadly still.

Athol Gray shivered where she sat in the unwontedly deserted kitchen, and even Jim Welsh, coming down the stairs at six o'clock for the first time since his retirement up them more than a week before, felt the place oddly still; and somehow queer. Usually he took his drinking fits as cheerfully as Christmas, but coming out of this one he had a suspicion he had done something foolish in it. He looked into the kitchen vaguely, then with surprise. Deaf Mary, who never left it, was not there; nor was John, her old husband.

"I couldn't be surprised at seeing things," Welsh muttered, "but not seeing things is crazy!" He wondered if the unpleasant thing he half remembered had been sending John and Mary away.

Athol turned at his step with a start of real joy.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come down," she cried. "It's been the longest, loneliest day!" She moved to the stove and began making the coffee with which

Uncle Jim always pulled himself together after a fall from sobriety.

"What are you working for?" Welsh demanded. "Where's Mary?"

"Oh, I told you," but Athol checked herself: it had been time wasted talking through his shut door that morning. "She and John are gone to Janesville," she explained. "Their son was hurt, and sent for them yesterday. I had to let them go in all this rain."

"And you've milked and fed and done everything," commented Welsh crossly.

"I didn't mind; it was something to do." She set his coffee by him, but Welsh did not look at it.

"Can you think of anything particular I did while I was drunk?" he asked baldly.

"Not a thing! Why?"

"Nothing; only I've an idea I did something crazy. It was mighty bad whisky I had upstairs," he added grimly, "wherever I got it."

"Where did you get it, Uncle Jim?" He had returned speechless on the night of Eldon's rout, but the girl who had helped him into the house had never connected Eldon with the burden in his saddle-bags.

"I don't know any more than the dead!" Welsh gulped some coffee and tried to collect himself. "I don't seem to have spent any money on it, anyway," pulling out his scanty roll of bills. "I just seemed to have it. I'm not fit for you to live with,

honey, and that's the truth! If I could strike gold somehow, I guess I'd send you away from an uncle like me, who——" But he stopped. Gold! The word had touched a chord in his memory—touched it without effect, as on damp piano strings; yet he had a dreamy sense of the sound that ought to have come. He looked round the room with a sudden realization of a familiar personality missing from it. "What's become of Eldon?" he demanded, with apparent irrelevancy.

"He's gone away."

"Where to?"

A mad impulse took the girl that now was the time to speak out about Eldon. Uncle Jim, sobering up and repentant, might take things in more seriously now than if she waited till he was light-hearted again. It was the time, too, to tell him about Scarlett and herself, if she must hold her tongue about Scarlett's gold. There was a wonderful color in her clear cheeks as she turned to Welsh.

"I don't know where Eldon went," she cried. "It was for no good wherever it was! He was a bad man, Uncle Jim, and we're well rid of him."

"Bad?" Welsh stared in blank astonishment. "He was kind of hard," he admitted, "but—how d'ye mean he was bad?" His hand went involuntarily into his pocket, and came out with a lump of gold in it. At the unexpected sight Welsh snapped his fingers till the nugget leaped on the table.

"That's where I got it," said he, "that's where I got the whisky! Eldon gave it and the gold there to me the night I met him on the Tabeak road, and I couldn't remember till now. He told me he'd left here and gone to Tabeak, but I'd forgotten that, too. I said I'd take him and some Tabeak men into Indian Valley prospecting, if he came back for me. Hasn't he been here?"

Athol took no notice of the question.

"Indian Valley," she said mechanically, though she knew perfectly it was only another name for the place Scarlett had called Drowning Valley; where he must be still. Her heart turned over in her till she could hardly get out another word. "You said you'd take Eldon into Indian Valley for gold?" she stammered.

"Why not?" irritably. "I don't see what ails you about his going there!"

"Everything!" Welsh's niece stood over him, dead white. At all costs she must prevent him from leading Eldon in on Scarlett, no matter how much she had to tell about either of them. "Eldon's a thief and a murderer," she cried trenchantly, forgetful that she had always dealt softly with Uncle Jim. "If you'd been sober, I'd have told you that a week ago! It's not plain prospecting he wants to take the Tabeak men into Indian Valley for—it's for murder! It's for backing when he quarrels with a man who is in there already, whom Eldon thinks has struck gold there. But it isn't his

gold Eldon wants to go for—not first! He wants to kill him. He's tried twice outside the valley, and if you lead him in there to try a third time, well," recklessly, "you'll kill me!"

"You're saying pretty tall things," said Welsh sharply: he looked at her with a curious start she did not see. "Supposing there is a man in the valley that Eldon has a grudge against, what's he to you?"

"Everything!" Suddenly she was kneeling by Welsh's side, hiding her face against his shoulder. "Uncle Jim," she whispered childishly, "he says he loves me, and I—love him. When you know him you'll see why!"

Welsh sat thunderstruck. Swiftly, by the flaw in his weak and kindly soul, a very devil of rage and distrust entered into him, till he was sick with jealousy of the unknown man who was coming between him and the girl who was like his only child.

"I've seen no man you could fancy," he said brutally. "Do you mean one's been coming here behind my back?"

Athol looked up; thrown back on herself; somehow frightened.

"I mean you don't know what has been going on here," she cried. "Nobody wanted to do things behind your back; I couldn't help your being away when they happened. That was why I began to tell you about Eldon now. If you'd heard all I

have about him, I don't believe you'd trust him any more than I do."

"I expect I'd be more likely to think any kind of man could come here and lie about him!" Welsh sneered openly.

"The man I mean didn't lie," said Athol hotly, "and it's not only what I heard about Eldon—things I saw him do couldn't be lies! Listen"—her quick voice broke piteously—"you've been an angel to me, Uncle Jim—who else would have burdened himself with a child of five, if she were his niece, and fathered and mothered her for all these years as you have? Do you suppose I didn't know how hard it was for you to send me to school from the time I was ten, and all you went without to do it? There'll never be any one just like you to me; but—I can care for the other, too. He came here a month ago, while you were in Tabeak; it was he who left the pack-pony we have still. I don't know, somehow I liked him; he wasn't the kind of man who comes here. And I—I found out Eldon meant to murder him. I made him go away, but he came back; twice he risked everything from Eldon to see me. And I—I can't bear him to be run into any more danger!"

Welsh sat rigid, with his devil ramping in him. It was true he had fathered and mothered his niece for fifteen years, and now—now she was ready to leave him for a man she had known one month. She was not even vouchsafing a coherent story of

who the man was. His lips were white as he turned on her.

"What kind of danger? And what man are you talking about? I don't know so much as his name."

"It's Scarlett." Athol put her hand on his shoulder. "Don't look like that, Uncle Jim! He isn't what you're thinking; he's as good as—as you are. Hear about him and Eldon, and me, and judge for yourself."

It was not easy to tell Scarlett's story and her own to a man who would not even look at her; but she did it. She left out the discovery of the gold in Drowning Valley: that was Scarlett's secret, and no business of Welsh's. But even without that it did not take long to prove it was no plain prospecting Eldon wanted to get into the valley for. The spy sent to dog Scarlett from Blaze Creek was what the girl began with; but Welsh took no particular stock in the story till the overheard conversation of Eldon and the Frenchman at his own gate confirmed it. Then he sat up and listened; but he had never heard of Henshaw's gang, and he dismissed that part as nonsense. His face hardened as he heard all Athol had done for Scarlett, and his letting Eldon go almost unscathed at the end of it.

"I don't know that letting Eldon go off after the rawhide business counts to your Scarlett," he commented grimly. "Unless you asked him to."

Athol nodded, and Welsh sat silent. The quarrel between Eldon and this unknown man was no busi-

ness of his; what was, was that Athol should have been mixed up in it. As far as he knew, her story might be true enough. Eldon's mouth had been bloody when he met him in the twilight, and he had explained it by saying his horse had fallen with him—but that did not go to show he was any worse than Scarlett. A wave of distaste for the whole thing rose up in Welsh, and for the moment drove out his devil of jealousy.

"I don't see why I've got to take any sides in other people's quarrels," he exclaimed weakly. "Eldon can shift for himself, for all I care. I expect getting into Indian Valley would be craziness this weather, anyway! I know the way, and I've heard there was gold there, but that's all I do know; and I'd just as soon let the place alone."

The girl's heart leaped. She had thought Welsh would stick by her, yet somehow—somehow she had been afraid.

"You won't go!" She laughed with relief. "Oh, Uncle Jim, I never was glad you got—well, you know—before! But just think how furious Eldon must have been all this week, waiting for you to come to Tabeak and show him how to get at Scarlett, while you'd forgotten all about him."

Welsh jumped. "I wasn't going in to meet Eldon," he cried. "I was—— Is this Monday or Tuesday?" sharply.

"It's Wednesday. Why?"

"He was going to gather up the Tabeak men

and come over for me here on Monday or Tuesday," said Welsh slowly. "But if this is Wednesday evening——"

"You don't think Eldon went in without you?" Athol interrupted frantically.

Welsh shook his head. "I told you he didn't know the way. He'll be here for me yet. Where's this Scarlett now?" peevishly.

Athol hesitated, her mind working like a mill. This was Wednesday evening. Scarlett had said he would leave the valley on Thursday morning at the earliest, so he was in there yet; besides—and her heart leapt savagely on it—even if he were safely gone, Eldon should not fall heir to his gold nor harry the Indian who had shown it to him. No matter how she stopped it, Jim Welsh must never, never lead men in on Scarlett's secret. She swung round on Welsh.

"Scarlett must be in the valley still," she said quietly. "He wanted to come here to-morrow to see you, and say good-by to me before he left for good; but I sent him word to stay away."

"If he stayed away altogether I could live through it," muttered Welsh. Once more his devil stirred in him. He spoke up suddenly like the educated man he had been before he fell to what he was now. "You say yourself you know nothing of this man except what he has told you, and every word of that may be a lie. It's extremely easy to go about saying other people are murderers!"

Athol stood dumb. She had never seen Welsh in just this mood. She realized it had been a mistake to tell him anything about Scarlett, and her lips shook as at last she spoke bitterly.

"It wasn't Scarlett who told me that; it was Eldon's own mouth—if he didn't know I heard. Remember that——" She stopped short, and clutched Welsh. "Wait, there's some one coming! Oh, Uncle Jim."

For there was some one come—not coming! Outside the window bulked a man on horseback; beyond him the yard was filling with horses and riders. Welsh glanced out, then made for the door.

"It's them," he said over his shoulder, "the Ta-beak men come for me! That was Inkster at the window."

"You won't go with them?" Athol caught him back with a man's strength. "You can't—after what I've told you!"

Welsh stood perfectly still till her grip loosened. "I won't go," he returned, "if what Scarlett told you is true! That's all I can say." But his voice was wavering, his devil quiescent. Athol looked him straight in the eyes.

"If Eldon himself hasn't come for you, you'll know that what Scarlett said about him was true, and he's afraid to come here," she said desperately. "If he does come, get me time, Uncle Jim; keep him and his men here for the night," with the wild thought that in the dark hours she might somehow

warn Scarlett of his danger. "You can do it, if you try. Help me just this once, and I'll do anything you say afterwards. You'd save a dog from being hunted if I asked you—unless you're all changed and different!"

For the first time the passion in her voice cut at the man's heart, but he could not answer her. He only nodded awkwardly and went out.

It was not much of a guarantee to stand by her, but it was something. Half assured of Uncle Jim's aid, half doubtful, Athol peered from the window and counted the men outside. There were seventeen of them, reckoning Inkster and Sabarin; but among them there was not another face she knew. Of Eldon there was no sign; and insensibly the girl's heart lightened. The whole crew were dismounting in the roadhouse yard, for five minutes perhaps, perhaps for the night. Which, Athol doubted breathlessly; till the men began to lead their steaming horses into the roofed sheds opposite. They were going to stay! And her heart leapt with relief. There were a hundred chances yet that they might fall on Scarlett and his claim, against the one that Welsh would be true to her; but they would not do it to-night.

Athol turned like a whirlwind to get supper—quantity, not quality, was what the Tabeak men would want. But her face paled as they began to dribble in. They were not the class of miner who used Welsh's house to come and go from Janes-

ville: they were the drifting scum of Tabeak, and not too sober as she herded them into the dining-room off the kitchen.

Sabarin was among them, and he grinned in her face; Inkster only nodded sulkily. As she flew from stove to table Sabarin's smile haunted the girl; but the Frenchman did not look up again. If it had not been for the need of keeping the whole crew where they were no power on earth would have made Athol feed Sabarin; but she did it.

Welsh she forgot utterly; till, refilling her empty dishes in the deserted kitchen, she remembered suddenly that he had gone out and never come back. At any other time she would not have given a thought to it; now, quite irrelevantly, she had a feeling that it was just his absence that had made Sabarin grin. She flung open the door to the yard in the quick terror that came on her; and stood rigid on the doorstep.

There was some one in the stable. It could not be Welsh alone, for a murmur of voices came from its open door, two shadows wavered in the light of a moving lantern. There was nothing terrifying in a simple thing like that, yet the girl stood sick with fear.

Furtively she slipped across the yard in the streaming rain, and stopped unnoticed in the stable door with her heart pounding in her. For inside it was Eldon—Eldon standing coolly by a dripping horse, with a smile that showed the lack of two front

teeth. And opposite him, pale in the lantern light, a new and half emptied flask of whisky in his hand, was Welsh.

It did not need words to tell Athol he had failed her; that he, who believed in every one, was believing in Eldon now. Instinctively she knew her cause was lost, if she did not know how it had been done. She slipped her hand to her pocket for the revolver that never left her in that lonely place; if Eldon had ever been afraid of her shooting he should have cause to be afraid of it now. But she flung up no revolver to cover him. Her pocket was empty; her gun gone. It was not Welsh being out with Eldon that had made Sabarin laugh, but a better reason: it had been easy enough for him to take her revolver from her pocket as she waited on him at supper, but she dared not go back and confront him with the loss now. She moved quietly into the circle of lantern light and stood, utterly defenseless, looking at the two men.

CHAPTER XXI

MRS. SOPHIA SCARLETT

WELSH was the first to see her.

“Get back out of this,” he began; and changed his mind. “No, stay! There’s something you’ve got to hear about your Scarlett.”

It was worse than the girl had expected, and she stood dumb. She had seen Welsh like this once before. It did not need the half-empty flask of whisky in his hand to tell her he had been drinking again, but he would not get drunk; all the whisky on earth would not go to his head or his legs now. White, shaking, strong with the dangerous strength of the weak, he would just follow implacably whatever idea happened to be in his head. There was no help in Uncle Jim; and fierce with despair she turned on Eldon.

“I didn’t think you’d dare come here—after the way you left!” she cried.

Eldon laughed, though the words stung. “I came partly to speak to you,” he declared. “You’ve done your best to make a mess of my business with Red Scarlett, but I guess you haven’t heard all there

is to know about him. Scarlett's——" He stopped, and looked at her.

Instinctively she waited for him to say that Scarlett was dead; that he had found his own way into Drowning Valley, and killed him—but even Eldon, who had been Henshaw, would never dare to come and boast of that. In the silence the talk and laughter of the Tabeak men drifted loud across the yard, over her thought that, if Scarlett were killed, Eldon should hang; if she had to go herself to find justice, he should hang. If Eldon had known the torture he was putting her to it might have gone far to repay him for the loss of his front teeth, but her silence made him unconsciously cut it short.

"Scarlett's a married man," he snarled. "That's what I came to say."

It sounded so bald, so ludicrous after what she had expected that Athol laughed. But it was not a girl's laugh, and Eldon's hatred of her leapt into his eyes. She had been in his way ever since he had known her; thwarted him, seen through him; and he could pay her to the bone for it now.

"Scarlett's been married," he repeated softly, "for five years. I guess he hadn't told you that when you saved his skin out there in the pasture! You've heard some rumors about me——"

"I heard them from your own mouth!" Her blood was up as she interrupted.

"You say so"—Eldon shrugged his shoulders—

"but that won't stop me giving you facts about Scarlett. He's married; to a woman whose name used to be Sophia March. They were living in New York for a time, till things happened, and she had to go to a sanatorium: it kind of knocked her out, you see, when Scarlett got two years in Sing Sing for stealing a diamond necklace out of a shop—like he's trying to steal gold out of Drowning Valley now. You mightn't have been so anxious to help him about that if you'd known that gold was going to keep his wife in that same sanatorium I spoke about. She was almost turned out a month ago, when Scarlett was on his uppers: he'd not sent her a cent for months—till you helped him get it."

It sounded like a crazy rigmarole, but somehow Eldon's hearer felt it was not.

"Sing Sing," she said to herself involuntarily, and very low; but it was not that she was thinking of, not that which stabbed at her heart. Scarlett might have been a thief—better men than he had stolen and repented—but to be married when he told her he loved her was a different thing. It might be true, too; the whole story might be true. She knew about Scarlett just—nothing; and his own lips had told her he had done things she might stick at. She could have stood that he had been in prison; even that he was a thief now; but never, never another woman between her and him. But Eldon should not know it, nor was she going to take

Eldon's word for it; when Scarlett's own mouth owned it to her it would be time to believe it. Her upper lip lifted oddly as she looked at Eldon.

"Some of that's untrue, on the face of it," she said steadily. "Scarlett would never let a woman want for money. If what you say is true he'd have starved himself to keep his wife; he'd have worked as a day laborer. As for the rest"—her eyes flashed into Welsh's as she turned on him—"it may be true and it mayn't; but if it is," significantly, "it's happened to other men—and they've been sorry."

A wave of blood came up in Welsh's face. It was not honesty that had first made him a dweller in the backwoods, if it had been weakness and not crime. But he had been drunk for days; he was on the verge of delirium now; and to be coupled with Scarlett maddened him.

"True," he screamed, "it's all true! Read this." He thrust a letter at her. "It's from his wife; Eldon got it from the bank at Janesville this very week. Your Scarlett hadn't gone by his own name there, and they refused his letters—and that's another thing for you to think of: honest men don't use two names. He's played the villain to you, and when he's hunted down—hunted down——" His tongue failed him; he stared at Eldon, at the flickering lantern, like a man who sees another sight. "Read the letter, and you'll stand no more between Scarlett and justice," he gasped.

"I'm not going to read it," said Athol slowly. She had had no need to be told that Eldon had brought the letter: sticking out of his pocket now was the envelope it had come in; her eyes had been on it, fascinated, ever since she had first entered the stable and wondered what weapon Eldon could have found to turn Uncle Jim into his slave. She could see nearly all the address—"C. E. Scarlett"—in a man's hand, not a woman's, though that did not occur to her then. It struck her like a blow that she did not even know the names the two initials stood for, before she thought that Eldon should not dare to keep even an envelope belonging to Scarlett; he should have nothing that might bear out the story he was telling against him. She would get it, somehow. But if she had known just how she was to find a chance she might not have taken it, even for Scarlett.

Welsh, looking at her stubborn face, lost what little self-command he had left.

"Then you'll hear, if you won't read," he burst out viciously; and Athol Gray made a queer sound between her teeth. It was Eldon who had pinioned her from behind; Eldon whose hands were on her waist; whose laugh bore his breath to her shrinking cheek. She struggled with him like a cat. He was having all he could do to hold her, when her hand brushed his pocket, and something like electricity flashed through her at the touch of paper there. She writhed in his grasp still, but that hand had

snatched something, slipped it into the folds of her dress, and was gripping it there. It might have been needed for her salvation and Scarlett's, perhaps, but she took it in nothing but blind fury, and because Eldon should not keep it. Quite suddenly she knew she was standing still; stunned, nerveless; hearing Welsh read something aloud.

She gathered the sense, not the words. Sophia Scarlett wrote to her "dearest boy" that never, even when he stopped sending her money and they said he had deserted her, had she lost faith in him. The doctor was rude, the matron impertinent, and she had not a new dress to her back, but she had always believed he would stand by her. She wanted to leave the sanatorium now. Why couldn't he come and take her somewhere they could live happily like they did before he went to that awful prison? She would not be happy till she got his answer, and knew he meant to go on taking care of "the little wife," Sophia Scarlett.

It was the letter of a selfish fool, but somehow it rang true. A sickish mist swam before Athol's eyes, her body went limp in Eldon's hold; but his laugh of satisfaction made her jerk rigid. It might be true that Scarlett was married; but Eldon should not think she cared. She leapt on Welsh, snatched the letter from his hand, reached the stable door, and stood at bay there.

"If you showed me that letter ten times over, I wouldn't believe it," she cried sweepingly: since she

had to lie she would lie well. "Uncle Jim, if you go after Scarlett with that man there," and it was not the hand in the folds of her dress that pointed at Eldon, "because you believe the things he's trumped up against him, you'll be sorry till you die!" And with the words on her lips she shrank like a child against the doorpost.

Welsh had struck her brutally; had screamed at her to get into the house; she had managed his business long enough—she and her convict liar. Dumbly the girl moved out in the yard, into the rain. Uncle Jim had turned on her; Uncle Jim, who had never given her anything but love till now! She wanted to cry; to cry and cry her heart out; but her eyes burnt dry in her head.

Suddenly she found herself in her own room, shutting the door, listening to her mind, that seemed to be thinking without her. It said she had been a fool ever to tell Welsh about Scarlett when he was not sober; that never before had she dared to argue with him when he had been drinking—and her heart said it did not matter; Uncle Jim would have failed her anyhow. Something had taken away her empire over him forever.

In her hands she still clutched the letter Welsh had read her, the envelope she had taken from Eldon; and the touch of them sickened her. It was all very well to say she did not believe in that other woman's letter, but she did believe it. The world was all of a piece to-night: Uncle Jim had struck

her, and Scarlett's love was the kind that filled her with shame.

The envelope in her hand was too thick to be empty, but she would not look inside it to find more words from Sophia Scarlett; instead, she pushed back into it the letter Welsh had read her. She would give the whole thing to Scarlett; watch him as he read it; let him know what she thought of those things he had said did not matter—and suddenly her heart jolted her whole body. Some one, coming up the stairs noiselessly, had locked her in her room. Outside in the yard were men shouting; men leading their horses out of the sheds; mounting them, riding away.

Athol flung herself at the window, and gazed down. Some one was holding a lantern in the thready darkness of the rain, and in its light she saw Welsh climb into his old saddle and ride out of the yard with Eldon. And what it meant flashed on her.

They were not even waiting for the morning to hunt Scarlett down; they were going to get him to-night! She would never see him again to confront him with his stolen letter, nor anything else.

Savage passion wrenched the girl as Eldon and the Tabeak men followed Welsh out of the gate. If they were going after Scarlett, if they killed him to-night, what was it to her? She had done enough for a man who had taken it for granted she would

not mind that he was married when he said he loved her; let him shift for himself! Unconsciously she gripped something that was in her hand till it crackled, and she looked down—and the sight of the thick envelope she still held steadied her like cold water.

She was letting that stolen letter do just what Eldon had meant it to do; she was playing into his hands like a beaten fool, when she could be revenged on both him and Scarlett if she chose! And she did choose. Welsh was leading Eldon into Drowning Valley by the road. She could cut him off—get to Scarlett before him—if she went by the pasture! It was one side of a triangle to two, and a simple journey; if only she knew where Scarlett's camp lay.

“But I can find it, if I can only strike the intervals he told me about,” she said between her teeth. “The first one runs into a second, and then there's a track going over a hill. I have a chance to strike it: Uncle Jim and Eldon have forgotten I might try. They think I'm locked in here.”

Regardless that she had no longer any gun, of the dangers she might run, Welsh's niece dragged on her slicker and her riding boots, and deliberately stowed Scarlett's letter in her pocket. It did not matter what was in it, now; what mattered was to defeat Eldon and warn Scarlett. She had done with him then, just as she was done with Uncle Jim now. She would never come back to live in this

house: she would go to Janesville and stay with old Mary. But first she had to save Scarlett from Eldon and the Tabeak men, even if it were for another woman—if she could! But her throat was dry as she left her locked room by the window that gave on the cowshed roof, that window that Welsh and Eldon had forgotten, and gained the stable.

The place was deserted. There was not one soul left behind to watch her. Athol's courage rose insensibly as she led out her horse and mounted him in the wet silence of the bush road. She could thwart Eldon yet, if only she could find her way to Scarlett.

It was almost dark when she reached the pasture where one day she had not known she was happy as she saved Scarlett from Eldon's rope, but the place felt empty of intruders as her own yard. She could see nothing moving, hear nothing but the drumming rain: she was ahead of Welsh and Eldon still. The thought of them sent her hurrying on, making for the path Scarlett had come out of the day Eldon roped him; but as she gained the entrance of it something crashed through the bushes at her side, black, monstrous in the gloom; a horse and man who nearly rode her down.

Her pony reared, swayed round as on a pivot, sheered by the horse that all but touched him, and was off on the dead run; when something happened. Athol could never tell what, but her pony crumpled

under her, and fell sprawling. At the crash some one shouted; and with blank fear she knew the voice.

It was Sabarin who had headed her! Eldon had sent Sabarin to the pasture to cut her off if she tried it. It had been no wanton theft the Frenchman had made of her gun, but a precaution to save his own skin. He had known he was to intercept her, and prepared for it.

Athol rolled from her struggling pony, more from instinct than anything else; cleared herself from his terrified hoofs; and turned cold in all her strong young body. With a shock that nauseated her a hand had come down on her shoulder, its grip biting into her flesh.

It was not Sabarin alone who had cut her off. They were all on her, here before her! She had been trapped like any common fool. Dumbly she felt herself lifted from the ground, flung behind the man who had seized her; and heard Sabarin's horse slither as he pulled it up to peer through the dark.

"I guess I got you fixed," he yelled at her. "Now I kill you—hein? Or I take you home. Come; which you say?"

A shot fired in sheer wantonness spun over her head, but it was not Sabarin who fired the second shot that passed her very ear. He had bowed forward on his saddleless horse at the sound of it, and slipped heavily to the ground. The man who had

killed him seized his plunging pony by the head, characteristically, before he spoke.

“Athol!” he cried, “I might have killed you. I thought you were Eldon!”

But at the sound of Scarlett’s voice Athol Gray stood speechless.

CHAPTER XXII

DARK SHADOWS IN THE DARK

FOR a long moment the two stared at each other, two dark shadows in the dark beside the trembling ponies, and Sabarin, who was still. Then Scarlett flung out his free hand to the girl.

"What's all this mean?" he cried. "I was on my way to you, now. What brings you here, with Sabarin after you like this?"

Athol shrank out of arm's reach behind her pony. She had never thought of meeting Scarlett outside the valley; somehow she was not ready to speak to him.

"I'm here because Eldon and sixteen Tabeak men are coming to find you," she said tonelessly: it was not the Scarlett she had loved she was warning, only the Scarlett Eldon should not get the better of. "They're going into Drowning Valley to rush your claim, and kill you if they can. They're on the road from our house now." She looked at Sabarin with a shudder of pure nerves. "Is he dead?" she whispered.

"I think you can't count him with the sixteen others," said Scarlett dryly. "He has what was

coming to him." Something in the girl's manner, in the way he could hear her taking her breath, was startling him more than the news of Eldon's new move. "What do you mean about your house?" he demanded. "Did Eldon dare to go back here—had you trouble?"

"No; it was easy," lifelessly, "till you stopped the Frenchman just now. I suppose Eldon left him to watch me; but I was a fool, I forgot him! You'd better take his pony now, and go. The rest will be here in a minute."

Scarlett moved to her with quick, impatient authority.

"For Heaven's sake, darling, tell me what's wrong," he cried. "What have you been doing for me now, to bring you out here? You couldn't have known you were going to meet me! I won't have you running risks for me like this."

"It's the last," said the girl slowly, standing like marble under his hand that lay warm on her arm.

Scarlett misunderstood her. "Eldon's men can't find me," he responded unexpectedly, "they don't know the way past here; and besides——" He glanced round him suddenly as he paused. A pitch-black gloom had dropped from the sky like a tangible curtain. In it he could scarcely see the girl who stood so close to him, or the horse he held. "It would be a clever man who could work out his way into Drowning Valley to-night," he added simply.

"Dearest heart, why didn't you let me take my chance at getting the better of Eldon?"

"Chance?" Athol started as if he had struck her. "You haven't any," she cried fiercely. "Eldon mayn't know the way to your gold in the dark; but Uncle Jim does"—she had to get out Welsh's name and be done—"and he's gone over to Eldon!"

"*Welsh?*" Somehow it was the last thing Scarlett had expected.

"He wouldn't have done it if he had been sober." Once more the girl's voice was toneless; mechanically, almost indifferently, she told Scarlett just what had happened at the roadhouse; all she left out was the letter Eldon had used on Welsh and her. That should come last, last of all, as she turned to bid Scarlett good-by. Over each word she spoke she listened for Eldon and Eldon's men; but she could not hear them. They would be making slow business of the pasture in this darkness.

Scarlett honestly and absolutely forgot them. "Welsh left you—alone, like that," he commented grimly, with a healthy longing to break that worthy's head. "Well, it's the last chance he'll have to do it! Get on your pony, Athol darling; you're coming with me." He had nowhere to take her except on a long hard journey, but even that would be safer for her than going back to an empty house, with not even a deaf old woman for protection if Eldon returned there. "I'm not much, but at least I can take care of you—if you'll trust me!"

For a moment he had no answer; but for the first time he felt Athol's eyes on him in the dark.

"You saved my life when you shot Sabarin," she said at last, and too quietly, "but I can take care of myself now. I'm here because I was going into Drowning Valley to warn you about Eldon; I didn't come because I was afraid to be alone. To-morrow I'm going to old Mary in Janesville: I'll never go back to Uncle Jim. Mary and I can live together somewhere. But I'm going home for now. Only first—have you any matches?" and it sounded oddly detached. "I want to show you something."

"Yes. But they're wet; they wouldn't light," said Scarlett, bewildered; insensibly his hand slipped from her sleeve. It was not the Athol he knew who was talking about going to Janesville to old Mary. There was something wrong.

"It doesn't matter," she returned, still with that curious detachment he did not understand, "you can take what I have to give you just as well in the dark." She pulled out of her slicker an envelope, stuffed to bursting, and laid it in his hand. "It's a—two letters for you that Eldon got in Janesville," she said carefully. "I took them from him to bring to you. I'd have gone to your camp, if I hadn't found you here, to tell you——" and she could not say the thing on her tongue.

Nothing could make her speak out her knowledge of a woman called Sophia Scarlett; and if it broke

her heart to know Scarlett was married, he should never hear it from her lips.

"Eldon got letters of mine in Janesville?" said Scarlett stupidly. It was the only thing he took in of what she was saying. "How?"

"I think they gave them to him at the bank. They said they didn't know any Scarlett, and Eldon said—he did!"

Scarlett made a small, quick movement of rage. That silly false name of Edgerley was coming back on him now! He had been a fool not to tell Harris he was Scarlett, had never been Edgerley in reality; but too much chance of talk about his gold had seemed to hang on it then, and he had never thought of being caught out with letters; nor did he think now of the person who was most likely to write to him.

"Did Eldon *give* you letters of mine?" he demanded incredulously.

"No! He—Uncle Jim read one to me; then—I took it and the envelope the other one was in." As if it had concerned some one else she told him how she had found a chance to take it; and heard the man swear below his breath.

If he had been a fool to pass as Edgerley he had been doubly a fool not to kill Eldon the day he had the chance. The thought of the man's hands on Athol made him sick.

"It's you I mind about, more than the letters," he said roughly. "But why should Eldon give one

to Welsh?" There were plenty of reasons Eldon might have done it for, but the concrete one never entered his head. "What was it for—what was there in it?"

"Plenty—to make me remember you'd told me twice that you'd done some things I might stick at!" Her voice shook on it, but once more she could not tell him what those things were.

"Well?" said Scarlett slowly.

"Well—you have!"

The man's heart turned over in him as at a revelation. "Did Eldon tell you I had been in prison?" he asked thickly. "Athol, is it—that?"

"It's—everything," and her voice was clear if Scarlett's was not. She would not have cared if he had been in prison for most of his life, but pride kept her from saying so. Nor, now that it came to the point, could she say one word of the woman who had signed herself Sophia Scarlett. He could find out she knew about that when she was gone. "It's good-by between you and me," she said hardily. "If you thought I shouldn't care what you'd done—well, I do! I'm only glad you never kissed me."

"Athol"—he had never tried to touch her since she had let his hand slip from her sleeve, but now he winced back from her—"for God's sake don't say—that."

"It's true," she returned listlessly. She moved to her pony, and he stopped her.

"Do you mean that for what Eldon told you—

that you won't even give me a chance to explain—you and I are standing here like this?" he asked bleakly. "That it's the end?"

"It is for me." Sudden, cold anger was in her voice, the anger no woman has for a man unless she loves him. "It's not what Eldon told me," she cried. "I *saw* that letter to you: I had it in my hands!"

"But"—Scarlett was oddly breathless—"you—you're giving me no chance! Do you mean you won't marry me because of something you read about me?" And the only thing in his mind was the taint of Sing Sing.

But the other woman was the only thing in Athol's.

"I'll give you every chance," she said, with sudden shamed desperation: if there was the tiniest loophole of explanation she would let him crawl through it. "You know what Eldon told me—you must know what there would be in a letter of yours—is it true?"

"True enough," said the man bitterly, thinking of those prison years that were punishing him now as they had never done before. "But—if you'd listen—that couldn't come between you and me!"

Every drop of blood drained from the girl's face. "Listening couldn't change things," she said, "once I know they're true."

Something in her hard composure made Scarlett feel sick; unable even to fight for himself.

"I don't suppose it matters," he said dully, "but I don't even know who the letter you're talking about was from."

It was the last straw. He must know, when he had owned the thing in it was true. "You can read it—when I'm gone," she muttered, and turned away to her horse.

Scarlett moved after her.

"You can't go like this—alone in the dark with Eldon round," he said, with a lame drop to practical things. "Even if you hate me, I'm going to take you home."

"You!" Athol wheeled like a flash, out of herself with shame for his shame that he did not seem to feel. "If you dare to come with me, or even follow me, I'll never forgive you. I lived before I knew you; I can live again when I've forgotten you—and the things you thought I wouldn't mind!" She began to sob in queer broken gasps. "I've warned you about Eldon's men: I would not see even a dog taken in a trap. They'll be here in a minute, they must be; and they'll kill you and take your mine. You'd better get on Sabarin's pony and go!"

"And leave you to face them?" asked Scarlett coldly. "Is it likely?"

Athol turned with one foot in her stirrup and spoke in the face of the man she had loved.

"If you follow me so much as one step, I'll ride straight for Eldon's men and take whatever they give me for betraying them," she said. "I'd rather

they shot me than have you save me." And with a spring she was in her saddle and gone into the dark, without even so much as a good-by.

If Scarlett had known it, she could not have spoken another word. She had shamed herself by her outspokenness already, and for no good. What Eldon had told her of Scarlett was all true: he had owned it; and in a world where she had had nothing left but Scarlett, the knowledge had sapped the life from the girl's veins. Somehow, mad as it was, she knew she had expected Scarlett could explain; that the thing she had read and heard was, after all, a lie. And he had just said it was true. If Eldon ran on her now, and shot her for her warning she had given, she would not care. She had nowhere to go since Uncle Jim had turned on her, nothing in particular to live for—and in the dark she sat on her stumbling pony and cried. Suddenly, at a far-off sound, she turned her head and rode towards it, crying still.

Scarlett, standing apathetically where she had left him, made no move to follow her. There was no sign of Eldon and his gang, if they were really coming. Athol could cut across the pasture in front of them easily enough, anyhow. Outside of caring for her bare safety, he was numb and dazed. He did not even think consciously till the sound of her pony's hoofs had died away.

He had no desire to read the letter Eldon had used against him, even if it had been possible to do it by a wet match in the rain. All he cared about

the thing was that it had broken his happiness in two. He supposed it was natural that a girl should shrink from a man who had been two years in prison, but it cut—and suddenly bitterness seethed up in him. Athol had not even cared to know why he had been in prison; the fact had been enough for her. But he would go after her and make her know; and then let her judge him! She could not be more than a mile off from him yet—and suddenly he lifted his head and listened.

Through the unearthly darkness that clung against his face came a sound. It was not the drumming of the rain, nor the soft single-foot of Athol Gray's pony returning to him. It was horses coming at a gallop, in a mob that suddenly broke and scattered, as if the men on them had spread out as each took the path that seemed good to him through the many-tracked place. It was Eldon's men!

That they had not run on Athol was Scarlett's first thought, or he must have heard them do it. He thanked Heaven that she was clear of them before his heart lifted savagely. It would go hard with him if in the dark he could not get most of his enemies—and suddenly, sickeningly, for the first time that night, he remembered Halliday!

It would be no good getting most of the Tabeak men, or even Eldon, if Jim Welsh were to lead the rest on to Halliday, sitting unsuspecting in camp! He might have lost his love and all he wanted in life this night, but that did not take away his duty to

Halliday—and Scarlett realized abruptly that nothing but luck was going to make him able to do it.

He could hear Eldon's gang on each side of him now, quartering their horses through the thick bush in a silence that meant Eldon's hand was heavy on them. If he let them catch him, even get wind of him, he would murder Halliday. He must go, now, to Drowning Valley, while the direct path behind him was clear still.

Scarlett took Sabarin's pony by the head and ran down it. He could have ridden if he had had the buckskin, who knew every inch of the road home, but he dared not trust a strange horse on the winding track; it was all he could do to pick his own way in the black dark.

It seemed hours as he wound through the soaked bushes, running the pony beside him as fast as he dared. He felt, more than saw, a free space round him at last, and knew he had gained the first intervale between him and Sabiel's, and dared stop to listen for pursuit. There was no sign of it as he leaned panting against the Frenchman's horse, but there was something else.

From far behind a shout came muffled through the rain; then shots; quick, sounding at random.

"They can't have got Athol," Scarlett gasped. He leapt on the Frenchman's pony to go back whence he had come; and common sense checked him like a curb bit.

He had forgotten Sabarin! The row was only that Eldon's men had run on Sabarin's body and were shooting all round them for the man who had killed him.

"I've more time than I thought, if they've only come on him now," Scarlett reflected callously, "and I owe him a horse, too! He's brought me that much luck." But he stopped on the last word. A flash of lightning, sinister, unexpected, had cut his eyes where he sat on the horse that was the Frenchman's legacy, and shown him it was his own pack-pony left so long ago at Welsh's. So far the beast had brought him anything but luck. It was recognizing it that had first made Eldon sure of him; that had made him linger at the roadhouse to come between him and Athol Gray. "Well, he hasn't brought Eldon much luck either," Scarlett reflected somberly, "so far as my gold goes, anyhow!"

It was the first time he had thought of his gold, but the remembrance of it, safely packed for transport, brought him no joy. He had wanted it, lately, only for Athol; and Athol wanted neither him nor it. Scarlett looked up at the winking sky, listened for the crash of thunder that did not come, and moved sullenly off towards Drowning Valley and Halliday. He could ride by the lightning flashes, and look behind him in them to see if he were followed—and if it had not been for Halliday would have stayed bleakly where he was till he could

shoot Eldon down. As he splashed across the flooded meadow a heaven-wide abyss of blue light split the sky. Scarlett turned in it, and looked behind.

The level intervalle was empty of men and horses. For a moment he could not see why: Jim Welsh had had plenty of time to bring Eldon's men out on it! And suddenly he checked his horse and waited for the next flash, with a thought that waked the blood in him at last. Jim Welsh must know a shorter way to Drowning Valley; a way that cut him off! Scarlett swore his only oath under his breath, as the lie of the land came to him.

The intervalle he was on curved past Sabiel's; curved again in the same wide sweep to the foot of the hill that ended it and shut in the lake and his camp. He was on the long side of the great half-moon it made; while Welsh, to all appearance, must know a straight way that linked both ends of the long crescent together with just a third of the distance to go. He was cut off, sure enough—and at the thought he shot out across the intervalle, riding a line that cut it diagonally to its last curve. It was not his gold he was riding for; but Halliday's life. If Welsh were taking Eldon to Drowning Valley by a straight line that cut off Scarlett's half-circle Halliday would be at his mercy; and Eldon had none. A queer sound between a groan and an oath broke from the man who had reason to know it as he galloped on. For the first time that night he

forgot Athol Gray, as at last he stopped his reeking horse before a black hill that was gone in the instant in the darkness.

"Here's where we walk," he muttered to the beast; for before him lay the rocky track home.

Mechanically he took the bit and bridle off the pack-pony, stuffed them into his pocket, and let it go free. Sabarin had not waited to saddle, and the horse should have its chance. It was a small thing to pause for, but Scarlett was a decent man with horses. As he turned to climb the slippery path towards home he heard nothing but the lashing rain; yet somehow it was no comfort to him: there was a sixth sense awake in him that was not saying "safety" in his ears. Once and again he fancied he heard another horse pull up behind him; but he dared not wait to see.

Anyhow, the lightning was dying away; just as he needed it, he thought impatiently. But as a flicker of it lit his path he caught his breath, for it had shown him what he had not expected. The hill-top in front of him was clear! Of a gully half-way down the other side he was not so sure: it was the natural place where a short cut across the interval would end; but even if Eldon and the rest had reached it first, it would go hard with him if he could not get by. He knew his way blindfolded now, and he moved down the hill silently as a wolf; and suddenly could have shouted with exultation. The gully was empty! He was ahead of Eldon yet,

and he had saved Halliday: there was nothing before him now but to rouse him and Burns and let them slip down the lake to safety. For himself, he was going to settle his score with Eldon, and then—with Athol. But though things looked easy, Scarlett took no chances. Any moment the gully before him might vomit men and horses and cut him off from Halliday yet. He raced across the mouth of it to open ground that he knew like the palm of his hand, and sprang in at the camp door.

"Halliday," he cried. "Halliday! Burns!" He groped for the spruce beds where they would be lying and shook Halliday's heavy arm. "Wake up; Eldon's after us—we've got to light out, quick!" He ran his hand along the bed and felt nothing. "Where's Burns?" he demanded frantically. "Burns!" But Burns made no answer.

Halliday sat up. "That you, Red?" he yawned. "I guess I was asleep. Burns?" He leapt to his feet thunder-struck, wide awake on the instant. "My Lord," he gulped, "I never went for Burns—nor the gold!"

"You'd better take the canoe and go now, then." Scarlett's voice snapped like a whip. He had thought of everything, but never of this. If Halliday and Burns had been ready and waiting things would have been simple: now it would be luck if they could get Burns at all—and as he thought it some one fell headlong through the camp door.

"Let me in," panted a girl's voice that was hoarse

with terror and exhaustion. "Oh, let me in! Eldon's—he's coming out of the gully."

"Athol," said Scarlett, as quietly as if the end of the world would not have astonished him less. Oblivious of Halliday's startled grunt as he pushed past them, of everything but that, after all, she had come back to him, he caught her to him. And for a moment she clung to him; the next, with her last strength, she pushed him away.

"I didn't come—for that." Scarlett heard the breath rasp in her lungs. "I came—the pony ran——" She stopped, pulled herself together to speak coherently, and the words came like a blow in the face to the man whose hands were still on her shoulders. "I said I'd rather die than come to you," she muttered painfully, "but I've had to; I had nowhere else to go. I thought I could ride to meet Eldon and be shot at, but—I couldn't!"

Scarlett's heart stood still. He had been mad not to know what it was she had meant to do when she left him; madder still to imagine that she had forgiven the thing between them and come to him of her own will. But there was no time to think of any of those things now, nor to ask her how she had ever found her way into Drowning Valley. One thing he knew, she was too exhausted to move out of it even if Eldon were on them, for she had slipped to the ground under his hands. He caught her up like a child, since it was the only thing to do, and went outside the camp to Halliday.

CHAPTER XXIII

SCARLETT KEEPS A PROMISE, AND THE DRINK DIES OUT OF JIM WELSH

HALLIDAY never even turned as the two joined him. At any other time he would have been about equally exercised at a girl appearing in camp in the middle of the night and the unlooked for arrival of Eldon, but he was too sick with his slackness about Burns to really care for either of them. He stared into the black silence round him, and could see no sign of danger from Eldon; but he saw something else.

The rain had stopped; for the moment there was no lightning, and the air round him was heavy with sulphur; moveless, without life. And what it meant smote Halliday between the eyes.

"By glory, Scarlett, it's the flood coming!" he gasped; and Scarlett grasped his arm for silence. There was more than the flood coming. The night might lie black as the pit, but in it the gully mouth behind him was belching men. If he could have seen them, it might have been different. As it was, it was like ghosts they came—walking, riding, falling over themselves in the dark—anywhere, everywhere, all around him.

If it had not been for the girl who hung heavy in his arms he could have fought them off. Now, even one shot from him would bring a circling fire on her from Eldon and all his crew that could have only one end. There was nothing for it but to make for the canoe and go.

"We'll get," said Scarlett briefly; and it was time. Even as he gained the water's edge after Halliday, with Athol lying speechless in his arms, the foremost of the Tabeak men rode fair into the bark camp they had just left. The crash of his horse coming down covered the sound of Scarlett's splash, as he plunged into water that was thigh-deep where he had left the canoe high and dry on the lake shore.

"The flood," muttered Halliday frantically, from where he held the canoe. "It'll be on us in another hour!"

Scarlett knew it; knew, too, that if it had not been for Burns left behind in the caves he would not have cared for any flood: they could have saved themselves in the canoe in spite of it. But he made no answer. Soundlessly the two men got into the canoe with the girl between them, and pushed out into deep water. Then Halliday turned where he knelt in the bow.

"Burns," he gulped, "what'll we do about Burns? The lake's up five feet now—and he'll drown!"

"You left him," said Scarlett brutally. "You're

responsible." But as he spoke something caught at his breathing; and the inside of the lower cave rose before him, with the lake water pouring down it on a man left to die like a rat in a trap. He looked at the lowering darkness of the sky, tasted the thick air that seemed to stick in his lungs, and with brute instinct knew what they meant when added to the pause in the sheet lightning.

There was just one chance to get Burns out alive—to do Scarlett justice he never thought of his gold the man had in charge—and that was to do it before the thunder broke that was surely coming. One good peal of it, and down would come that landslide Sabiel had talked of; to send the lake water into the caves like Niagara into a drain.

He took one thought of Athol; one glance at her lying motionless in the canoe before him. She was all he wanted in this world; she had come back to him, even if she hated him; and to save Burns's life he must risk hers. Involuntarily he turned the canoe down the lake, to safety—and remembered he had given his word to Burns that at the last pinch he would save him. Even for Athol he could not break that promise. He brought the canoe to a stand.

"Athol," he whispered hardly. "I'm going to put you and Halliday on shore. There's a man I have to pick up in the caves. When I've done that I'll come back for you. You and she," he turned on

Halliday, "could slip away somewhere on this side of the lake and lie low?"

Halliday hesitated; they might, and they might not. But the girl took the words out of his mouth.

"If you mean hide from Eldon," she panted, "I couldn't! I can't walk—any more."

"I guess she's better here than landing anywhere," agreed Halliday grimly, with his eyes on the shore they had left behind. "Whew! Look back!"

There had been nothing to see there but black darkness, filled with the noise of men cursing as they found Scarlett's camp deserted; but Eldon had changed that. He had cleared the men from the empty camp with two words; slipped inside; and fired the spruce bed. It and the dry bark lining caught like tinder. As Halliday bade Scarlett look behind him they flared up into one gigantic torch, and in its light they saw Eldon and Jim Welsh stand out plainly. In the dark, beyond the fire's radiance, the canoe lay blotted out; but it was within earshot still. Eldon's question to Welsh carried across the water.

"Where next for Scarlett? You said you knew. And where's the gold?"

The drink had died out in Welsh with the wet ride, and with it his familiar devil. He had had time to remember Athol and how he had treated her; even a queer doubt had come to him of the story about Scarlett he had been so ready to believe.

Anyhow, even if it were true, he would do better to go back and comfort the girl he had left locked up alone and broken-hearted than stain his hands with murder. Scarlett saw him motion Eldon querulously aside. He could not hear what Welsh said, which was that he had never promised to find Scarlett or his gold for Eldon, only to show him the way into the valley and that was done; but with a sick premonition he leaned over to push Athol flat in the canoe so that she could not see the shore, even as with the other hand he fired full at Eldon.

But the one motion spoiled the other; and anyhow, both were late. With the same apparently unreasoning savagery with which he had once lashed his horse across the face Eldon had turned and shot Welsh through the body.

"Oh, Uncle Jim," cried Athol. "Uncle Jim!"

The agonized cry rang across the water, and Eldon jerked up his head. But, if he called out anything, it was drowned in the fusillade of the Tabeak men as they realized where their quarry had gone; in their yells, as the leaping bonfire showed them Sabel's pile of canoes. As they fell on them, Scarlett thrust his revolver into Athol's hand.

"Welsh was dead as he fell, darling," he said swiftly. "We can't help him. Don't waste fire on them. Shoot if they really come on us."

The canoe leapt like a live thing as he and Halliday swung it round towards the caves. It was a race for their own lives and Burns's now, against

more than the flood. In minutes—seconds—Eldon's whole gang would be after them in those canoes Sabiel had done so ill to leave. But it was curious that, instead of looking where he was going or listening for pursuit, Scarlett stared at the sky. They might save themselves and Burns too, if there were no thunder; with thunder, they were heading for their end. So far, there had not been even any more lightning; Eldon's men had not seen them, had only shot blindly at the flash of Scarlett's revolver—and as he thought it the whole world was light; trembling blue and green and sulphur round an unbearable glare of white that arched the sky. In it Scarlett could see the cave mouth lying half a mile ahead of him, and knew Eldon must see the canoe; a moving black spot on the iridescent lake. He swerved it sharply aside as the dark fell on his stinging eyes again, but there was no shooting from the shore they had left, and he dared not even pause to see what Eldon was doing as he put his back into his paddling. The last thing that was in his head now was to fight for his gold: time to get Burns and go was all he wanted, for a heavier hand than his would settle Eldon.

"Provided it doesn't settle us, too," Scarlett thought fiercely; for the feel of the water under him was ominous.

There were no waves, no breath of wind to make them, yet the lake was rising like something alive hunching under a burden. It lifted palpably in

great lumps that the canoe slewed away from like a frightened thing; and in the bow of it Scarlett heard Halliday gasp.

There was time yet to turn and save themselves and leave Burns to drown; but he could not do it. He cursed himself instead for not having shoved Athol and Halliday out on the dark bank somewhere, and come on this mad business alone. But there was no landing for a mile now, except in the cave itself. They were almost at it; he could see the mouth of it showing wide already in the ceaseless lightning, with the water lipping horribly high in it. But there was no shelf of rock now to wade over; he could not so much as feel it with the tip of his paddle. The canoe brought up against a solid wall of rock, inside, not outside the cave, and as its bow touched, Scarlett turned on Halliday.

"Get out," he cried, "and get back here with Burns; quick! It's"—with a significance that was savage—"our only chance, and his!"

And he did not mean of escaping Eldon, but the waters of Drowning Valley.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TABEAK MEN

ON the other side of the lake Eldon had stood motionless while the Tabeak men lugged down Sabel's canoes and launched them. Each and all of them had put down Welsh's death to Scarlett's bullet if they had not been sure he had caused Sabin's, and if they had needed egging on against him, that would have done it.

Eldon never so much as glanced at the dead man who lay at his very feet. He was well rid of him, for his need of guidance was over; and without Welsh to go home and blab of this night's work, he had seen the black opening in the cliffs across the lake for which Scarlett's canoe was making. It was there Scarlett would make a stand, there his hidden gold must lie. As flash after flash of lightning lit the sky in an almost continuous glare Eldon marked its position, the mountain at whose base it lay, the great obelisk towering in the middle of the lake and to the right of it.

He watched Scarlett swerve in his course to pass behind the big rock, and realized that to pass on its other side would save a quarter of a mile; yet he

made no move to seize a canoe and cut him off. Once he lifted his gun to take a shot at the girl who crouched amidships in the flying canoe, but he dropped it again.

That could come later. It was she who had saved Scarlett from his just vengeance all along; she who must, somehow, have escaped from the roadhouse to warn him to-night, or Sabarin would not have lain dead in the rain. He would have her begging for mercy yet—which would be better than missing her at long range. Scarlett was certain to fortify himself in the cave's mouth, and Eldon was ready for a fight there; yet, to Inkster's surprise, he let the Tabeak men crowd into the canoes and paddle off without him.

"Why ain't we getting off?" the big man blurted.

Eldon made no answer; though the explanation was simple he had no mind to give it. He did not want the mere death of his enemy, but to profit by it, and take possession of the gold Scarlett had found in the caves. The Tabeak men could take Scarlett in full front, alone, and come in for the first fire from him and Halliday; and the fewer of them that lived through it the more gold for Eldon. He and Inkster could creep up last, at one side, in a carefully lagging canoe; with any luck, just when Scarlett had forgotten them; perhaps when all his cartridges were used. And Eldon grinned as he saw the Tabeak men outstripping him in the race for the gold they were never to see. It was not till they

were nearly out of sight that he got into the canoe where Inkster sat in swearing impatience, and even then it was not across the lake he steered, but up it, in front of the towering rock that even he saw was like a giant Indian. Perhaps if he had known Sabel's superstition about it he might have crossed at its back—and perhaps not. He was capable of any daring to gain his ends this night.

He wanted the gold of the great caves, and Scarlett wiped out; with as many of the Tabeak men as Providence saw fit to remove by the bullets of either friends or enemies. If he looked forward grimly to the excitement of doing it, it was by other men's work, if possible; Eldon's successes had always been got by remaining in the background. Unobserved he slipped high up the lake in his canoe, ready to slip down again to the cave's mouth in time to finish a half-fought fight there.

But Scarlett was more ready for the Tabeak men than perhaps Eldon knew. As Halliday and his candle disappeared down the black passage at the back of the cave to look for Burns, he swung his precious canoe high and dry behind a rock on the left side of the cave. At the right a rampart of living stone stretched half across it, breast-high, and he drew Athol down behind it. If they had to shoot, the flash of their guns would draw no returning fire on the canoe that was their only hope of leaving the caves alive; and the stone wall before them would keep stray bullets off the girl whom

somehow he must save. She had never spoken to him. She had left the canoe at his word, done all he told her stolidly; but that was all. Now, as he leaned across her to make sure of the height of the rampart in front of her, he felt her shiver.

"Dear love, what is it?" he whispered; and bit his lips at the slip; she had made it plain enough it was not for love she had come to him. But it was doubtful if Athol even heard him.

"Uncle Jim," she moaned, more to herself than to Scarlett; unconsciously her hard-held calm broke into a sob. "He was good to me; I might have done more to stop him coming to-night. Till I die I'll feel I failed Uncle Jim!"

"Do you mean—because of me?" Scarlett asked involuntarily.

"No;" and it was the first time she had spoken to him, or seemed even to realize he was there. "He'd have gone with Eldon just the same if I'd never spoken of you. But I might have said something I didn't to Uncle Jim. I think that if I could go back and tell him so, even now when he's dead," and the choking pause was piteous, "that he'd—understand!"

Compassion for her cut at the man's soul, but he dared not tell her so any more than he dared touch her. She had come back to him only because she had had nowhere else to go, and he was no man to use her coming to force on her a love she had despised.

"You can go, in the morning," he answered very gently, and hoped it was true. He was not too sure they would ever see any morning. Their bare lives hung now on the speed with which Halliday came back with Burns. If he delayed, they might be able to fight off Eldon and his men; but they could never fight off Drowning Valley in flood. Beside the girl who wept silently for Jim Welsh, whom he dared not try to comfort, Scarlett listened avidly for Halliday. But there was no sound in the clammy darkness that was thick against his face but the lap of the lake water. Every minute he could feel it rising; every minute heard it lip higher on the rock between it and him. He spoke to get the sound of it out of the girl's ears, lest she should ask what it meant.

"How did you get to me?" he asked curtly.

"I turned back—after I first left you." Athol flinched at the nearness of his voice, but she stood still. "I—I hadn't anywhere else to go."

But it was not true. She had been nearly across the pasture on her way home, been as safe as Scarlett had thought her, when at the far-off sound of Eldon's men she had deliberately turned her pony's head and ridden toward them. If she had meant them to kill her by accident death had evaded her, as sought death always does. In the dark she missed them. And then—and it was the reason she lied now to Scarlett—she had heard the Tabeak gang come on Sabarin's body, and had thought it

was on Scarlett! She might hate him, but she could not stand that. She had raced her pony madly to the sound of shooting, to help him if she could, die by him if needs must—but she could not tell that to the man whose wife stood between her and him.

“I thought I wouldn't care if they killed me,” she substituted bitterly, “but it seems I did. They nearly had me when they came on Sabarin after you'd gone, and I—I let the pony run! I didn't even try to stop him till I came on your horse turned loose on the intervale. Then”—she sobbed once, with shame—“I couldn't care what you were, what you'd done. I unsaddled my pony with yours and followed you when I found your path. I—I'd got afraid!”

“My heart,” said Scarlett pitifully, “my little heart!”

There were things he was bound to tell her, now that, beyond all dreams, she stood by his side once more, but he dared not begin on himself nor on explanations now, for he had to look for Eldon; and suddenly knew where to do it. The lightning had stopped for the last five minutes, and out of the pitchy blackness of the lake beyond the cave came a swirl of paddles, a fusillade of bullets that flattened harmlessly against the rock in front of him or sang high above his head.

It was Eldons' vanguard of Tabeak men, coming all together in a huddled mass, and shooting as they

came. Scarlett caught the revolver he had pushed into Athol's hand in the canoe, and held it as she would have fired into the flashes.

The first canoe had too much way on; the men in it had not allowed for landing on bed rock. It slammed in head first against the very wall of stone behind which Scarlett crouched, up-ended with a shattering crash, and sent its cargo of Tabeak men flying into the deep water behind it.

"Now," said Scarlett, without pause or pity; it was no question of his own life against many, but of one girl's.

He fired into the shouting confusion as the other canoes piled in against the wrecked one; if he could beat them off before Halliday came he could save Athol yet. As he shot mercilessly into the shooting and the yells in front of him he could hear the girl firing steadily by his side, and his heart was filled with a fierce joy in her. The strange night was helping him, too; in the dark Eldon's men had no target. But as he thought it, jagged lightning tore the black half circle of sky in front of him. He had time to see the Tabeak men in it, as they fought like devils to gain foothold on the rocky floor of the cave, before—for the first time that night—the world round him crashed with thunder.

It sounded like the whole mountain shattering above his head; like something let loose that would never stop; and, in the very middle of it, came a lower, duller roar. Scarlett had only time to be con-

scious that he flung himself round Athol, clamping his hands and feet into the crevices of the rocks, before a wall of water was over him. Stunned, suffocated, he held on by instinct, crushing the girl between him and the living stone he clung to.

It was the end. He could never explain his years in Sing Sing to Athol now; never plead again for the understanding, the forgiveness she had denied him; he and she had got to die here without a word or a kiss, because Halliday had betrayed his trust and forgotten to go for Burns. He was conscious of an immense anger against Halliday as the water covered him and the girl against his breast; of pressure that was agony; then—of nothing.

CHAPTER XXV

"LUCK PEOPLE WOULD SELL THEIR SOULS FOR!"

BATTERED, stunned, drenched, Scarlett came to himself with a sickening sense of movement that stopped as he realized it. Very far off a voice said something; another answered it; but he took no interest in either of them. There was warmth and softness under his shoulders, and he rested against it with closed eyes. His dazed brain repeated to itself mechanically that Sabiel's landslide had come, and he was still alive; but he was horribly worried about something, he could not remember what. And suddenly the name of it wrenched loose in his head.

"Athol," he muttered, "Athol!" He opened his eyes, and was abruptly certain he was crazy. The upper cave was gone; and the dark. He lay by the great mother-lode in the lower one, with candle-light shining in his face, and Halliday staring at him. "Where's—where's Athol?" Scarlett whispered; and realized that the softness behind him was her arm.

"I'm here!" She was not the stony girl who had stood by his side waiting for Eldon; she leant over

him, mothering him. "Lie still. It's all right! Eldon hasn't come."

Stupid from half-drowning, it seemed to Scarlett that everything was all right if Athol were touching him. Yet his eyes strayed past her, as if he looked for something.

"How did I get here?" he asked dully. "I don't remember coming."

"I guess you don't!" Halliday had turned away from the marvelous sight of Scarlett with his head against a girl's arm; Scarlett, who never spoke to a woman. He knew now who this one was, and where she came from, and normally would have been filled with pity for Scarlett, who had a crazy wife somewhere, while this kind of girl held his head against her breast; but now he never even thought of it. "You got knocked out," he said gruffly, "holding the force of the water off her." He turned round on the two with a look at Athol. "I lugged you down here. I didn't know what else to do."

"Knocked out?" Scarlett looked at him vacantly. Suddenly Athol's face where she knelt over him, dripping wet, brought recollection to him with a jerk that sat him bolt upright, sick and giddy. "What became of Eldon's gang?" he demanded. "I was shooting at them when there was some kind of a wave or something. I don't remember past that."

"I guess what happened to them was simple,"

“Luck People'd Sell Their Souls For!” 289

Halliday answered grimly. “The first lift of the lake, that nearly did for you, sent them and their canoes up against the solid cliff over the cave's mouth and smashed them like egg-shells. I found you stuck like a limpet on that front ledge of rock with her”—he nodded sheepishly at Athol—“jammed in between you and it. Why you hadn't gone out with the backwash I couldn't tell, till I had to pry off your fingers to get you clear.”

“To drag me here!” Good healthy rage cleared Scarlett's tongue. “What on earth for, man? A dog's sense would have told you to put me into the canoe: there was none in bringing me here! What kept you away for so long, in the first place? We'd had time to go over and over again before Eldon's lot showed up.”

Halliday looked at him queerly; then at the passage to the upper cave that showed black in the light of the candle.

“That Burns is gone stark crazy is why I didn't get back to you in time,” said he slowly. “He wouldn't stir from here without his gold. Time and again I got him dragged half-way up to you, and he pulled away from me. I had to let him bring the stuff with him at last, and tote half of it myself: that was what kept me. And”—he hesitated as if the words would not come off his tongue—“Red, I brought you here because I had to! She”—once more he jerked his head toward Athol—“said Eldon wasn't with those men that got drowned; and

I didn't suppose sitting in the top cave waiting for him, without any guns, would have been healthy for us if he'd dropped in."

"But we needn't have waited," Scarlett exploded, "we could have *gone!*"

"Not easy," Halliday answered, with his back turned to hide his face. "You see, the canoe'd gone, first! I guess she just went out on the backwash of the big wave like a basket, and my gun was in her. Lord knows where your two went to."

Scarlett was silent. He had been ready for a good deal, but not for this. His bad luck had caught up to him at last, and he was tasting the full flavor of it where he sat on the cave floor. He had brought the girl he loved to this.

"Where's Burns now?" he asked unexpectedly.

"Going up and down the passage to the outside cave like a spider, lugging all his gold back here: he hadn't put it far enough up to have it washed away. It's no good talking to him," said Halliday bitterly, "he don't hear you even."

"Then it's no good worrying about him, either. We've done all we can for him." Scarlett sat frowning at nothing, and Halliday spat at the empty forge.

"I guess he'll straighten up by morning," he suggested hopefully.

"Morning!" It was Scarlett who straightened up like a bar. He pushed his fatigue and soreness away from him, and looked Halliday in the eyes.

“Luck People’d Sell Their Souls For!” 291

“We have to get out of these caves to-night—now—if we swim,” he said tersely. “We’re not safe here ten minutes.”

“Swim?” Halliday tried to grin. “We thought of that before we left the front cave, and she couldn’t swim and I couldn’t; and I guess you looked in fine shape to teach us, when we couldn’t tell if you were alive or dead. Besides——”

“Well?”

“Oh, there ain’t any landing this side of the lake—not if you clawed your finger-nails off on the cliffs,” said Halliday simply. “And I guess the other side’s kind of far.”

Scarlett stood speechless, eyeing the incredible gold around him. All of it was not worth one leaky canoe to him now. There was something so black in his stare that Halliday took fire with injury.

“I did the best I could, bringing you here!” he exclaimed. “I guess Eldon’s dead—she couldn’t say for sure he wasn’t—and Sabiel’s flood’s over. I don’t see what you mean by not being safe here to-night!”

“You will,” returned Scarlett bitterly; he pointed in front of him, to the passage Halliday had dragged him down from the outer cave. Out of it a tiny stain of fresh dampness was spreading darkly, growing as they looked at it. Athol’s eyes fell on it with mere inquiry; but Halliday, the stolid, turned sick at his stomach.

"You don't mean——" He gasped; and fell silent.

"The lake's just beginning to get in its work," said Scarlett dryly. "That wave, as you called it, was only the first spasm of the flood as some landslide came down. Now the water that started that landslide will be tearing into the lake. It takes about four hours to fill, Sabiel said; and I fancy you remember what *you* said about this place and Niagara in a drain!"

He did not look at Halliday. Now, at the last pinch, he had eyes only for Athol. She was standing away from him now, whatever she might have done before he came to himself. She had despised him because he was a jailbird, was probably despising him still; she had been forced into taking refuge with him, he knew; and he supposed it had been only pity for a man she thought dying that had brought her arms about him when he was unconscious—but none of those thoughts were what turned Scarlett pale. His torture was that if Athol Gray had never seen him, never cared for him, no matter for how little a time, she would have been safe in her house now. And instead, she had death in front of her: plain death, alone with a man she hated.

"My God, if it were only plain dying," Scarlett thought. Before that came there would be Heaven knew what; starvation, maybe; surely suffering. She was wet and cold to the bone now. It would serve him right if she turned on him and cursed him

with her last breath. But it had not come to dying yet. While he could he moved to her, and caught her hand.

"We're in a nasty place," he said. "I'll get you out of it if I can. God knows I didn't mean to bring you to it."

"I'm not afraid," Athol began; and could not finish. If it had not been for Halliday she would have held out her hands to Scarlett; sobbed that she would never be afraid with him; that the woman between them was no matter any more, now that they had to die. But Halliday stood beside them, and Scarlett had moved sharply back at the unconscious thrust that cut like a knife. She was not afraid—but she did not begin to know, yet, what there was to be afraid of. It would be easy to go up the passage to the outside cave again, but it would not make a way out of it to watch the black lake rising on them by inches till they drowned. It was better here, where they could not see.

He wished dumbly that he and Athol were alone there. He had so much to say when it came to talking. Now he had to do; and in the name of Heaven he did not know what. He moved irresolutely toward the end of the passage where the wet mark was widening, and Burns shot past him like a rocket, coming down with a load of gold from the upper cave. He forced even Halliday's solid bulk aside with the speed of his impact, and vanished out of the back of the place.

"Where does he go—with his gold?" demanded Scarlett.

"Up that passage you thought was the back way out of here," snapped Halliday; and stopped. "By glory, Red," said he slowly; and the two men stared at each other with the same thought in their heads. Suppose that passage were a way out, now; suppose Burns were not so crazy as he seemed, in carrying all his gold there!

"I dunno!" Halliday was the first to speak. "There was no outlet yesterday, and I guess there hasn't been enough of a convulsion of nature to clear one now. I could look, though."

"I'll go," and a mad hope had shot through Scarlett's blood. He grabbed Halliday's candle, and was off after Burns. Half-way up the tortuous passage behind the cave he met Burns coming down, his eyes dead black in his white face. A sharp revulsion of hatred took Scarlett at the sight of him. He had always been sure Burns was crazy: what had possessed him to risk his all for a madman's sake? He would have pushed by the man, but Burns stopped in his trotting run.

"I've put it all up there as high as I can," he said confidentially, "so I can go to it when the water comes in all black and oily. I can hold on to the gold like an anchor: it's heavy; it won't let the water sweep me down the other way I took you out of."

He trotted on again, but a vision had flashed up before Scarlett of precisely that "other way" where

“Luck People’d Sell Their Souls For!” 295

Burns had once saved his life. It might possibly be that that dark sluice would be enough to take even the overflow of water from the lake; that the passage Burns had come out of now, where he and Halliday had vainly tried to get through to the space the fresh air came from, was on a higher level enough to let them cling like bats in the topmost part of it till the flood went by. Scarlett raced up to it, stumbled over Burns’s gold piled up at its very end, and stood there. If he had had a vision that the landslide might have shaken the mountain over him enough to make a way out, it was gone. The air came in on him, as it had always come in since his pick had stuck in the tiny vault over his head, but there was nothing altered; no widening in the almost invisible opening that he had thought might have let them through. Even if there had been, he realized hopelessly, it might have been only into another cave that for all he knew might connect with the black pit he had once so nearly slid into.

That the level he stood in was higher than the passage that led to the latter was the only crumb of comfort he got. But it was not high enough to save the four in the caves if the intruding water from the lake filled the tunnels to their roofs; and as for clinging on to gold, or anything else, while the flood rushed by, it was a madman’s notion. The tiny bags of ore, the very stones of the passage, would lift like dry leaves. But the air-hole, and staying by the air-hole, was the only thread of a

chance for life, where really and honestly there was no chance at all. Scarlett knew all the "ifs" and "possibles" he had been saying to himself were just so much mere breath when the flood really came. His knees shook and his brain felt like something loose in his skull as he relit his candle the air-draft had blown out, and went back to the two he had left in the cave. Halliday raised his eyebrows as he entered, and Scarlett shook his head.

"We'd better go up there, all the same," he advised. His voice felt like dry ashes that would not come out of his throat, but it sounded gentle and everyday. "There's—more air! Get the candles, and Burns's blankets and things."

Halliday nodded silently, and disappeared. Scarlett turned to Athol, and to his surprise she held out both hands.

"I know—what's coming," she said in a queer voice. "Halliday told me while you were gone. And since we can't get out of here I can tell you something, too. I'd rather be here with you, no matter what happens—if we have to drown—than be safe without you anywhere in the world."

Scarlett caught her to him. It was no use to pretend he could keep from touching her now.

"Oh, sweet," he said bitterly, "you can tell me that—when it's all my fault! I could have saved you, if you don't know it. I ought to have known it was no good to think of getting Burns out of

"Luck People'd Sell Their Souls For!" 297

here. We could have been safe down the lake by now."

"I dare say," said Athol slowly. "Only it wouldn't have been you who saved me that way, and I'd never have spoken to you like this." She hid her face against his strong shoulder. "We'd have had to die some day, even if there had been nothing to part us," she whispered, "you first, or I first, and one of us left in the world alone. It's luck—luck people would sell their souls for—to do it together!"

Scarlett crushed her to him. He could not speak to her. Presently he said she was brave.

"I am now," said the girl simply. "I was frightened to-night when you said it was true about your wife, and I thought the only thing I could do was to get to Janesville and old Mary before I was mad enough to say I didn't care."

"True—about my wife?" gasped Scarlett. "I haven't any wife. Did Eldon tell you I was *married*?"

"It was what I asked you to tell me the truth about." She stared at him wide-eyed. "I wouldn't believe what Eldon said, but when he made Uncle Jim read me your letter, and it was signed Sophia Scarlett, what could I do but believe him? And I couldn't love you—like that!"

"Eldon told you I was married to *Sophia*," said Scarlett incredulously. "Oh, sweet, and I thought you despised me because I'd been in prison! I knew

I wasn't fit for you; I'd told you so. But to think I was *married!*"

"I wouldn't have cared what else you'd done." She leant bewildered against the great lode they had both forgotten. "But when I read 'the little wife, Sophia——'"

Scarlett interrupted her bitterly. "You read a silly, childish nickname," he said, "that I could never break her of using. My father called her that, and she——" He looked her full in the eyes. "Sophia Scarlett was my father's wife, not mine, Athol," he said.

"Do you mean she's your *mother?*" asked Athol dazedly.

"She's just my stepmother," the man returned quietly. "I've taken care of her ever since my father died. I'd have looked after a cat if he had loved it, and I did my best, even for a thief."

"A thief?"

He nodded. "I wouldn't tell even you if I didn't have to! She couldn't help it, I know that. It was mania. She was pitiful—weak, pretty, and nearly as young as you."

He pulled the envelope she had taken from Eldon out of his pocket, took out the letter Welsh had read to her, and glanced at it. It was the kind he was used to: Sophia never wrote without begging to be taken away from the sanatorium where he had to put her, or suggesting she was in rags.

The thicker inclosure stuck. Scarlett tore the

envelope impatiently, and there fell out a third note, in the man’s hand which had addressed the whole. It was from the sanatorium doctor; and for a moment Scarlett could not take in anything in it, except that Sophia—pretty, weak Sophia—was dead. Presently he read that it had been sudden at the last, but that Mrs. Scarlett had perhaps expected it, since she left the accompanying sealed inclosure, which he forwarded according to her last wish.

The kleptomania had been quite cured when she died, the sanatorium doctor added simply; it happened so sometimes, when the physical health failed. He begged Scarlett to believe that everything possible had been done for his stepmother, and all affectionate care bestowed on her by a most faithful nurse.

“What is it?” asked Athol gently.

“She was dead when Eldon lied about her—poor soul. He mayn’t have known that—I don’t know.” For there was no doubt that when he lied he had seen the sealed inclosure; it had been torn open rudely, and Sophia Scarlett’s pitiful letter read. Only Eldon knew why he had not torn it up there and then. Perhaps his own name in it had been a satisfaction to him. It was he alone who had got Scarlett two years in prison; and he had never been quite sure of it, in spite of his boasts. It began as Sophia’s letters always began: “Dearest boy”—but what came after was not like her.

“When you get this I shall be dead, and there are

things you ought to know then. I never was the kleptomaniac I pretended to be to you; I was just a plain thief. When I made you take me to New York because I said the West reminded me of your father and I couldn't be happy there, it wasn't true. I just wanted to get back to New York.

"When you got work there, how did you suppose I spent my days? I said it was in the house, making *cotillon* favors to sell. It was not. I used to go out, from shop to shop, and take little things you couldn't afford to give me. I was quick: I never was caught. I think I never should have been caught, and I swear you would never have gone to prison for me, if one day I had not run on a man I knew in the West before I married your father. His name was Eldon, and he hated you; though that was the last thing I ever thought of then. I used to meet him every day, and when we were out together I took things. I had never stolen once when I was out with you, and I never would have but for him. He told me you were crooked; that I was a fool to be afraid of you; and that you would know what to do with anything I might get. I *was* a fool, for I believed him.

"Do you remember the day I dragged you into that jeweler's shop? You must, for it was the last day you ever were happy. You bought me a pin for Christmas—I have it yet. While you paid for it I made a man show me a diamond necklace because it was pretty. I told you I was quick. I

“Luck People'd Sell Their Souls For!” 301

changed my own rhinestone necklace for it; the diamond one was in my hand—the man had put the other one away—when I turned round and saw Eldon looking at me across the shop.

“I don't know what possessed me, but I was mad with fright. I slipped the stolen necklace into your pocket. The jeweler didn't see me; I know that it was only Eldon. Going home, I cried; and I told you lies about being a kleptomaniac, because I thought when you found the necklace you might take it better so. I hadn't told you you had it, and we were barely in the house before the police came to arrest you. I can see you now, just standing dumb and not answering when they took you away.

“Eldon never appeared against you because he had done all he needed to when he gave your address to the shop, and said he saw you take their necklace. He just vanished. I let you suffer for me—let you waste your youth in prison—let you support me when you came out—and never had the face to tell you I was just a plain thief without the courage to pay.

“I never saw Eldon again but once; and then I found out he hated you. It was you he had worked against, not me. I warn you against him, even now; though I never dared to when I was with you. I was glad when you put me in this place, though I said I hated it. I'm ill now, and I hope I'm dying. I want you to forgive me when I'm dead, for if ever

a woman was grateful to a man for what he did for her it is I—your father's wife,

“SOPHIA SCARLETT.”

Scarlett looked up as he read aloud Sophia's straggling signature, but Athol's eyes were on the floor, where the damp stain widened.

“You went to prison—for her,” she said slowly.

“But—why?”

Scarlett's mouth tightened. “I suppose because I was a fool,” he said simply. “But I was pretty young—I didn't know what else to do. She'd just told me she was a thief, though she called it by a bigger name; and it never came over me *why* she'd told me till the police came. She wasn't fit to go to prison, even if I could have turned round and given her away. She'd have died of it. I hadn't time to think what to do, anyway. You see, the diamonds were in my pocket—one of us must have taken them—and I'd promised my father to take care of Sophia!”

“And Eldon knew?” All this time Athol had never looked up. “While he told me those lies about you and your wife he'd read this. He knew all you've told me?”

“Yes—I suppose he knew!”

The girl looked up now. Her eyes were deep shining sapphires as they met his.

“If I'd never loved you before,” she said slowly, “I'd love you for what you did for that woman till

the day I died. I'm thankful they shot at me to-night"—she laid her arms round his neck—"for if they hadn't you'd have died here alone, and I'd never have known all Eldon told me was a lie."

Scarlett's heart gave a great jolt that swung the blood through his body.

"Die here!" he cried. "We're not dead yet, sweet; we'll have a try for living, anyhow! You and I can't die, and lose this—and this!" He kissed her, as a man kisses the only woman in the world for him. They might have only hours left to spend together, but such hours were better than fifty years of life alone. Mad as it was the two were happy as they moved after Halliday, leaving the great lode dark and deserted as the light of their candle vanished up the sloping passage.

For twenty minutes the cave lay empty. Then out of the passage from outside grew a light. Burns, candle in hand, with a strange, leering smile in his eyes, came in from the upper cave; and behind him Inkster and Eldon.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE WAY OUT

BOTH men were dripping wet, but neither gave a thought to it. There before their eyes, plain even in the feeble candle-light, lay the great lode of Drowning Valley. The riches of the world were theirs, and they had run Scarlett to the ground. It was that, more than the sight of the incredible gold, which made Eldon's face triumphant. Mechanically he covered Burns with the revolver he had somehow managed to keep dry, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

He had had luck to-night; utter, blazing luck! The wave that had half-drowned Scarlett and quite drowned the Tabeak men had caught him so far from the shore that he had got off with a capsized canoe. The shots, the drowning screams of his late allies, were no surprise to Eldon; what was a surprise was to find himself in the caves after all. In the dark and the upset into the lake he had lost his bearings, and all sense of the direction of Scarlett's citadel. He had cursed as he and Inkster righted the canoe they clung to and got back into it, each astride of an end.

They could do nothing to find Scarlett except wait for daylight, and they had not even troubled to paddle. There was a current coming from somewhere, and they let it take the canoe where it would. And the gentle set of it ran—against all Eldon's expectations, against all probability—straight into the mouth of the cave he had lost.

For twenty yards in it was ankle-deep in muddy troubled water, that covered all sound as the canoe slid gently in; but there was no doubting it was the right cave. For in it shone Burns's candle, on Burns, with his back turned, gathering up his last load of gold.

As Eldon leapt on him the man screamed, but the sound of it could not carry down the long passage to his friends. Perhaps Burns realized it, for he lay quiet. Presently, under the threat of Eldon's gun, he answered sullenly everything he was asked. Only once did his eyes light—when Inkster, having made fast the canoe, sighted the bags of gold and ripped one open with a joyous oath. Scarlett would have known the look on the half-crazed man's face, but it was wasted on Eldon, just as his glance at the lake behind him was wasted. Then he cringed to his captors, and turned traitor; to all seeming.

"Scarlett?"—He was by the gold.

"Guns?"—He had none.

"Where was the gold?"—He would show them.

"Was Scarlett in this cave?"—Yes; unless he had gone out the other way.

"Other way?" Eldon repeated sharply; and for the first time Burns looked at him.

"Oh, yes; there is a back way out of here," he said slowly. "I can show it to you later. Now, if you want to go to the gold, you'd better come with me, without making a noise Scarlett might hear."

Eldon took him by the back of the leather belt that held his rags together; more for guidance than security, for the man looked weak as a rat. With Inkster at their heels they crept down the long sloping passage to the second cave. As they disappeared a little wave from the lake lifted their abandoned canoe, a little trickle of water edged from it toward the passage entrance. Neither Eldon nor Inkster noticed it; but Burns smiled fiercely, and was still smiling when he brought up in the lower cave and pointed to the great mother-lode. He was used to Halliday and Scarlett, but these strange men should have no share of his gold, that he had worked and sweated and been shut up for. He did not think of breaking away from them to warn Scarlett of their presence, but the last little bit of sanity left to him worked insensibly in his subconscious brain. He knew, none better, how voices sounded from this lower cave to any one who lurked in the dark tunnels above and behind it. He would let these strangers talk—and then something would happen to them! He did not know what, but something.

Eldon had stood dead silent at the sight of the prodigal gold. It was this Scarlett had kept to him-

self; this he had been selling driblets from, when there was enough to upset the markets of the world! But it was not the gold that lit his eyes to savagery. He had come down on Red Scarlett just as he had intended, when his guns were washed away and he thought all danger was over; and he wanted Scarlett under his hands. To-night, for good and all, should wipe the old score clean.

"Where's Scarlett?" he demanded; and forgot to whisper.

"Scarlett? Up there!" Burns glanced at the dark opening at the back of the cave. "Be careful." But his own voice rang loud in warning; rang as the subconscious Burns meant it to ring.

Eldon looked at his gun, at Inkster, and motioned to the gold. "I guess we'll have to fight for this," he said.

"Fight for it!" Inkster's heavy face suffused. "I'd fight twenty men for a yard of it." Greed lit his eyes; if he had once protested against killing Scarlett, he had no scruples now. He caught up a loose crowbar that was the first thing to his hand, and stood weighing it—a bigger man than Halliday, and drunken with the sight of the endless gold.

Eldon touched his revolver to the back of Burns's neck. "Now, you find us Scarlett," he ordered, "and if you warn him by one word——" The movement of the gun was significant, but in it he changed his mind. "No; you'll show us the back way out first," he said; for he would run no chances

of Scarlett's escaping by it, nor of other men coming in.

"It's easy," Burns gulped, "the back way is! I'll show it to you when—you need it."

He was dead white and shaking as he moved forward. The whole floor of the lower cave was wet now, and he shook worse as he saw it; but he went on. And around the corner, out of the light from the candle he carried, where the five passages forked and the widest one ran down to depths unspeakable, stood—just as that something that was not Burns had thought they would stand when he spoke aloud in the cave—Halliday and Scarlett!

It was Eldon who was taken by surprise. If Scarlett had been in front of him the business would have been simple; but he stood at one side, within arm's reach. For one second Eldon fumbled with his gun—the one second that undid him. It went off, harmlessly; there was a wrenching jar in his hand, and the gun was gripped in Scarlett's. Inkster lifted his crowbar, and stood back with a queer vacuous expression on his big face. Halliday was standing eye to eye with him, with a great lump of rock in his hand. He was a dead shot with a stone, and if Inkster had had a gun he would have had no chance to use it.

Burns alone looked at none of them. This was not what he had meant to happen to the strange men; he could not remember what he had meant to happen to them. He clutched his candle and stared be-

hind them, to where the single passage led from the lower cave to the five branches where they stood. Insensibly Eldon backed away from him.

Above the five men Athol Gray's face made a white point as it caught the last radiance of the faint light from Burns's candle. It was she who had first heard voices, first thought of Eldon; for it was he alone she had shot at when the Tabeak men came, and not once had the lightning shown her his face among them. But she knew better than to speak or move now.

"If you've anything to say, Eldon," Scarlett drawled, "get it out!"

Eldon snarled wordlessly. He would have backed again, but he did not dare.

"I have, then." Athol would never have known the voice for Scarlett's. "You did a mean murder to-night, and that deserves my killing you; you made a miserable woman a cat's paw to betray me once, and that deserves it worse. If you want to know how I know that last, it was in the letters you stole at Janesville. You missed your aim with them, as you've missed it everywhere else—you can have that to think of when you go the way you sent Jim Welsh; and you may thank God if you go as quick. Put down that crowbar!"

Inkster dropped it with a clang that cut Athol's raw nerves. She wanted to cover her eyes, to scream, to have the thing over; this cold, slow Scarlett was not the man she knew. But she could not

move her gaze from Eldon and Inkster, from the dark behind them and Burns's candle; and there was something wrong with her eyes, for that darkness was slowly turning lighter. Fascinated, she stared at it, in a dream, that Burns's yell broke into reality.

"The water, the water!" he screamed.

For it was no dream the girl looked at; it was death! Up the passage to them, drawn as by a force-pump, came a well of white water tearing to find its level. It caught Inkster at the knees, swayed Eldon where he stood, swung past Burns's feet, foam no longer but flowing black and oily as he had seen it once before. Whether he thought of his own end or not no man can say; but he knew what he meant to happen to the two strangers at last.

"The way out," he shouted, "the way out!" He beckoned Eldon, and, candle in hand, turned to run with the water, up the wrong passage; the one that led to the lipless pit he had once shut his eyes not to see as he saved Scarlett from it.

"Burns!" roared Scarlett. He grabbed for the man, lost his footing, and missed him.

Eldon saw his chance of escape and took it. He leaped over Scarlett as he stumbled, and, knee-deep in water, tore after the man who carried the light; who knew the back way out. If Inkster ran too, or fell and was swept away, Scarlett never knew; for, like Niagara, the main passage filled to the roof. He felt Halliday grip him and haul him up the narrow one, where there had once been a way out in

reality. There was none now; yet, with the girl between them, the two men scrambled to its end.

Sabiell had been right: the flood had saved them the trouble of getting rid of Inkster and Eldon; but it was small comfort to them now, for a few minutes more and the water would follow them. It was nothing to them if the dark pit that was taking Burns and Eldon would presently drain it off, for it would be up to the roof of their refuge first.

"Burns," said Halliday, trembling. "Oh my God, Burns!"

But Scarlett could not answer: only this evening he had hated Burns, and Burns had died doing his best to save him.

He had put out his candles with the first alarm of Eldon, and in the dark the roar of the flood seemed closer with each second. He seized Athol to lift her to his shoulders, and set her down again. Above them, close over their heads, was a furious, grinding noise like thunder, that turned to a slow shattering mutter. He had time to think the roof of the passage was coming in on them, to ward off a shower of falling stones from Athol's face, before he heard her scream:

"It's a star! I can see a star."

The man's head was up and back before the words were out of her mouth. There, above him, slipping aside before his eyes as the roof of a theater slips, the great stone that had blocked the passage Burns had entered by slid back. Through the hole he

had thought could never open shone the blessed stars through a rain of pebbles that stung his face.

"We're out," he said, in almost the same drawl that had threatened Eldon, "we're clean through the cave roof! There's been a landslip on this side, too."

It had cleared the way before them as nothing else but dynamite could have done it, but Scarlett wondered if it had cleared it in time. As he swung Athol to his shoulders, bade her find a firm place in the side of the opening, and then climb out, the water surged to his ankles. He felt her feet on his shoulders, the stones she clutched at rattled about his ears; and suddenly he could have shouted with exultation. Her weight had lifted off him; she, at least, was out! But as he turned to Halliday the water reached their knees.

"You next," said Scarlett peremptorily, "you're the heaviest." But Halliday hesitated, and he swore at him, knowing what was in his mind; that there was not much chance for whoever was the last in the cave. Nor was there, till, like help sent from Heaven, Scarlett remembered Sabarin's bridle, that he had stuffed in his pocket when he let his pack-pony go free. "I'll swing on this better than you," he said, and Halliday understood as the leather reins were shoved into his hand. Then and not till then did he make one move to save himself.

For one doubtful moment his great bulk was on Scarlett's back; the next he was hanging to some-

thing, climbing and pushing as he had never done in his life. If he were not quick, Red was gone. And somehow, he never knew how, he was outside the hole, his wide shoulders squeezed through the gap that had been easy for Athol's slimness; but it seemed years before he heard his own voice calling to Scarlett to catch hold; years again while Sabarin's bridle dangled loosely.

It had nearly dangled so forever, so far as Scarlett was concerned. It was not long enough to reach, and the yard of bare space between it and him meant the distance between life and death. He sprang for the bridle, and missed it; sprang again—and a rush of flood water slapped to his chin, lifted him bodily for one instant before it ebbed back whence it had come; but in that one instant Scarlett's hand had closed on hard leather.

It was his own bridle, not Sabarin's or Jim Welsh's, or it would have snapped with the strain, though Halliday knew better than to jerk it when he felt Scarlett's weight. He braced himself against rocks that might or might not hold him, and knew suddenly that Scarlett had found foot-hold. But as his head emerged from the hole he knelt by, he could only clutch at him wordlessly.

They were out; free; saved; all three of them! But what it meant to Scarlett Halliday did not realize, till he saw him scramble up the open hillside to Athol Gray, and hold her by both hands in the sweet, living air under the stars.

"I guess I must have been wrong about Scarlett's wife," Halliday thought dazedly. "He isn't the kind to—to——" But he did not finish the sentence. The two had forgotten him, and for the second time that night he turned away.

By the time noon was high over the mountains next day Halliday had long known for certain that there had never been a woman in the world for Scarlett but Athol Gray. But it was a very small item in the day's work to him. Somehow they walked over the hills till they found Sabiel at the lower end of the lake; how, Halliday never knew, for he was asleep on his legs most of the way. But Scarlett had no sleep in him, for the happiness that sang in his blood. Even Burns he could not think of with sorrow: it had not been an easy world for poor Burns. And for the rest—he stood with Sabiel by a new camp fire at the lower end of the lake, and gazed silently on a changed world.

Behind him Athol rested dry and warm till he could take her back to the roadhouse on the buckskin, leaving Halliday and the Indian to carry to Janesville what they had saved of the gold that had been the whole world to him when first he saw Drowning Valley—as no man would ever see it again.

For where they had camped for so long was deep water. Where Jim Welsh's weak soul had left his body a great current set and swirled, from a

river that poured down from the head of the lake where no river had ever been; that had the mouth of the caves for its only outlet, and would wash down endlessly on the sepulcher where Burns, Inkster, and Eldon would lie till the last day. The tall obelisk, the giant guardian of the Indians' gold, was gone, being no more needed; for neither white man nor Indian would ever look again on the Drowning Valley lode. Suddenly, unexpectedly, Scarlett felt Sabiel's hand on his shoulder.

"Best so," the Indian commented slowly. "There come no more people to rob and murder for it. And"—he looked significantly at the heap of blankets where a girl slept, dead-weary—"my debt to you is paid. You get what is more than much gold—out of Drowning Valley!"

THE END

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WILLIAM DE MORGAN'S JOSEPH VANCE

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