



THE
PAROWAN
BONANZA

B·M·BOWER

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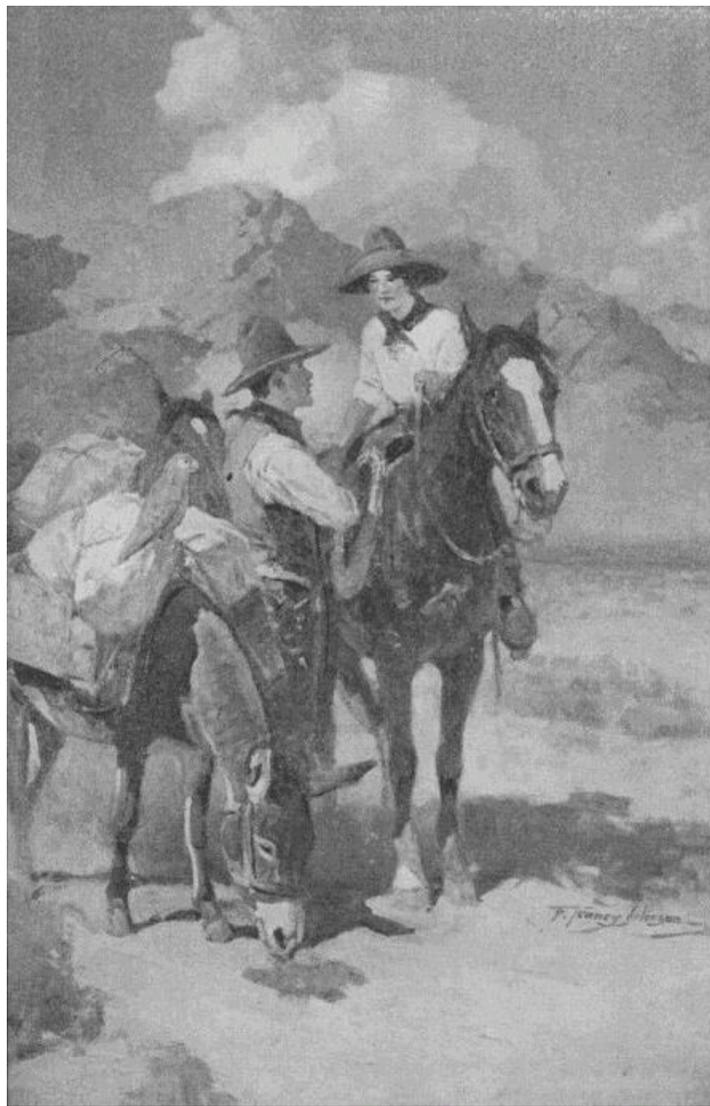
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**He packed an emergency camp outfit on Wise One, and
set out quite happily, walking beside Doris.
FRONTISPIECE. *See page 103.***

The
Parowan Bonanza

BY

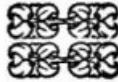
B. M. BOWER

AUTHOR OF

**CHIP OF THE FLYING U,
THE TRAIL OF THE WHITE MULE,
STARR OF THE DESERT, Etc.**

FRONTISPIECE BY

FRANK TENNEY JOHNSON



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THE PAROWAN BONANZA

CHAPTER ONE

HOPEFUL BILL DALE

To those who do not know the desert, the word usually conjures a picture of hot, waterless wastes of sand made desolate by sparse, withered gray sage more depressing than no growth at all; blighted by rattlesnakes and scorpions and the bleached bones of men from which lean coyotes go skulking away in the brazen heat that comes with the dawn; a place where men go mad with thirst and die horribly, babbling the while of mountain brooks and the cool blur of lakes shining blue in the distance, painted treacherously there by the desert mirage.

Sometimes the desert is like that in certain places and at certain seasons of the year, but the men who know it best forgive the desert its trespasses, and love it for its magnificent distances, always beautiful, always changing their panorama of lights and shadows on uptilted mesas and deep, gray-green valleys. Such men yield to the thrall of desert sorcery that paints wonderful, translucent tints of blue, violet and purple on all the mountains there against the sky. They love the desert nights when the stars come down in friendly fashion to gaze tranquilly upon them as they sit beside their camp fires and smoke and dream, and see rapturous visions of great wealth born of that mental mirage which is but another bit of desert enchantment.

Bill Dale was such a man. Hopeful Bill, men called him, with the corners of their mouths tipped down. Bill loved the desert, loved to wander over it with his two burros waddling under full packs of grub and mining tools and dynamite. He loved to pry and peck into some mineral outcropping in a far canyon where no prospector had been before him. And though he sometimes cursed the heat and the wind and brackish water, where he expected a clear, cold spring, he loved the desert, nevertheless, and called it home.

Men jibed at his unquenchable optimism and mistook the man behind his twinkling eyes for a rainbow chaser, mirage-mad in a mild way. For even in Nevada, where the hills have made many a man a millionaire, they laugh at the seeker and call failure after him until he has found what he seeks. Then they want his friendship and a share in his good fortune; and this merely because Nevada is peopled—very thinly—with human beings and not by gods or saints.

Occasionally, when Bill Dale came to town for fresh supplies and mail, some one would wonder why a great, strapping fellow like Hopeful didn't go to work. Perhaps that was because Hopeful carried a safety razor in his pack, and had the knack of looking well-groomed on a pint of water, a clean shirt, an aluminum comb and six inches of mirror. Your orthodox prospector (at least in fiction) promises himself a bath and a clean shave when he strikes it rich, and frequently is made to forego the luxury for years.

Men liked Hopeful Bill, but they thought he was a shiftless cuss who would never amount to anything, since he had taken to the burro trail. A few remembered that Hopeful's father had been unlucky in a boom when Hopeful was just a kid. They thought it was a bad thing to have the legend of a gold mine in the family. Personally they called him a good scout,—and that was because they could borrow money from him, if he had any, and need not fear the embarrassment of being asked to repay it. They could tell their private troubles to Bill and be sure that he would never betray the confidence. But it never occurred to any man that knew him that Hopeful Bill Dale might now and then need money, or sympathy, or some one besides his menagerie to tell his troubles to.

It was the menagerie that belittled Hopeful Bill Dale in the eyes of his fellows. Commonplace souls they were, their brains dust-dry in that cranny where imagination should flourish. They could not see why any grown man should carry a green parrot and a great, gray, desert turtle around with him wherever he went. They were willing to concede the harmlessness of the fuzzy-faced Airedale, since any man is entitled to own a dog if he wants one. But they could not understand a man who would call a dog Hezekiah; which was not a dog's name at all. The mournful, hairy-chopped Hezekiah was therefore a walking proof of Hopeful Bill Dale's eccentricity. And as all the world knows, a man must be rich before he dare be different from his fellows.

Of course, they argued in Goldfield, any grown man that would keep a turtle on a string—tied firmly through a hole bored in the tail of its shell—might be expected to call it Sister Mitchell and claim that it had a good Methodist face. Who ever heard of a turtle having a face? And there was the parrot, that cooed lovingly against Bill's cheek and made little kissing sounds with its beak,—the same beak that had taken a chunk out of a stranger's hand, swearing volubly at her victim afterward. Even if Goldfield could overlook the parrot, there was its name to damn Hopeful Bill Dale finally

and completely. Couldn't call it Polly, which is the natural, normal name for a parrot! No, he had to name the thing Luella. Add to that Bill's burros, that answered gravely to the names Wise One and Angelface. Could any man know these things and still take Bill Dale seriously?

Goldfield shook its head—behind Bill's back—and said he was a nice, likable fellow, but—a little bit "off" in some ways.

So there you have him, according to the estimate of his acquaintances: A great, good-natured, fine-looking man in his early thirties; a man always ready to listen to a tale of woe or to put his hand in his pocket and give of what he had, nor question the worthiness of the cause; but a man who seemed content to wander through the hills prospecting, when he might have made a success of some business more certain of yielding a good living—and mediocrity; a man with a queer kink somewhere in his make-up that prevented his taking life seriously.

Prospectors were usually men who, having failed, through age or other cause, to make good at anything else, took to burrowing in the hills and pecking at rocks and dreaming. If the habit fixed itself upon them they became plain desert rats, crack-brained and useless for any other vocation. Hopeful Bill Dale was too young, too vigorous to have the name "desert rat" laid upon him,—yet. But it was tacitly agreed that he was in a fair way to become a desert rat, if he did not pull up short and turn his mind to something else. The purposeless life he was leading would "get" him in a few more years, they prophesied sagely.

One day in spring Bill Dale walked behind his burros into Goldfield and outfitted for a long trip. Had any one examined closely Bill's pack loads, he would have guessed that Hopeful Bill had a camp established somewhere in the wilderness and was in for all the grub his two burros and a borrowed one could carry.

The storekeeper knew, as he weighed out sugar, rice, beans, dried fruit (prunes, raisins and apricots mostly), that Bill was buying with a careful regard for the maximum nourishment coupled with the minimum weight. For instance, Bill bought five pounds of black tea, though he loved coffee with true American fervor. Rolled oats he also bought,—a twenty-five pound sack. There was a great deal of nourishment in rolled oats, properly cooked. And when Bill called for two large cans of beef extract, the storekeeper looked at him knowingly.

"Goin' to develop something you've struck, hey?" he guessed with unconscious presumption.

"Going to stay till the grub's low, anyway," Bill drawled imperturbably. "Hazing burros over the trail is going to be hot work, from now on until fall. It's cooler in the hills. I'm taking out a rented burro that will come back alone. I figure this grubstake ought to run me until cool weather."

"Got a pretty good claim?" Storekeepers in mining towns are likely to be inquisitive.

"Can't say as I have," Bill grinned. "Open for engagements with old Dame Fortune, though. Kinda hoping, too, that she don't send her daughter, instead, to make a date with me."

"Her daughter?" The storekeeper was one of those who had desert dust in the folds of his brain. "Who's she?"

Bill looked at him soberly, rolling a smoke with fingers smoother and better kept than prospectors usually could show.

"Mean to tell me you never met Miss Fortune yet?" His lips were serious; as for his eyes, one never could tell. His eyes always had a twinkle. "She can sure keep a man guessing," he added. "I like her mother better, myself."

"Oh. Er—he-he! Pretty good," testified the storekeeper dubiously. Something queer about a fellow that springs things you never heard of before, he was thinking. The storekeeper liked best the familiar jokes he had heard all his life. He didn't have to think out their meaning.

"Hey! Cut that out! Bill! Take a look at that!" A voice outside called imperiously, and Bill swung toward the door.

"What is it, Luella?"

"Take a look at that! Git a move on!"

In the doorway Bill stopped. Luella was walking pigeon-toed up and down the back of Wise One, where she usually perched while Bill traveled the desert. Three half-grown boys were crowding close, trying to reach the string of Sister

Mitchell, who had crawled under the store steps. The string was fastened to the crotch of Wise One's pack saddle, and Wise One was circling slowly, keeping his heels toward the enemy. Luella's tail was spread fanwise, showing the red which even Nature seems to recognize as a danger signal. Her eyes were yellow flames, her neck feathers were ruffled. By all these signs Luella was not to be trifled with.

"Cut that out! Hez! Here, Hez! Where the hell is that dog? Hezekiah! Bill! Come alive, come alive!" Up and down, up and down, one foot lifted over the other, her eyes on the giggling boys, Luella expostulated and swore.

Bill stepped outside, throwing away the burnt stub of a match. The three boys looked at him and fled, though Bill was not half so dangerous as Luella or Wise One, either of which would have sent them yelping in another minute.

"Hez! Here, Hez! Where the hell's that dog?" Luella called again impatiently and wheeled, stepping up relievedly upon Bill's outstretched finger. "Lord, what a world!" she muttered pensively, and subsided under Bill's caressing hand.

Bill dragged Sister Mitchell from under the steps and swung her, head down, to the porch. He sat down beside her, his knees drawn up, Luella perched upon one of them.

"Add two cartons of Durham, will you?" Bill called over his shoulder to the storekeeper and turned back to his perturbed pets.

Sister Mitchell thrust forth a cautious head and craned a skinny neck, looking for fresh alarms. Luella tilted her head and eyed the turtle speculatively. "Cut that out!" she commanded harshly, and Sister Mitchell drew in her head timorously before she realized that it was only parrot talk and not to be taken seriously.

The storekeeper asked Bill a question which necessitated Bill's personal examination of two brands of bacon; wherefore, he placed Luella on the porch beside Sister Mitchell and went inside to finish making up his load of supplies. When he emerged with a sack of flour on his shoulder and three sides of bacon under one arm, Luella was riding up the platform on Sister Mitchell's back and telling her to "git a move on." At the other end of the porch a small audience stood laughing at the performance.

"What'll you take for that parrot, Hopeful?" a man asked, grinning.

"Same price you ask for your oldest kid," Bill retorted, and returned for another load from the store.

"Make that strike yet?" another called, as Bill came out with his arms full.

"You bet! Solid ledge of gold, Jim. Knock it off in chunks with a single-jack and gadget. Bring you a hunk next trip in—if I can think of it."

"Hate to hang by the heels till you do," Jim retorted.

"Hate to have you," Bill agreed placidly, stepping over Luella and her mount that he might deposit his load on the edge of the porch.

"What yuh got out there, anyway?" Jim persisted curiously. "You aren't packing all that grub out in the desert just to eat in the shade of a Joshuway tree. What yuh got?"

"Hopes." Bill bent and slid a sack from his shoulder to the pile of supplies. "Outcropping of lively looking rock, Jim. Good indications. I'm hoping it'll turn out something, maybe, when I get into it a ways."

"Get an assay on it?" Jim's curiosity was fading perceptibly. The same old story: lively looking rock, indications; desert rats all came in with that elusive encouragement.

"Trace of silver, two dollars in gold," Hopeful Bill replied. "I'm hoping it'll run into higher values when I hit the contact."

"What contact you got?" Jim's tone was plainly disparaging. "You can't bank too strong on values at contact, Bill."

"Well, this looks pretty fair," Bill argued mildly. "A showing of quartzite,—if it's in place; which I'm digging to find out. Nothing lost but a little sweat and powder, if I don't hit it. I can eat as cheaply in the hills as I can here. Cheaper." From under his dusty hat brim he sent a glance toward the restaurant across the street. "And I know it's clean. I like to have eat

a fly, this noon."

"Why didn't you try the Waffle Parlor? They've got screens."

"My own cooking suits me just fine," Bill returned amiably.

"All right, if you like that kinda life," Jim carped. "I should think you'd want to get *into* something, Bill. You aren't any has-been——"

"Nope, I'm a never-was," Bill retorted shamelessly. "And a going-to-be," he added with naïve assurance. "You mark that down in your book, Jim. Some day you're going to brag about knowing Bill Dale. Some day your tone's going to be hearty and your hand'll be out when you see me coming. You guys will all of you be saying you knew me *when*."

The group bent backward to let the laughs out full and free. Into the midst of their mirth Luella came scrabbling with her pigeon-toed walk, her tail spread wide and her throat ruffled.

"You cut that out!" she shrieked angrily. "Hez! Here, Hez! Where the hell's that dog? Git outa here! Git a move on."

Bill grabbed her before she succeeded in shedding blood.

"Luella doesn't like the tone of that applause," he observed, holding her close to his chest while he smoothed her ruffled feathers. "Luella's a sensitive bird, and she stands up for her folks."

With three loaded burros nipping along before him, the whiskered Hezekiah slouching at his heels, and Luella and Sister Mitchell riding serenely the pack of Wise One, Bill left the town and struck off up the hill by a trail he knew that would cut off a great elbow of the highway, which was dusty and rutted with the passing of great, heavy ore wagons and automobiles loaded with fortune-hunters and camp equipment. At the crest of the long slope the burros stopped to breathe, and Bill turned and stood gazing back at the camp whose first fever was already cooling a bit, leaving the restless ones a bit bored and eager for some new strike in a fresh district, with the whooping boom times that must inevitably follow.

"Laugh, darn you!" Bill figuratively addressed Jim and his companions down there in the town. "You're bone from your necks up, or you'd see plumb through my talk—and be on my trail like ants after a leaky syrup can. Go ahead and laugh, and call me a fool behind my back! You won't take the notion to follow me, anyway."

"Lord, what a world!" chuckled Luella, scrambling for fresh foothold on the canvas pack as Wise One started on with a lurch.

"You're dead right, old girl," Bill agreed; and went on, grinning at something hidden in his thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO

MUSIC HATH CHARMS

Just before sundown, while Bill and his burros and Hezekiah were plodding down the highway toward the sporadic camp called Cuprite, a big touring car came roaring up behind and passed Hopeful Bill in a smothering cloud of yellow dust. Bill observed that it was loaded with luggage and stared after it with that aimless interest which the empty desert breeds in men. A coyote on a hilltop, a strange track in the trail, human beings traveling that way,—it matters little what trivial thing breaks the monotony of plodding through desert country.

Bill could remember when this same road was peopled with men rushing here and there after elusive fortune. Good men and bad, honest men and thieves, the dust never settled to lie long upon the yellow trail. That last two years had made a difference. The tide was fast ebbing, and men were rushing elsewhere in search of the millions they coveted.

"Get a move on!" Bill called to Wise One, at the head of the pack train, with the strange burro tied behind at a sufficient length of rope to protect him from Wise One's heels, which were likely to lift unexpectedly. Luella repeated the command three times without stopping, and the burros shuffled a bit faster in the lowering dust cloud kicked up by the speeding car.

Farther on, Wise One stopped short, backing up from an object in the trail. Bill went forward to investigate, and lifted from the ground a black leather case such as musicians use to hold band instruments. Bill undid the catches and looked in upon a shining, silver object with a gold-lined, bell-shaped mouth and many flat discs all up and down its length. He gazed up the road, already veiled with the purplish haze that comes to the desert before dusk, when the sun has dipped behind a mountain. The car was gone, hidden completely from sight by a low ridge.

"They'll be back," Bill observed tranquilly, and tied the case securely upon the pack of Angelface. "They're bound to miss a thing like that. Anyway, I'll probably run across 'em somewhere."

"Hate to hang till yuh do," remarked Luella, who had evidently been adding to her repertoire in Goldfield while no one thought she was taking heed; which is the way of parrots the world over.

"I don't know about that, now," Bill grinned. "Anyway, if it was mine, I know I'd miss it. I always did want to play a horn."

"Aw, cut it out!" Luella advised him shrewishly. "Git a move on!" Which pertinent retort may possibly explain why Hopeful Bill Dale looked upon the parrot as a real companion. He swore that the bird understood what he said and conversed intelligently, so far as her vocabulary permitted. And her vocabulary, while simple, seemed sufficient for her needs.

Instead of turning aside to a certain spring and camping there for the night, Bill camped near the road where he could not miss seeing and being seen, if any came that way. It was quite a tramp to the spring, so he took a couple of desert water bags and mounted Wise One, leaving the other two burros to follow, and trusting his supplies to the care of Hezekiah and the parrot.

He was not approached that night, nor the next day. Cars passed him, it is true, hurrying through dust clouds from either direction; but never the automobile that had lost the horn. So Bill arrived, in the course of time, at his camp, richer—or poorer, according to viewpoint—by one band instrument of doubtful name and unknown possibilities.

In spring the desert is beautiful. Bill loved the desert flowers, vivid pinks and blues and yellows, dainty of form, sweet as honeycomb. He loved the desert lights, as delicately vivid as were the flowers growing out of the sandy soil, shyly snuggled against some stiff, scraggy bush. Cottontails romped through the sage in the afterglow that lingers long in that high altitude, and Bill let them go unmolested, and gave Hezekiah a lecture. He did not believe in killing just because one can, and there was meat in camp already. From the juniper bushes above the spring the quail were calling. "Shut-that-door! Shut-that-door!"—or so Bill and Luella interpreted the call. Farther up on the hillside, doves were crying mournfully. And Bill knew that higher, on the very top of the butte, mountain sheep, deer and antelope were hiding their bandy-legged young away from the prowling coyotes and "link cats" that were less conscientious than Bill when the chance came for a killing.

Yet this was the desert, against which men rail. There was no mistaking. Out there stood a barrel cactus, almost within reach of a gaunt yucca whose awkward, spiny limbs were rigidly upheld like bloated arms,—colloquially called Joshua trees because they seemed always to be imploring the sun. Down in the valley a dry lake lay baked yellow, hard as cement, with dust devils whirling dizzily down its bald length when Bill looked that way. On the map you will see that valley. It is officially known as the Amargosa Desert. And over the ridge which wore a mystic veil of blended violet and amethyst, Death Valley lay crouched low amongst the hills. The maps call that amethyst and violet pile the Funeral Mountains; and away to the east, Bill could see the faint blue line of Skull Mountains and the Specter Range standing bold behind the Skeleton Hills; proof enough that this was the desert, since it bore the sinister names given it by those who knew too little and dared too much.

It could be cruel,—but not crueller than the cities. It could be lonely, though not so lonely as a multitude. The air was clean and sweet and of that heady quality that only altitude can give. Bill squatted on his heels by his camp fire, just about four thousand feet above sea level,—higher than that above the floor of Death Valley, whose rim he could see, whose poison springs he knew, whose terrible breath he had drawn into his nostrils.

From now on the geography will remain closed and you must take my word for it. And when I tell you that the great, blunt-topped butte behind him was Parowan Peak, don't look for it on the map; you'll never find it. It's a great, wild country, a beautiful, savage country, and if you don't love it you will fear it greatly. And fear it is that rouses the sleeping devil of the desert and sets the bones of men bleaching under the arid sky.

Hopeful Bill Dale knew the desert, and loved it, and made friends with it. He plucked a bright red "Indian paintbrush" from beside a rock and held it up to Luella, watching him cock-eyed from her crude perch of juniper laid across two forked sticks driven into the sand. Luella took the flower in one claw, looked it over and dropped it disdainfully.

"Aw, cut it out! Let's eat," she suggested.

"You're on," Bill replied amiably, turning fried potatoes out of the frying pan. "Come and get it, old girl."

Luella was not a flying bird, except under stress of great emotion. Now she leaned head downward, her beak closing upon a knob where a small branch had been lopped off the stick. Turning like an acrobat, she went down with the aid of beak and claws, and pigeon-toed over to Bill's crude table, crawled upon a convenient rock and waited solemnly for her first helping of fried potato, which she ate daintily, holding it in one claw.

"I've got a surprise for you, old girl," Bill began, when the edge of their hunger had dulled a bit. "That horn we picked up in the road,—it's mine now, by right of discovery. You saw how I stuck to the Goldfield road and made an extra day's journey of the trip, just in case that car came back, hunting for the horn. Lord knows where they are, by now. So I figure the thing belongs to me. After supper, I'm going to open her up and give you some music."

"Hate to hang till yuh do," Luella observed pessimistically. "Let's eat."

Bill dipped a piece of bread in his coffee and gave it to her, unmoved by her pessimism. "One thing a fellow needs out here alone is distraction," he went on. "You're getting so you know more than I do—leave you to tell it—and you're more human than lots of folks. You've reached the point where I can't seem to teach you anything more, Luella. You could almost hold down a claim alone, except for the cooking and maybe swinging a single-jack. So I figure a little diversion will come in about right."

"You're on," said Luella. "Git a move on."

So that is how Hopeful Bill Dale conceived the idea of becoming a musician, thus making use of the opportunity which Providence—or something not so kind—had thrown in his way. It may seem a trivial thing, but trivial things have a fashion of tripping one's feet in the race for happiness, or perchance proving to be the one factor that makes success certain. Bill washed his dishes and tidied his camp, and then he opened the instrument case and for the first time removed the shining thing within. Luella, once more back on her perch, watched him distrustfully.

"Luck's own baby boy!" he ejaculated under his breath. "Here's a book goes with it. 'Progressive Method for the Saxophone.' Saxophone, hunh? I always did want to learn one, Luella; believe it or not. Well, let's go."

"Aw, cut it out!" Luella advised him gloomily, but Bill was absorbed in putting together the instrument and in reading certain directions on the first page of the book.

Followed a muttered monologue, accompanied by certain unusual grimaces and gestures.

"Upper and lower lips slightly over the teeth—chin must be down—lips drawn back as when laughing.' I got that, all right. 'Put the mouthpiece into the mouth a little less than halfway.'" Goggling down at the page, Bill obeyed,—or tried to. When he recovered from that experiment, he read in silence and looked up at Luella puzzled.

"Now if you were human, you could maybe explain to me how a fellow is going to breathe steadily without making use of his nose, mouth, ears or eyes," he hazarded. "Your mouth is full of saxophone to your palate and past it, and you mustn't breathe through your nose, because that looks bad, and your eyes must follow the notes and it's against the rule to puff out your cheeks, which is unbecoming. I figure, Luella, a man's got to curl up his toes and *die* till he's through playing. Hunh?"

"Git a move on! Come alive, come alive!"

"Oh, well,—" said Bill, and began again.

Nothing happened, save imminent death from strangulation. Bill looked foolishly at the instrument. Once more he placed certain fingers carefully upon certain keys, flattened his lips to a fixed, painful grin, swallowed as much mouthpiece as was possible without choking himself to death, and blew until his eyes popped. Sister Mitchell came slowly forward and stood with her skinny gray neck stretched toward Bill, her melancholy eyes regarding curiously the long silver thing in Bill's tense embrace. Hezekiah came up and squatted on his stump of a tail, his ugly, hairy face tilted sidewise while he stared. Bill's family were always keenly interested in everything that concerned Bill, if it were only a new label on a can of tomatoes.

"Didn't get a rise out of it yet," Bill apologized embarrassedly, "but I will. I've heard fellows warble on these brutes till your heart fair melts in your chest. What they can do, I can do. A little music, evenings, is what this camp needs."

In the dimming light he read the confusing instructions all over again, engulfed the ebony mouthpiece within his carefully grinning mouth, took a deep breath,—and something slipped. A terrific, deep bass note rumbled forth quite unexpectedly, before Bill had fairly begun to blow.

Bill jumped. Sister Mitchell disappeared precipitately into her shell, Luella let out an oath which Bill only used under sudden overwhelming emotion, and Hezekiah gave a howl and streaked it into the desert.

Bill recovered first, and on the whole he was pleased with himself. He had gotten the hang of it by sheer accident, and he sat and made terrible sounds while Luella paced up and down her perch with her tail spread, cursing and imploring by turns.

She wronged Bill if she thought that Bill enjoyed his spasmodic blattings and squeakings. He did not. He winced at every squawk, even while he persisted doggedly in the uproar. Through discord only might he hope to become a master of the melody he craved, wherefore he endured the discord, thankful that no human being was near. It took him all the next day to round up the burros, however, and Sister Mitchell went into retirement in her shell and remained there stubbornly.

Thereafter, the stars looked down upon a pathetic little desert comedy enacted every night: The pathetic comedy of Bill Dale tying up his burros and his dog and anchoring a gray desert turtle to a rock before he sat down, with a dull-green instruction book before him on the ground, its corners weighted with small rocks, and practiced dolefully and indefatigably upon a silver-plated saxophone. As long as he could see he would sit cross-legged, humped over his notes,—of which he possessed a rudimentary knowledge learned in school. When darkness blurred the staff, Bill would tootle up and down the scale to the accompaniment of vituperous remarks from Luella and an occasional howl from Hez.

Down deep in his heart there was a reason, which he would not divulge to any one, much less Luella. Twenty miles away, in a vine-covered ranch house that looked out upon the desert from under the branches of cool, green cottonwoods, a certain Doris Hunter sang sweet old songs sometimes in the twilight, and played a sketchy, pleasant little accompaniment upon the piano. Bill knew no ecstasy sweeter than sitting in the gloaming, staring dreamily up through the cottonwood branches at the evening star, while Doris sang "Love's Old Sweet Song."

The pathetic note in the little comedy, the note which his outraged menagerie missed altogether, was the fact that Bill would sit for hours, there under the stars, and try to play "Love's Old Sweet Song." And while he tried patiently to make

the notes come true, his heart was away over the ridge and down in that little, vine-covered ranch house, worshipping Doris Hunter while she sang.

A dream came to him every night while he played and watched the stars. He dreamed of some day going down to the Hunter ranch, with some perfectly convincing excuse for a visit. He would have the saxophone tied on Wise One, who was more dependable in his habits than Angelface, who was a devil. He would wait until after supper, when Doris would finally settle down on the piano stool. Then he would remember his saxophone and suggest nonchalantly that they try a few little things together. Doris would round her eyes at him, and the dimple would show in her left cheek when she begged him to bring it in.

Then,—Bill's lips would smile in spite of the correct position of the mouth, when he reached that point in his dream—then, after a little talk, and the whole family gathering around to exclaim over the beautiful instrument (which really was beautiful, in cold reality), why, then Bill would suggest something, and Doris would strike a preliminary chord or two, and Bill would follow her voice softly with his music while she sang:

"Just a song at twi-light,
When the lights ar-re low,
A-and the flick'ring sha-adows,
Sof-fly come and go-o—"

Bill's lips would soften, his eyes would grow luminous and very, very tender. He would forget to play and would stare up into the gemmed purple, and wonder, and dream, and hope.

After a long while, when Luella had tucked her head under her wing, Bill would lay the saxophone carefully in its velvet nest and begin absently to unlace his boots. Doris Hunter—the gold mine he meant to find—had indeed almost found—"Love's Old Sweet Song"—the skill to play while Doris sang; these things mingled indissolubly in his soul while he slept and dreamed, shuttled through his waking mind while he worked.

So this was the real Bill Dale, whom men called Hopeful Bill with their mouths tipped down.

CHAPTER THREE

LUELLA ANNOUNCES

In the beginning of mining booms, accident and freaks of chance are popularly supposed to play the leading rôle. A mule, for instance, played fairy godmother when it let fly its heels and kicked a nub off a ledge of fabulous richness in gold. A man threw a rock at a jack rabbit, and then realized that the rock was heavier than it should be; sought its mates and found a mine. Or a man takes an inadvertent slide down a ledge and lands upon a bonanza.

These things do happen occasionally; and, being ready-made romance, they are seized upon avidly by the teller of tales. So the public comes to believe that chance, and chance alone, discovers the precious minerals and leads men like blind children to the spot; a sort of "Shut-your-eyes-and-open-your-mouth" game played by Fate.

In reality, more mines are found by careful prospecting than are ever given to the world by sheer accident. More and more is science turning prospector, and men go carefully, reading geologic formations, following volcanic breaks and mineral outcroppings. Your desert prospector may eat with his knife and forget to take off his hat in the house, but he can talk you blind on intrusions and sedimentary deposits and the dips, angles and faults of certain mineral formations he knows. Chlorides, "bromides," sulphides,—these things are the shop talk of desert and mountains. Men speak of one another with praise or disparagement, as "knowing rock" or as not knowing rock. And the man who does not know rock is the man who goes about praying for a mule to kick the dirt off a gold outcropping for him.

Bill Dale knew rock. He had spent two years, more or less, prospecting on the southern slope of Parowan, because there was a "break" running across, and because, in the lower end of a wash that had many feeders wrinkled into the mountainside, he had picked up a few pieces of "float" carrying free gold in such quantity that it would mean a real bonanza if he found it "in place," which means in a continuous vein leading to the main body that produced it.

As a bystander he had observed the boom at Goldfield, Tonopah, and at other lesser points. His father had been rich in a boom town for a few weeks. Then he had been a broken, old pauper until he died. Wherefore, Bill Dale did not want a premature boom, nor any boom at all. He wanted to find the ledge or vein that had produced that float, so that he would have something tangible to offer Doris Hunter,—in case he ever found courage enough to offer her anything. He knew that he was liked by the Hunters; but he also knew that as a prospective husband for Doris he was never for one moment seriously considered. Don Hunter, her father, was a stockman. He did not believe much in mines, and he looked askance, from a business viewpoint, at any man who spent good, working days in prospecting the desert. It was the most insidious, the most hopeless form of gambling, according to Don Hunter. He would rather see a man sit down to poker and play for a living than to see him wallowing around like a badger, digging holes in a sidehill looking for wealth.

Bill had done a great deal of pecking and prying, up this wash and that. He believed he knew where the float had come from, but there seemed to be an overburden of soil, probably the result of some beating storm and consequent slide, which had covered the ledge that had at one time been an outcropping. It was slow, tedious work, but Bill was a patient man. Prospectors have to learn patience, or quit the game.

Flaunting desert lilies, dainty blue bells, the deep magenta bloom of the cacti gave way to the tiny pink and pale lavender blossoms that cling close to the arid soil. The sky was brazen with heat, or it turned deep shades of slate as the thunderheads poked over Parowan and rumbled warningly at the desert. Bill worked on through the hot days and practised scales and simple melodies in the evening, and quarreled with Luella and confided to her many things which he would not want repeated.

One sultry evening he brought into camp several pieces of rock and held them where Luella could gaze upon certain telltale, yellow specks. Bill's perspiring face glowed. His eyes were dancing with something akin to mirth.

"We've struck it, old girl! What I've been looking for all this while. Biggest thing yet, from the looks. We're *rich*, I tell you! Doggone, thundering rich! You watch Parowan go on the map. Biggest thing in the country. If I showed that rock in Goldfield, they'd be down here like flies." He laid the rock down and broke a dry stick across his knee, meaning to start a fire. But he was excited and kept on talking,—now definitely to Luella, now to himself.

"It's the kind of thing I've been hunting. I knew it should be here somewhere. This district is entitled to a big mine. It's got all the earmarks. I've got her traced, now. That rock is in place, or I'm a Chinaman. I tell you, old girl, we're rich! I've

got a nugget in my shirt pocket that I didn't show you, for fear you might swallow it."

"Aw, cut it out!" Luella snapped at him. She was a pessimistic bird, as a rule.

Bill burrowed deeper and found more gold. Rock so rich that he could break it up by hand and pan it in the spring, and glean gold enough for another grubstake, more equipment. He was in no great hurry to proclaim his fortune to the world, and he did not mean to show himself in town until his grub was gone. Then he would make a trip, buy more supplies, perhaps hire a man if he could find one whom he could trust. He did not want the harpies to know about Parowan,—yet.

He relieved his inner excitement by talking to Luella, and by tootling on the saxophone and dreaming of Doris Hunter, who did not seem quite so unattainable, now that he had found the mine he had wanted to find and was proving it richer than his most lavish expectations.

With the first discovery he had put up his location notices on three claims, calling them simply Parowan Number One, Parowan Number Two and Parowan Number Three. And in compliment to the girl of his dreams he had located another, called it the Evening Star and signed Doris Hunter's name as the locator. Which is a chivalrous custom observed quite commonly among prospectors.

He did the location work on all four claims, put up the corner and side-line monuments required by law, and then, having eaten most of his supplies, he cached the remainder and started for Goldfield, his mind at ease, his heart singing and his lips wearing an unconscious half-smile all the way.

It was in Goldfield, while Bill was in the recorder's office, that the news leaked out where it shouldn't. Luella, like others of her sex, began talking, inspired by an audience of four men, one of whom was Jim Lambert, who had betrayed some curiosity over Bill Dale's affairs when Bill was last in town.

"Bill Dale's outfit. Hello, Luella," Jim greeted.

Luella looked down at him, seemed to recall having seen him before, and began her pigeon-toed march up and down Wise One's spinal column.

"Boy, we've struck it rich!" she began, chuckling in vivid imitation of Hopeful Bill's tone when he was particularly pleased. "Got her traced now. Richest thing in Nevada. Goldfield can't show stuff like this. Tell you, old girl, we're rich! Doggone, thunderin' rich! Can't tell anybody. Don't want a boom. Git a move on! They'd be down here like flies. Hez! Hez'll have a gold collar. Gold perch for you. Luck's turned; luck's patting us on the back." Luella laughed, then, just as Bill laughed.

Jim and his three companions had stood perfectly still, listening. Jim turned his head and looked at the others, who stared back at him inquiringly.

"Inside dope, boy, believe me." Jim plucked the nearest man by the sleeve. "Bill Dale's parrot has give us the real dope on Bill, if you want my opinion. Come on. We'll lay low, and I'll feel Bill out. He's inside—recording claims, I'll bet. Anyway, I've got a claim to record, come to think of it. I'll git all I can outa the recorder. Bill Dale's parrot has tipped Bill's hand. I'll see the recorder."

They went away. Five minutes later, Bill came down the steps to his burros and discovered Luella toeing it up and down, up and down, practising new sets of words.

"Bill Dale's parrot has tipped Bill's hand. I'll see the recor'," she muttered, over and over.

"You damned huzzy," Bill reproved her, when he had got the full significance of her speech. He picked up Wise One's lead rope and went thoughtfully down to the store.

"We'll lay low," Luella continued, bobbing her head as Wise One's empty pack swayed and lurched under her feet. "Come on. We'll lay low. I'll feel Bill out. Bill Dale's parrot has tipped Bill's hand. I'll see the recor-r'——" She worried over the final syllable that defeated her powers of enunciation.

Bill looked back at her speculatively. At the store, the first thing he asked for was a large, pasteboard carton. Having found one which he thought would do, he plucked Luella unceremoniously off her perch and shut her up, with the box lid tied firmly in place with much heavy twine.

"Fellow tried to steal her, last time I was in," he explained good-humoredly. "She's a pet I'd hate to lose. I'll give you a dollar if you'll let me put her away somewhere till I'm ready to leave town."

"Sure! Keep the dollar, though. It ain't any trouble—if you feed her yourself." Bill was a good customer. He bought largely when he did buy, and he never hinted at credit; which was more than could be said of most prospectors.

"Wait! I'll just put the turtle in with her. Then she'll be more at home, and won't try to break out." Bill went out and returned, swinging a headless, footless, tailless mass of gray turtle insouciantly by the string. "Bunch of boys was after Sister Mitchell too, last time," he observed. "I hate to have trouble, and I can't always keep an eye on things in town. Got quite a lot of running around to do."

He carried the turtle to the back of the store, opened the box and slid her in with little ceremony.

"What the hell!" Luella ejaculated, but Bill slipped on the cover and left her in darkness, so that Luella subsided into throaty mutterings. She never talked in the dark, as Bill knew very well.

"How's prospecting?" the storekeeper asked when Bill returned. "Found anything?"

"Well, I've got a dandy prospect," Bill confided, lowering his voice and glancing sidelong toward the door. "I want to do some more digging, though, before I throw up my hat. Just recorded three claims, as I came past the courthouse. I've got to go in on a lead, and I want the work to count as location work. In fact," he further elucidated, "I've recorded what work I've done as location. No use digging for nothing, and even if they don't pan out rich enough to pay now, so far from transportation, there's enough showing of mineral to pay for hanging on awhile."

"Um-hmm." The storekeeper nodded. "Pity all prospectors don't take the pains to make sure uh what they got. They come in here blattin' about their strikes—and want more grub on credit. I used to fall for it. What's your claims? Gold?"

"Showing of gold," Bill told him unhesitatingly. "The formation entitles me to gold, too, so that's what I'm looking for. Here's a piece of rock. Take a look at it."

The storekeeper tilted the specimen to the light and squinted. Bill obligingly lent him a miner's glass, and with his finger pointed to a certain spot on the sample. "Right there—at the edge of that iron stain; there's a speck of color."

"Mh-hmm—yeah—I see it. Well, it's good, live-lookin' rock, Bill. I think you're wise to dig into it." He returned the sample, weighing it in his mind as he held it out.

"I'm keeping quiet about it—to outsiders," Bill said, dropping the rock into his pocket again. "Don't want any stampede. But I do want a couple more burros, and a hundred pounds of powder, and four boxes of Six-X caps, and five hundred feet of fuse. If you can get me all the stuff I need, and get the two extra burros packed and headed down the trail with orders for the fellow to camp and wait till I show up, I'll make it right with you. This town's got big ears and big eyes. And—you can maybe remember why I hate boom stampedes that don't pan out. I'll give you ten per cent. on every dollar's worth of stuff and the cost of the burros you get to—say to Hick's Hot Spring for me, and twenty-five dollars for a good, trusty man that can swing a single-jack and throw a mess of sour-dough bread together."

The storekeeper ruminated.

"Why, I'll do it for nothing, Bill. You're a good customer, and if you do make a strike I guess I won't lose your trade by treating you white. Trade's slidin' into the credit class more'n what I like to see. You're hard cash when you buy. Just give me your order, and I'll fill it. And what's more, I'll keep my damn mouth shut. And glad to accommodate yuh, Bill."

"Say, you're a white man!" Bill looked full at him and grinned appreciation. But he did not confide further in the storekeeper, nevertheless. "Don't let anybody hang around my pets, and don't say who's to own the burros. You buy 'em, and I'll buy 'em from you, same as I do bacon. And be careful, pickin' that man, will yuh? I want one that can swing something besides his tongue."

"I getcha, Bill. How about booze?"

"All right—if he can do without for a month or two at a stretch. I don't pack any jugs into the desert, as you maybe know."

"That's why I asked. Town's full of good men, but they are mostly booze-punishers. Well—how long you expect to be in town?"

"Just until I'm hooked up with what I need."

"Well—I can get yuh out to-morrow, maybe."

"Just in case you happen to run shy,——" Bill wrote a check on a Reno bank and handed it over. "Any balance, either way, we'll straighten up before I leave."

He purloined a handful of withered lettuce leaves and dropped them into the box for Sister Mitchell and Luella, and went out to idle here and there through town and discover, if he could, just how much damage Luella had done to his plans.



CHAPTER FOUR

GOOD, LIVELY PROSPECT

Jim Lambert had known Bill Dale since the beginning of the boom that had broken Bill's father,—broken him mentally and financially. Jim was a broker in Goldfield and sold real estate and underwrote fire insurance as a side line. Lately, the side line had become the chief industry, since mines had begun to close down and adventurers were drifting on to later excitements.

Bill did not care much for Jim Lambert. Although he never troubled to explain to himself his indifference that edged close to dislike, he had no definite distrust of the man. Yet Jim Lambert had been active in his father's Myrtle Mine boom and had professed to suffer when the bubble burst. Bill's father had complained vaguely that Jim Lambert was largely responsible for the bursting of the bubble, but Bill had not paid much attention to that talk. He knew his dad too well. His dad always blamed some one for his misfortunes,—some one other than himself. Bill's nature was built of stiffer material. When his plans went wrong, Bill set all his energies to work planning the next move and wasted little thought upon the reason for his last failure; unless, to be sure, in that reason lay his safety in the future. Thus, Bill flatly refused to help his father play the game of find-the-guilty-party. He went to work and earned and saved all he could out of it, and when he had enough to keep him going for five years, he set out deliberately to spend that five years in finding a mine.

Wherefore, Bill never did learn what part, if any, Jim Lambert had played in the failure of the Myrtle Mine. All he knew was that the mine had been attached and sold by its creditors, and his father had come out of it without a dollar. And he knew that he was not going to be caught that way when he had found his mine. He meant to steer clear of those speculating crooks who managed to loot every enterprise they got hold of and still kept out of jail.

Jim Lambert met Bill by accident—or so Bill believed. It was in the Great Northern bar, where Bill was treating himself to a glass of beer and a San Francisco paper in a quiet corner. Both were inexpressibly refreshing after his long exile, but Bill was not too engrossed to keep a quiet eye open for those who came and went, or remained to chat desultorily before the polished bar.

He was waiting for some one to approach him. Some one did, presently, and that one was Jim Lambert. Jim brought his schooner of beer over and sat down opposite Bill, grinning goodfellowship while he wiped his perspiring brow.

"Got baked out, eh? Must be pretty hot in the desert, now."

"Fair," said Bill, and folded the paper for politeness' sake. "Still, it hasn't been so bad. The man that cusses the desert is the man that strikes out into it and thinks he'll hurry up and get it over with. The desert's all right—if you know how to take it."

"I guess you're right. The old-timers don't seem to have much trouble."

"Not unless they're drunk, or have an accident," Bill agreed, and took two slow, satisfying swallows of beer.

"Well, how's she going? Hit that contact yet you were after?" Jim spoke over his beer mug carelessly.

"Not yet. Been doing location work on three claims. Located first and planned to prospect more thoroughly afterwards." He set down the mug and reached into his pocket for the specimen he had shown to the storekeeper. It was not a good sample of his ore; it was, in fact, the "leanest" rock he could find. But he pushed it across the table with an air of subdued pride.

Jim picked it up, testing its weight as he did so. Bill hooked his toes behind his chair legs and leaned forward expectantly, watching Jim Lambert's face. He thought he read there a shade of disappointment, and he leaned back satisfied. Luella, he told himself, did not talk to perfect strangers except when goaded to profanity by teasing. Jim she had seen many times.

"Good, lively-looking rock," Jim said at last, repeating the storekeeper's comment. "Carries gold, doesn't it?"

"You bet! Here, take this glass and look right there at the point of that iron stain. It shows color, there, under the glass. When I get depth on that, it ought to show good values, don't you think?"

"How deep is this?" Jim turned the rock under the glass. "Looks to me like surface rock."

"You're right. That's outcropping. If I had enough of it, I'll bet it would pay, just as she is. Or if it was close to a railroad, even."

Jim did not reply. He was pretending to study the rock; in reality he was studying Bill Dale. Bill's optimism was a byword, to be sure; yet Jim fancied he saw a slight discrepancy between Bill's keen eyes and the easy hopefulness of his words. He missed somewhere the good-natured twinkle and the drawl.

"Well, it's pretty good for surface rock," Jim said, when the silence became noticeable. "Nothing to get excited over, though, do you think?"

"I should say not! It'll have to look better than that before I get excited."

"Well, good luck to yuh, Bill. If you do get something good, let me know. I might be able to turn a deal for you. There's money in this town yet—if you can show something good enough. It's shy, but it's here. I'll be glad to help you out, any way I can."

"Thanks." Bill's drawl was quite apparent now. "I'll sure remember, if I want to turn anything, later on."

Jim looked at his watch and said he must go; a simple expedient for breaking off a conversation that has grown barren of interest, and one that can never be gainsaid. And Bill, having finished his beer to the dregs, went away also, quite satisfied in his mind.

His satisfaction was not so keen as Jim's, however. Had Bill Dale tiptoed to the door of Jim's office, half an hour later, and put his ear to the keyhole, he might have heard himself being talked about.

"He didn't get by, with me," Jim was saying positively. "Not for one minute. He showed me a piece of rock no better than you can pick up on any tailing dump in Goldfield, and claimed that was his best showing. It wasn't good enough to account for what that parrot of his let out. Remember? I jotted it down, first thing. Parrot talk is just parrot talk, but they don't invent nothing. They've got to hear it said before they'll say it. And if you might say Bill Dale was teaching it that stuff for fun, that don't sound reasonable—knowing Bill."

He fumbled for a minute and brought out a little, soiled, red book.

"Now here's what the parrot reeled off, and I'll gamble she got it straight. A man out alone by himself lets go and says what he really thinks. We all know that. Now, the parrot says, 'Boy, we've struck it rich! Got her traced now. Richest thing in Nevada. Goldfield can't show stuff like this. Tell you we're rich. Won't tell anybody—don't want a boom. Git a move on!' (That's something else, run in). 'They'd be down here like flies. Gold perch for you. Luck's turned. Luck's patting us on the back.'"

He looked at his companions and grinned. "Don't tell me that wasn't picked up from Bill Dale's camp talk."

"Maybe he taught the parrot that lingo just to *have* her spill it in town and start a rush," one tight-faced man said cautiously.

Jim shook his head. "I saw him in the Great Northern—trailed him there. Most generally, when Bill's in town, he takes the parrot around with him, riding on his shoulder. She's a smart bird. Bill's proud of her and likes to show her off. Talks everything, just like a human; everything she hears and takes a notion to, that is. Well, he didn't have her with him to-day. He's left her somewhere. From the saloon he went into the barber shop. He's getting a haircut. Shave too, probably. Never saw him in a barber shop before without that green parrot. My guess is, he's afraid she'll let out something." Jim put the book back in his pocket with a self-satisfied air. Men who live by their wits are usually a bit vain of their shrewdness.

"Well, if you're right, he got scared too late to do any good," chuckled a jovial, round little man with one eye milky from cataract.

"He was just coming into town. Leaving her in the street for five minutes, up there at the courthouse, would look safe enough to anybody. It's just luck we happened along."

"Well, now, how's it to help *us*?" The tight-faced man had brown eyes that stared intently, as do the near-sighted. He leaned forward, bringing the conference to a point.

Four heads went together, at that, and if Bill had been listening at the keyhole he wouldn't have heard much. They were a careful quartette, and they had worked in harmony through the complexities of several "deals."

Bill saw Jim Lambert again the next day. Jim was in the store, looking boredly impatient to be served. The storekeeper's signal to Bill, of tilted head and lowered eyelid did not pass unobserved. Bill followed him back among the piled boxes of canned goods, and Jim idled over to a pile of overalls and inspected them carefully while he tried to listen.

He did not hear as much as he desired, and much that he did hear was irrelevant. There was something about two burros leaving last night. Then, after some mumbling, he caught the storekeeper's earnest assurance, "—all right when he's sober. Just off a big drunk, so he's good for three months, anyway. Tommy's an old, hard-rock man; all around good guy if he takes a notion to yuh. And I got him cheap for yuh. Three dollars and found."

Jim Lambert could not guess what Tommy this might be, but he was glad to know that Bill was hiring a man by the underground route, and that Tommy liked whisky. Working through the storekeeper meant only one thing; the need of absolute secrecy. Which provided wonderful illumination for a man like Jim Lambert.

Jim moved carelessly back to the front of the store and was giving his order to the clerk when Bill emerged, carrying a spiteful-tongued parrot on one finger. Bill grinned a greeting at Jim.

"Say, 'Hello, Jim,'" he instructed Luella in his coaxing tone.

Luella's reply was just barely printable when the editor's sense of humor is keener than his puritanism. Luella blinked and said, "You damned hussy, git a move on!"

"She's peevish," Bill apologized. "She's getting such a darned nuisance in town I had to shut her up. Now you listen to me, old girl. Back you go in the box, if you don't behave. Be quiet—you know I mean it."

Luella turned and walked up Bill's arm to his shoulder, and leaned forward to click her beak against his neck. "Lord, what a world!" she murmured, and began daintily to eat half a banana which Bill gave her.

Jim Lambert took his few small packages and went out, and Bill saw him no more. Which does not mean that Jim ceased to take an interest in Bill Dale's prosperity and personal affairs.

CHAPTER FIVE

STRANGERS IN CAMP

From beside a camp fire at the springs which Bill Dale had designated as the rendezvous, an undersized, ape-bodied individual rose and goggled up at Bill through thick-lensed spectacles that magnified his eyelids grotesquely.

"Hello," said Bill, looking down at him whimsically. "Is this the outfit the Goldfield Supply Company sent out?"

"An' if ye'll tell me what business it might be uh yoors, I c'd maybe say yis er no to that," the undersized one retorted, raising his voice at the end of the sentence as if it were a question.

"All right, Tommy. You'll do, I reckon. I'm Bill Dale, and if I'm not mistaken you'll be looking to me for your pay."

"An' from the look of ye I'll be earnin' that same," Tommy suggested drily.

Bill lifted Luella and Sister Mitchell off Wise One, and began to unlash the heavy pack, Tommy helping him. The two studied each other with covert interest; Tommy seeking to discover whether Bill Dale would make a good boss, one easy to work for, which, next to the security of his pay, is a laborer's chief consideration. Bill measured Tommy shrewdly as a man who would work—and gossip. A man who could be loyal to the last gasp, but a man who might easily choose to be disloyal. He was a garrulous little Irishman, was Tommy; a man of indeterminate age and of problematic usefulness. But Bill was not inclined to carp. He was content to give Tommy a trial, which was as much as the best man could justly expect.

If Tommy had received any hint of the probable value of Bill's claims, he gave no sign of knowing. Until he slept he sat cross-legged by the fire and stared into the flames through his thick-lensed glasses, and regaled Bill with choice anecdotes culled from his past,—that endless, obvious odyssey of the common laborer whose world is bounded by his "job." His voice was a soft, complaining monotone saturated with the eternal vague question. Never did his inflection fall to a period. At a distance which would blur the words of his speech, his voice would inevitably give one the impression that Tommy was asking one reproachful question after another, with never a statement to relieve the endless inquiry.

Bill was amused, but he was also convinced that Tommy would presently become a bore. He was interested to note that Luella preserved a dignified silence all through the evening. One yellow eye on the latest recruit, she sat humped upon the crotch of a packsaddle with her green feathers ruffled moodily, still sulking over her incarceration with Sister Mitchell.

At Parowan, whither they arrived one sultry afternoon with a smell of rain in the air, Tommy went to work like an old hand on the desert. Bill watched him unobtrusively and decided that the storekeeper had shown pretty good judgment. While they were unpacking the burros, Tommy cocked an eye at the sullen clouds that tore themselves on Parowan Peak only to mend immediately and crowd lower down the slope, and began gathering heavy rocks which he piled in a row on the lower edge of Bill's tent, and to test the guy ropes and drive the pegs deeper.

"She's a cloud-burst comin', er I never seen wan," he observed complainingly, when he was again lugging the supplies into the tent. "Them taties c'd stay outside, but watter will cause the bacon t' mold, Mr. Dale. An' beans is never the same, wancet they've been wrinkled wit' rain watter an' dried agin. I dunno, but that's been my experience wit' grub. I'd git it all under cover, if it was mine, Mr. Dale."

"Does look bad, for a fact," Bill admitted. "I was going up to the workings; but I reckon we'd better make camp snug. Now, Hez, what'll happen if you bust a lung? What's on your fool mind?"

Hez appeared to have a good deal on his mind. Presently his excitement was explained by four loaded burros laboring up the draw, followed by three men who hurried the animals up the uneven slope. Bill frowned when he saw them, wondering if they had followed him.

But the men were strangers to him. If they came from Goldfield, he thought, they must have hurried,—because Bill himself had made the trip in record time. He nodded as they came up, and sent the impolite Hezekiah into the tent with his hindquarters drooping guiltily. Two of the men had the look of mining engineers (for your desert dwellers learn to

judge a man's profession by the way he dresses and carries himself on the desert). The third, who evidently had charge of the burros, had "desert rat" written all over him.

"Spring up here still workin', mister?" the burro driver asked in a flat voice raised shrilly by way of attaining some volume. "Used to be a spring up here."

"The spring is still there," Bill replied neutrally.

A pleasant, short man came forward, smiling and holding out his hand, never doubting his welcome.

"Glad to see you, sir. My name is Rayfield; Walter B. Rayfield. My partner, here, is John S. Emmett, a mining expert of whom you may have heard, if you're the mining man you look to be. Working for the government, making a report of the gold, silver and copper possibilities of Nevada. I examine the country for gold and silver, and Emmett, here, takes care of the copper report. We've been allotted what is called the Furnace Creek quadrangle. We're working the northern part first, so as to have cooler weather for the Death Valley neighborhood."

"Glad to meet you." Bill's handshake was cordial, with a certain reticence behind it. Happy-go-lucky as he seemed, Bill Dale was slow in choosing his friends, while acquaintances never got below the surface of his mind. "My name is Dale; Bill for short, Hopeful Bill for sarcasm. You're just ahead of a big storm, by the looks, Mr. Rayfield."

"Yes, it does look like rain." Mr. Rayfield glanced at the heavy clouds that were now hiding the peak. "We expect to camp here for a while, if the spring is all right. Glad to have a neighbor. Most of the time we have to put up with our own company. Well, Al, suppose you find a place for camp. You'll have to hustle, my man, if we're to get our tents up before it rains."

"You've a nice little camp here," the man introduced as Emmett observed, his hard brown eyes taking in the surroundings appraisingly. It's certainly a great view you have here. We saw your tent from miles away, down there."

"You came from Vegas way, then," Bill stated calmly. From that direction only could they see his camp from any distance; the Goldfield trail twisted around the mountain.

"We started from Las Vegas. We've been out some time, though. Came down Forty Mile Canyon to the main road and followed that as far as we could." He pulled a pipe from his pocket and began filling it in leisurely fashion from a leather pouch while his gaze traveled sophisticatedly over the surrounding hills.

"Prospecting, I suppose?" His eyes came back to Bill's face. His tone had the casual note of one who wishes to be civil.

"Yes, a little," Bill replied guardedly. Even to research men he did not feel like telling all he knew. "She's a hard country to prospect in, though. Too much overburden. But I like the formation here. Seems to me there's a chance here to run on to something, if a fellow keeps right after it."

"I see already why they call you Hopeful Bill," Mr. Emmett grinned over his pipe. "I don't think it's sarcasm, though." He gave another professional glance at the rough outcroppings near them. "Looks pretty fair, but my specialty is copper. Doesn't seem very promising for that—but one never can tell. You're looking for gold, I take it. That's more in Rayfield's line."

"I'm looking for anything I can find," Bill corrected lazily. "Anything from gold to diamonds; just so there's money in it."

The fitful breeze died suddenly to an ominous, stifling calm. The copper expert glanced up at the slaty mass moving up from the west and went to help the others set up the tent before the storm broke.

"Want any help?" Bill called after him. But Mr. Emmett shook his head, waved a hand and went on.

Tommy, who had retreated into the tent as the party drew near, pushed his head through the opening and goggled at the group fifty yards away. They were spreading a wall tent, preparing to make camp in the lee of a rocky ledge. Tommy wiped the tobacco stain from his lips with the back of his hand and glanced sidelong up at Bill.

"That's Al Freeman they got wit' 'em," he drawled in his complaining, questioning way. "An' how he c'd git wit' 'em I dunno, fer I left him in Goldfield—I did—and him owin' me tin dollars and denying all knowledge of that same. He's a liar an' a t'ief, Mr. Dale, an' them that trusts him is like t' find their t'roats cut some marnin' an' their pockets turned out.

"How he got to Las Vegas t' join up with these fellers I dunno—fer he was in Goldfield whin I left, and there can't be two of 'im—an' the devil wit' his hands full a'ready just wit' wan of 'im. I'd tip off them gov-ment men, Mr. Dale, I sure would. He's worse ner a rattler in camp, an' he's the kind that'll lie wit' 'is ears open an' then run an' make bad use o' what he hears, Mr. Dale. He's a durrty claim-robber fer wan t'ing, an' if yuh've got annything here wort' robbin', Mr. Dale, yuh'd best set yer tent over it whilst Al Freeman's on the mountain. It's the Gawd's trut' I tellin' yuh—an' yuh better slip them experts the word—though how he got wit' 'em I dunno, fer I left him in Goldfield; I did that!"

"That's mighty queer," Bill assented dubiously. "If you're sure of that, we'll step lightly till we know the bunch better. Keep your eye on him, Tommy, until I find out more about it. They won't get that tent up in time to save a wetting; I can see that right now."

The man Tommy said was Al had unpacked one burro, but it was certain they would not have time to make themselves even passably comfortable. Even now the tent they were erecting was bellying like a balloon in a sudden blast of wind, and while they struggled with it pegs and guy ropes snapped loose. The short man, whose name was Rayfield, evidently made a suggestion. All three looked toward Bill's camp. Then, as the earth quivered under a deafening crash of thunder, Al hurriedly tied the burros to a couple of stunted junipers, wadded the tent hastily into an ungainly bundle and thrust it between two rocks.

Heads down against the wind, holding their hats on with both hands, they came running. Bill opened the tent flaps and held it against the wind until the strangers and Tommy were inside. Then he double-tied the flaps and turned, grinning hospitably. His twelve-by-fourteen tent was more than comfortably full now, what with the piles of supplies, Bill's stove and table and bed, and the five men. But it was a shelter, set shrewdly against just such an emergency as this storm. It faced away from the wind, and a ledge protected it from the full force of the gale.

Thunder, lightning, wind—then an abrupt silence, a holding of the breath. Tommy, crouched down in his corner, his shoulder held carefully away from the canvas wall, stared owl-like through his thick glasses.

"She's comin'," he mumbled dolefully.

She came. All the water in the clouds seemed to have been dumped unceremoniously upon the tent. A fine mist beat through the roof and sides until warp and woof became saturated, and shrunk to a waterproof texture that sent the water running off in streams.

"She's a cloud-burst—I said she'd be a cloud-burst!" Tommy muttered again in melancholy triumph.

"You didn't get here any too soon," Bill observed cheerfully. "It would be pretty tough, climbing through this. You're lucky."

"We certainly are!" Mr. Rayfield's voice was raised almost to a shout, to carry above the storm. "Wouldn't want to be caught out in this!"

They sat and listened to it,—the boom and crash of the thunder, the vivid flashes that lightened blindingly the gloom of the tent, the roar of the falling water.

"She's a tough one, all right!" Bill rose and pried open the flaps with his fingers, and put an eye to the crack. "Now I know how old Noah felt when he shut the door of the ark. Nothing in sight but water—good Lord!"

Something sagged against the tent, beat upon the taut canvas. A voice was raised shrilly, frantically.

"Bill! Oh, Bill! Let me in!"

Bill's face had whitened at the first sound. His fingers clawed at the stiff, canvas knots that held the flaps shut. His hands, reaching out to loosen the outside fastenings, touched other fingers that tore nervously at the soaked knots. Bill was hampered by those other fingers, as a swimmer is hampered by the frenzied clutchings of a drowning man. But he managed the two lower fastenings and was beginning on the upper when the person outside stooped and ducked in past Bill's knees.

"Doris—— Miss Hunter! What——"

"Oh, it's perfectly *awful*! I thought I'd never make it, Bill. I couldn't make the horses face it, so I tied them down the gulch

and came on afoot. I could see your tent when it lightened—I'm just *soaked*! It's the worst storm this year."

She was talking in gasping little rushes of words, talking because she must have some emotional outlet. Her hat had gone in the wind, and she wiped the water from her face with quick, impatient brushes of her palms outward from her nose. Her hair was wet as a drowned woman's, and as lank about her face and shoulders. She wore a khaki riding skirt and a striped cotton blouse that clung to her shoulders and arms like wet paper. Her high-laced boots squelched soppily when she moved. Had she been pulled from a river she could not have been wetter.

"Tommy, start a fire in the stove; you're the closest," Bill commanded. "Miss Hunter, let me introduce some other storm birds—only they were luckier than you were. They beat it in. This is Mr. Rayfield, and Mr. Emmett—both government experts making an examination of the country for mineral. That's Al Freeman over there; working for them" (Mr. Rayfield looked surprised) "and Tommy, over there by the stove, is going to work for me. Get over there in the corner and dry out. It'll be hot in a minute. You must be chilled."

The men moved back to leave clear passage to the stove, and she hurried toward it, nodding to them shyly as she went. Mr. Rayfield smiled upon her benignantly and drew a box from under the table for her to sit on.

"Take off those wet boots, Miss Hunter, and put your feet in the oven," he commanded, in the same tone which he might have used to his own daughter. "A cup of coffee will take the chill out of your bones. My, my! I've heard that it could rain pitchforks in this country, but nobody mentioned raining angels!" His own hearty laugh robbed the remark of any offensive familiarity, as he picked a blanket off the bunk—disturbing Mr. Emmett and Al Freeman to do so—and laid it matter-of-factly upon her shoulders.

"Here, let me unlace your boots. Tommy, get the coffee pot working." Bill knelt and reverently lifted her small, booted foot to his knee. "Mr. Emmett, if you'll pass that war-bag over here, I'll dig up some dry socks. And if you'll remember to hold out your arms, Miss Hunter, so you won't fall in outa sight, I'll lend you a pair of my boots. Or maybe we could tie a loop under your arms and hitch you somehow. Anyway, we'll fix you up comfortably as we can.

Miss Hunter laughed, which was exactly what Bill had intended that she should do. If every little happy nerve in his big body tingled while he unlaced her boots, that was his own business and none of his neighbors'. He did not mean to have Doris Hunter experience one moment's embarrassment if he could help it.

With a fine tact for which Bill was silently grateful, the two government men resumed their casual talk of the storm and of the desert,—the small talk of the region which is useful for filling in the awkward spots in strange situations. Tommy busied himself with a ham, a few cans and the coffee pot, and said not a word. Al Freeman, over by the door, made himself as inconspicuous as possible,—perhaps for reasons which Tommy could guess.

Bill casually turned his back upon Miss Hunter and the stove and stood there with his hands in his pockets and his legs slightly apart, throwing a sentence now and then into the talk of the others.

Thus hidden away in the corner, ignored for the time being, Doris Hunter pulled the blanket tighter around her slim person, and fumbled within its shelter. She was a sensible girl, and she had lived all of her twenty years on the edge of the desert, and knew nothing much about cads and crooks. So presently her khaki skirt was spread over her knees to dry, and she was holding the blanket open to dry the rest of her. And not a man of the five noticed the skirt, or paid any attention to her whatever.

But when Tommy said supper was ready, Bill moved from his position as screen, and pulled up a box to hold the girl's plate and cup so that she could eat without moving away from the stove. It was casually done; so casually that it would not have cost a nun the quiver of an eyelash. Certainly Miss Hunter felt no confusion, for presently she was chatting quite as composedly as if she were at home with her family around her.

It rapidly grew dark, the lightning coming at more infrequent intervals as the downpour continued. Bill found a lantern, lighted it and hung it on a wire hook from the ridgepole, where it swayed to the spasmodic shuddering of the tent. Miss Hunter turned and turned her skirt, and Bill watched her boots that they did not dry too quickly. There seemed nothing unusual in this foregathering, which was but one more incident of the wilderness.

CHAPTER SIX

BILL GROWS SENTIMENTAL

"Bill, you haven't asked me if I were lost or just going somewhere," Miss Hunter accused suddenly, setting down her cup which she had twice emptied of coffee. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Any one else would have asked me that before I got the water out of my eyes."

"Well—are you lost, or just going somewhere?" Bill inquired obediently. "I've known this young lady a good long while," he added to the others, glad of the opportunity. "She rides the range right alongside her dad, and can sling a pack or rope a critter better than lots of men that draw wages for doing it. She couldn't get lost to save her neck. Looking for cow brutes or horses, Miss Hunter?"

"Neither one. And don't call me Miss when I've been Doris all my life. These gentlemen don't demand the starch in your speech, and I know it. Dad sent me over to see if you'd come and help him out for awhile. He's going to run the water by a tunnel through that little ridge back of the corrals, and water the lower meadow directly from the spring. It will save at least an inch" (she referred to a miner's inch of water, which is a cubic measurement) "that's lost now in seepage as it's carried around the hill.

"He's been sort of looking for you over to the ranch. But you didn't show up, so he sent me over to see if you'd drive the tunnel for him. He thinks your cautious disposition will make the blasting safe for the cattle, I reckon. Anyway, that's what I came for, and the storm did the rest. I guess the horses will be all right, but if they ever get loose they'll beat it for home—and that will worry the folks. I brought old Rambler with my camp outfit, and of course I rode Little Dorrit."

"My, my, if some of the young ladies back in Washington could hear you talk so calmly of traveling the desert alone with your own camp outfit!" Mr. Rayfield pursed his lips and then smiled at her. Mr. Rayfield was disfigured somewhat by a milky film over one eye, but for all that his face was a pleasant one that made friends for him easily.

"If you folks can make out with a candle," said Bill, "I'll take the lantern and go see about the horses. I can bring them up closer to camp, maybe——"

"You'll do nothing of the kind, Bill Dale. Don't you suppose I made sure they would stay tied? Or do you think I *like* to take a chance on being set afoot? I was, once. That was a plenty, thank you. You stay right where you are."

Bill chuckled but declined to commit himself by any promise. Torrents of rain still pounded upon the roof with the hollow sound of a kettle-drum beaten at a distance. Like all the passionate outbursts in which Nature indulges throughout her desert lands, this was likely to be almost as brief as it was violent. Bill knew well the way of these sudden storms and did not worry over the immediate future. The present was sufficiently engrossing, and he was not loath to obey the command of his queen.

Having Doris Hunter there beside his stove, her boots drying beside his fire, her eyes meeting his with a smile in them now and then, her voice a melody he loved against the drumming accompaniment of the storm, was like a dream come true. Never before had Doris Hunter come to his camp fire save in his most secret dreams. Never before had she needed him, felt the comfort of his presence, his protection. It was well that these men were all strangers to Bill,—else they might have read his secret in the shine of his eyes, the steady flush on his cheek bones, the smile that came twitching the corners of his lips at the slightest provocation.

If Doris saw, she gave no sign. Outwardly Bill held himself rigidly to the usual friendliness of a man who has known a girl since she was a little thing just past babyhood, eager to ride on his shoulder with her heels drumming his chest. His manner was indulgent, almost paternal. He did not look at her often, he did not need to look at her; indeed, he did not dare. To know that she was there, close beside him, was like drinking wine.

"Storm's letting up fast," he announced at length, his face raised, his eyes dwelling speculatively upon the roof. "I guess we're all tired enough to get under the covers—and I hope you won't take that as a hint to you fellows to go home to your own camp," he drawled meaningly. "I'll bunk with you to-night, Tommy, and let Miss Hunter have this tent. She's tired. I've caught her nodding twice in the last five minutes."

"Oh, it's just the heat," Doris protested briskly. "I—really, Bill, I can't turn you out of your tent! I've my own outfit, you know, just down the gulch."

"Yours isn't set up," Bill pointed out to her calmly. "These fellows got here some time before the storm broke. And Tommy has his tent, so it's not putting me out. I'll leave you Luella and Sister Mitchell and Hez for company. Oh, they're all at home," he answered her look of inquiry. "They hate rain, and they've hunted cover. Well, fellows?"

Obediently the two experts turned toward the doorway. Al Freeman had already untied the flaps and ducked out into the dark and the drizzle. Mr. Rayfield apologized weakly for keeping late hours, and herded the sour-faced Emmett out before him. Bill waited until they were gone.

"I want you to keep Hez inside," he told Doris then, his voice lowered. "These fellows are all right, probably, but I don't know them. And here's my gun. If you just call me, though, I'll hear and come a-running."

He started out, then turned and smiled at her whimsically. "There's a bundle of new blankets in that corner," he informed her. "Never been opened up. Help yourself. Good night."

Over by the junipers Bill could hear the mutter of voices. He turned that way and presently came upon the three, fumbling with wet pack ropes and swearing softly at the rain pattering down upon them. Talk ceased entirely when Bill approached.

"Hard luck, folks," he sympathized cheerfully. "But not a darn bit harder than if you hadn't run across my camp at all. I'm sorry you got here so late. Want any help?"

They did not, but Bill remained and did what he could to help them raise the wet tent and get their stuff inside. They would not be comfortable, but they would be quite as comfortable as he would be.

"We've got some tent-raising to do ourselves," he told them cheerfully, when he could do no more. "It'll let up raining after a bit, I think. Come over to my camp for breakfast. I'll sling together some pancakes that'll melt in your mouths. And I've got a gallon of alleged maple syrup to swim 'em in. Life will look a thousand per cent. better, to-morrow morning."

"Oh, life looks all right to us now," Mr. Rayfield protested. "This is nothing—nothing at all. Don't apologize, Mr. Dale. Of course the young lady needed the tent; wouldn't think of such a thing as—but we'll just call you on that breakfast bluff—pancakes, maple syrup and all!"

"You're on," said Bill, and went back to help Tommy find his bedding and tent.

Tommy was ignoring his own troubles in a chortling glee at Al Freeman's discomfort.

"An' that's where he got 'is come-uppance," he gloated. "Al planned it t' bunk in a warrm tent wit'out settin' up his own t'night!" He tittered while he groped for ten pegs. "That tent-settin' b'foor the starrm was a farce, as you know yerself, Mr. Dale. He's up to something sure as yuh live—and phwat it is I dunno, but I sleeps wit' wan eye open this night—I do."

It is likely that he did just that, as did Bill, lying so that he could peer out through the opening of Tommy's little tent and see his own bulking vaguely in the dark and drizzle. Hezekiah, shut inside, would have lunged at the throat of any stranger who sought entrance in the dark, and Doris Hunter did not need even that protection, since she probably carried her own gun and would know what use to make of it in an emergency.

But Bill discounted those things and himself kept watch; and smiled for sheer happiness while he pulled Tommy's soggy blankets over his shoulders. In the dark, so close in the dark—serene in the knowledge of her safety, the girl he loved lay asleep, her head touching the pillow where his head had lain while he dreamed of her. To-morrow she would go again. All the to-morrows thereafter Bill would have only the memory of her presence here to-night. But to-night he could lie and know that she was there,—and what fool would waste the hours in sleep, when he might lie awake and think, and thrill at the sense of her nearness?

He wondered what she would say when he showed her his gold discovery; told her, too that she owned a claim quite as good as his. He hoped that the deluge of rain had not filled his cut and covered his vein of rich ore. But even if it had, there were his samples in the corner of the tent behind the door; and it would not take him and Tommy long to uncover

the vein again.

He thought uneasily of the government men camped so close. Not that he was afraid of anything they might do; indeed, he could not imagine anything that could rob him now of his claims. He had located according to law, and his location work was done and on record in Goldfield. It was Al Freeman who troubled him; not alone because of what Tommy had said (he suspected Tommy of being an arrant gossip and not too gentle with men's reputations behind their backs) but because Al looked the sneak, acted the sneak, and undoubtedly was the sneak Tommy had declared him to be.

Still, there was nothing a sneak could do to harm him. Even if he were killed,—he thought swiftly of something he must do, and he smiled tenderly at the grayish blotch in the drizzling dark. He must make his will, so that if anything happened to him, Doris would have the claims. There was no one else. His father had been the last relative he knew anything about. Distant ones—cousins—they didn't count.

No, Doris Hunter stood closer to him than any one else. He wasn't going to die yet awhile, but still accidents *could* happen, he admitted to himself. There must be no slip-up, no last-minute regrets. Mining is always more or less risky. If he went out, then Doris must have the Parowan group. And as for the rest, Bill did not worry.

He fell asleep finally, thinking that these experts might be able to give him some good advice. There was no sense in trying to keep his discovery a secret from them. They meant to examine Parowan's mineral possibilities, and they would inevitably run across his claims. But he would not be in too great a hurry. First, he would tell Doris. It seemed to him a miracle of good fortune that had brought her to Parowan at that particular time, when he was aching to tell her and yet could not leave his claims and let Al Freeman—yes, and perhaps Tommy as well—"high-grade" his gold the minute his back was turned. Now he could show Doris, which was better than telling. And—the world could go hang, for all Bill cared.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHAT DRIVES PROSPECTORS CRAZY

After all it was Doris Hunter who called breakfast while Bill was yet busy with her horses and Tommy was profanely spreading damp blankets upon dry rocks that would presently be hot to the palm, when the sun had stared down at them for a few hours.

There were hot cakes as good as Bill could have made, and bacon and coffee and potatoes sliced raw and fried just right. The eyes of Mr. Rayfield glistened when he saw them, and Bill drew his underlip between his teeth when he looked at the girl's flushed face bent solicitously over the coffee she was pouring; it was so like a daydream come true that he could scarcely trust himself to speak, for fear his tone would not be so normal as he meant it to be. But he had his part to play nevertheless.

"Morning! I meant to get breakfast myself, but I didn't want to get you out too early. You had a hard trip——"

"Oh, fudge! That wasn't a commencement to being caught out in a blizzard. Luella woke me about daylight. She came crawling up on the pillow, and the first I heard was 'What the'—something—in the most surprised tone you ever heard." Doris laughed at the memory of it. "Imagine hearing a man's voice saying *that* in your very ear when you're dreaming about putting up peaches! And that reminds me, Bill. Mother sent over a jar of preserves. If you'll watch these cakes, I'll get them out of the pack. I saw you had brought up the horses. Sit right down and eat, folks, I won't be a minute."

Bill's table was small, but Doris had somehow crowded a sufficient number of plates and cups upon it. Mr. Rayfield voiced his opinion of her efficiency as he seated himself on Bill's neatly spread bunk and drew the potatoes toward himself.

"My, my, what a difference there is in women nowadays!" he said cheerfully. "Take these Western-raised girls—you can't match them anywhere in the world for downright common sense and capableness. Seems to be a great climate for the growth of brain. Now a city girl out in a storm like that—well," he chuckled, "think of the hundreds of plays and stories that have been built around the fainting forms of beautiful maidens carried in from right center, just rescued by the hero from the falling dew! And here's a girl can come out of it smiling, with a breakfast fit for a steel king! Mr. Dale, if you can beat these cakes, I'll resign from government employ and be your burro puncher for life!"

Into the responsive laugh walked Doris with a quart jar of peach preserves carried proudly in her two hands.

"I heard that about the cakes, Mr. Rayfield," she announced gravely. "And all I can say is, you come down to the ranch where we have real milk, and thick yellow cream, and fresh eggs. I'll show what hot cakes can be like!"

Mr. Emmett, pulling a box out of a corner for a seat, had stooped and picked up something from the ground,—something which the edge of the box had dragged forward. He turned it to the side where the sun was shining brightly on the canvas wall and examined the piece of ore interestedly.

"Good-looking rock, that," he observed, glancing up at Bill. "Didn't pick it up in this neighborhood, did you?"

Bill slanted a glance at the rock, and another at the sly, watchful eyes of Al Freeman. Mr. Emmett was holding in his fingers a bit of the richest ore Bill had taken from his vein on Parowan Number One. He had concealed it under some sacks in the corner, and its appearance at the breakfast table was, to say the least, inopportune.

"That? That's a specimen I've been packing around for luck," he said carelessly. "Wish I had a mountain of it; then I could have fresh eggs and cream for breakfast too."

Mr. Emmett laid the rich specimen in Rayfield's outstretched hand and seated himself on the box, his hard, brown eyes glancing sharply now and then at Bill. Mr. Rayfield set down his cup of coffee and pursed his lips over the sample. His pleasant face glowed with professional admiration for a pretty bit of ore.

"Yes-s—a mountain of that would insure a man against canned milk for life!" he chuckled. "If you had even a good vein of ore like that, Mr. Dale, your friends would need to pray that millions wouldn't make you money-mad."

Doris held out her hand for it, and Mr. Rayfield smiled as he placed it in her palm. He did not say anything at all.

Doris bent her brown head over the sample, then looked up quickly at Bill, her eyes wide and questioning.

"O-oh—that's gold—is that gold, Bill? All those yellow patches? It—it doesn't look just like pyrites——"

"That's gold, Doris." To save his life Bill could not have kept the tenderness, the deep exultation out of his voice.

"Gold! Why, it—it's almost *solid* gold! Why, where——"

Bill pulled himself together, laughed lazily and helped himself to the fried potatoes.

"That's what drives prospectors crazy," he drawled. "Looking for more of the same. You keep that, Doris, if you like it. If I ever get hold of enough of that, I'll call it a mine." He laughed again disarmingly. "You know folks call me Hopeful Bill," he added quaintly.

"You'd be Sure-thing Bill, if you ever found a mine of *that*." Mr. Rayfield's good eye dwelt hungrily upon the sample. "I suppose you're on the trail of it. You wouldn't be human if you weren't looking for more of the same. Well, I hope you locate it. I do, for a fact. I know I wouldn't rest until I located that."

Bill's laugh betrayed nothing more than amusement, but his eyes forgot to twinkle. They were fixed rather intently on Mr. Rayfield's smooth, smiling face.

"And when you had it located—then what would you do?"

"Do?" Mr. Rayfield looked up, astonished. "What *would* a man do, with a gold mine like that?" He returned to the spreading of peach preserves carefully between two hot cakes. "Organize a company and avail myself of the most modern methods of mining it. A good, clean corporation, Mr. Dale, is the most efficient, the most satisfactory methods I know of to-day. I certainly would organize at once and start out right to get the gold cheaply as possible and market the product as profitably as possible. There is no other intelligent method, these days."

Mr. Emmett looked up dissentingly. "There you go on your hobby," he remarked. "The country's been done to death with wild-cat organizations that found a showing of mineral and hustled a corporation together. Look at the companies we've been sent to investigate, Walter! I should think that would sicken you of corporations."

"We investigated a lot of crooked corporations, yes." Mr. Rayfield admitted it calmly. "We helped the government send more than one bunch of crooked officers to the penitentiary—where they belong. But crooks always will take advantage of the best machinery invented, John. And those very investigations taught me the details of organizing and operating corporations. They proved to me that a man is a fool to potter along by himself with any mine—I don't care how rich it is! You can't work a mine as you would a farm. Why? Because your potential harvest is all there, in the ground, waiting for you to gather it. A farm yields its wealth season by season—on the installment plan, we'll say. Whereas the mineral in a mine *is there*; all of it. It was put there long before it was ever discovered. The faster and the cheaper you take it out, the greater your profit. That stands to reason. What man of intelligence would spend ten, twenty years, we'll say, taking out a million dollars, when an efficient corporation will get it for him in less than half that time?"

He held up his cup for more coffee and smiled blandly at Doris, who was listening to him with flattering attention.

"Miss Hunter, you see the point, don't you? I'll venture to say that you'd want your millions dug out by machinery, in the shortest time possible."

Doris laughed and looked again at the gold ore beside her plate.

"If I knew where there was a lot of that in the ground, and you could get a million dollars worth of it out in fifteen minutes," she said, "I'd—why, I'd probably stand around and abuse you because you weren't getting my million in ten minutes instead of fifteen!" She blushed a little as she met Mr. Rayfield's understanding smile. "That's just human nature, isn't it?"

"That's human nature." Mr. Rayfield sugared his coffee with the satisfied air of a man who has gained his point with less difficulty than he had anticipated.

Then appeared Luella, walking offendedly out from under Bill's bunk, where she had retreated from the presence of strangers.

"Aw, cut it out!" Luella complained gruffly. "Let's eat! Git a move on, there!"

"And here we are, trying to starve poor Luella!" Doris stooped to her, and the bird eyed her hand sidewise and decided to trust it for once. She stepped solemnly upon the slim, brown wrist and so was lifted to a perch on the foot of the bunk where she gravely accepted a slice of fried potato. The advantages of a corporation over an individual miner got no further attention from any one, for a parrot is very much like a baby in its unfailing ability to monopolize attention. Luella would not talk, save now and then a curt ejaculation that was hailed with laughter. She was a temperamental bird and her manners were inhospitable; for which Bill was vaguely thankful.

Furthermore, he was grateful when Doris proceeded as a matter of course to clear away the breakfast. That little hint of hers, of rising and picking up Bill's plate and cup, scattered the group. They went, ducking their heads under the flaps, and Bill followed them with the thought in his mind that he would see the three strangers safely off about their business before he made any move toward his own claims with Doris.

But the jovial Mr. Rayfield stuck to him like a burr, talking idly of many things save mineral. Bill wondered what he had on his mind; and as soon as they were out of hearing of the others, Mr. Rayfield proceeded to the subject uppermost.

"You'll pardon my apparent presumption, Mr. Dale, I know. We government fellows are instructed to help miners in any way we can, and—well, this man of yours; have you had him with you long enough to be sure of him?"

"I never," said Bill in his easy drawl, "consider that I'm sure of any man. Why?" And then he gave no time for an answer, but put a question of his own.

"How long have you had your pot-walloper?—if I may ask a question that's none of my business."

"Al Freeman? We picked him up just the other day. Our cook that we hired in Las Vegas was taken sick just as we struck the highway down there. We laid over, and did what we could; but he wasn't recovering, so when this Al Freeman came along with three other men in a car, headed for Las Vegas, we just made an exchange. Sent our man in to a doctor, and hired Al in his place." He laid his fingers lightly on Bill's arm, and lowered his voice confidentially. "He told us last night that your man, Tommy, is one of the toughest men out of Goldfield. They call him Slippery Tom up there, I believe. Al says he came near getting lynched, at one time—some murder and robbery, I believe."

"Then there's a pair of them," Bill observed imperturbably. "Al's a liar and a thief, according to Tommy."

Mr. Rayfield considered for a moment, then threw out his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"Might be a good idea to watch 'em both, don't you think?" He chuckled. "Pot is very likely calling the kettle black. And I don't know of anything worth stealing in our camp. Just thought I'd give you a hint for what it may be worth, in case you don't know your man. And we'll keep an eye on Al."

"Aw, there's nothing they can do—but earn their wages," Bill dismissed the subject indifferently. "Time Tommy wrangles the burros and does the dirty work and slings a muck stick eight hours a day, crime won't look half so good to him as his blankets. Same with Al Freeman, if you handle him right."

Nevertheless, Bill stopped at the corner of the tent and unobtrusively watched Mr. Rayfield when he joined his companions.

So far as he could determine, Mr. Rayfield was concerning himself at present with the preparations for a day's fieldwork. Emmett was already waiting with his sample bag over his shoulder, his canteen at his feet ready to pick up at the last minute. Al, apparently, would be left in camp. Bill turned suddenly and beckoned to Tommy, who was glumly examining a dull pick.

"You say you can sharpen steel, Tommy. I'll just let you do a little blacksmithing, this fore-noon, while I show Miss Hunter a claim I located for her," he said, when Tommy had come close. Then he lowered his voice. "You can keep an eye on camp, too. I saw Al Freeman looking hungry at that sample of gold ore, Tommy. You'll know what to do if he makes a break. Only—don't kill him. I don't want to take in boarders, and those experts can't cook."

"I'll watch 'im, Mr. Dale. I will that!"

Bill grinned, took a last pull at his cigarette, and went in to wipe the dishes for Doris and watch the dimple in her left cheek.

And Destiny, that invisible, inscrutable companion whom men sometimes fear, sometimes curse and obey inevitably, smiled and waited to see how these souls would work out the problems she had set for them.



CHAPTER EIGHT

"MONTE CRISTO WOULD ENJOY THIS!"

"The way this gulch is washed, I don't know whether I can show you anything or not," Bill explained worriedly, preparing for a flat failure of his little plan. "That was next thing to a cloud-burst last night, Doris—and I'll own now that I was uneasy last night when you said you had left your horses down the gulch. But then, I knew you wouldn't tie them in the bottom where they might get drowned out."

"Well, I hope not," Doris retorted with some asperity. No desert-bred girl likes to be thought ignorant of desert hazards. "You'll have to make this short, you know. They'll expect me home early to-day. I don't see why you can't go. Now you've staked yourself to the luxury of a mucker, you can leave him in charge, I should think. Do you really think you've struck anything, Bill?"

"You wait. If my location cut isn't filled in, I can show you in ten minutes. And—if it's good, you're in on it. I located a claim on the same ledge in your name."

"You did?" Doris looked up at him quickly, but she could see only Bill's left cheek as he swung his face away from her. "Why, why for me, particularly? I couldn't develop it—dad wouldn't let me. You ought to keep your claims for yourself, Bill. You—you'd give away your head, if you could get it off!"

"I might throw in the rest of me," Bill hinted meaningly, his heart pounding like a single-jack in a miners' contest. He stole a glance at her from the corner of his eye and was scared and a bit happy, too, at the flush on her cheek.

"Well, fortunately for you——" Doris bit her lip and left the sentence unfinished. She liked Bill Dale, but—there would always be unfinished sentences concerning her regard for him. A prospector is, paradoxically, not a good prospect for a girl. Doris had seen the poor, withered wives of miners who were forever just on the eve of striking something rich.

Walking beside Bill, she thought of the wistful eyes and the draggled, cheap clothes of certain women she had met. Some of them even wore overalls and helped dig. Bill had been prospecting ever since she first met him at a dance in Goldfield. He had talked optimistically of his prospects then. He would always talk in the same vein. Always just going to strike rich ore,—never actually getting more than a bare living; if one could call grub and a tent a living.

"Fortunately for me—what?" Bill was in the mood to bring about a crisis of some kind between them. He considered that he had gone too far now to retreat.

"Fortunately for you, your friends have more regard for you than you have for yourself," Doris amended glibly. "Is it much farther, Bill? Because I really must——"

"It's just up around this first turn." Bill's face sobered a bit. After all, Doris didn't seem to care much, one way or the other. She didn't seem very enthusiastic over her claim; didn't she know he would take care of the development work for her—at least the assessment work?

"If a slide hasn't covered it up," he said heavily. "I wanted to show you what I—what I've got. Then——"

"Well, you know I'm no expert, Bill," Doris reminded him lightly. "I can tell silver—when it's in spoons. And gold is jewelry——"

Bill caught her arm, stopping her perforce. His grip left marks in her soft flesh. She looked at him, startled, and paled before the fixed stare in his eyes. He lifted a shaking finger and pointed.

Bill's cut in the side of the gulch had not been filled by any slide of the soft gravel higher up the slope. Instead it stood there naked, deep, clean as a dog's tooth. Even from where they stood the metal gleamed yellow in the ten-inch vein of quartz laid bare to the sunlight.

Slowly, almost reverently, Bill went forward, still holding the girl's arm in his strong, unconsciously painful grip. He led her into the cut, stooped and broke off a point of the vein with his fingers where his last shot had seamed the quartz. He laid the gold-flecked piece in her hand. He looked at her standing there so close with the symbol of a great fortune in her

hand,—the symbol too of his worshipful love.

"Monte Cristo would enjoy this," he said and laughed unsteadily. "It's—I found it—it's yours—if you'll take me along with it. I couldn't—I had to strike something before I could dare——"

"Is—is it—*gold*?" Doris whispered it awesomely. Looking up wide-eyed into his face. "Oh—Bill!"

Bill took her in his arms, felt her yield, saw her head tilt back against his shoulder. He drew a deep breath that was like a sob, and bent and kissed her hair.

Doris was looking from the gold-specked quartz in her hand to the gold-specked ridge lying naked to the sky. Her eyes were big and deep, like the blue of the sky.

"Do you love me, Doris?" Bill dared to lean and speak his one absorbing hunger, his lips close to her ear.

"Yes—Oh, Bill, it doesn't seem possible! I—I can't realize it. Can you? Doris was staring still at the gold.

"It's like a dream come true—a thousand times better than I'd ever dare to dream it." Bill was looking at the way the sunlight turned her brown hair to burnished copper, strand by strand. His voice broke. He laid his cheek against the copper shine. "You love me! God, I was always scared to dream you ever would!"

Doris stirred in his arms. She was lifting the piece of ore, turning it this way and that, watching it shine in the sun and in the shade alike. That was the test—pyrites wouldn't shine in the shade. It was gold, absolutely it *must* be gold!

"Oh, Bill, aren't you—excited?" She had turned so that she could look into his face. "It's an awfully rich strike, isn't it?"

"Why—yes, I suppose it is." Bill looked briefly at the vein. "Yes, it's the richest stuff I ever saw in the ground. But it doesn't mean anything to me, Doris, alongside your—love." He whispered the last word shyly against her cheek. "You'll marry me right away, won't you, Doris? I've—wanted you so long; ever since that first time I met you. I've thought and dreamed about you—but it didn't seem possible you could ever care. Only, I thought if I made a real stake, and you did like me well enough, I could give you everything in the world you wanted. It's as you say: I can't realize it yet. I—wish you'd say it again; just once more. *Do* you—care?"

For answer Doris smiled up at him brilliantly. "You great, big silly," she said softly.

Bill kissed her lips and wondered if a man could bear greater joy than was his. Not to have just weary, wishful dreams of her; to have Doris herself, her love, her willingness to trust herself to him. He felt humbled, ashamed of every little human, masculine fault. In one sweeping, swift repentance as he stood there, he resolved to attain perfection for her sake—or as near to perfection as a man may approach.

"You know, daddy and mother will have to be asked before I can—promise absolutely," she reminded him prudently. "So let's not talk about it any more just now, Bill."

"Why, I—I *couldn't* talk about it," Bill said slowly. "Some things go too deep. You just can't find any words; or I can't. I'll just have to prove as I go along—what it means to me."

"Just think, Bill! We could go to California, couldn't we?" Doris suggested inconsistently. "Talk about dreams—I've dreamed of the ocean, and orange groves, and beautiful things, until sometimes I've nearly gone crazy. Bill, I almost hate the desert. It's beautiful, and of course I know it by heart and would probably miss it if I never saw it again; but all my life I've been hungry for California."

"You're kind of glad I found the big strike, aren't you?" Bill smiled down at her, his eyes worshipful. "I guess we can go to California, all right. We could go to the South Pole, if we wanted to badly enough. Anywhere in the world you say, Doris. You and I together have four claims along this contact—as near as I could judge from surface indications. That ought to bring your dreams to life, don't you think?" Then he sobered. "But it's going to take a little time, at that. We've got to dig it out, you know. Unless," he added dubiously, "I sold out for just what I could get. That would be quick money, but it wouldn't be enough to let us play the rest of our lives. I'd have to take some of it and get into some business or other. And that would tie us down to one spot more or less."

Doris shook her head at that. "No, we mustn't sell out. You remember what Mr. Rayfield said at the breakfast table, don't

you? He certainly does know what he's talking about, and I know he'd be glad to advise—us." The last word she spoke with an adorable hesitation which registered an extra beat in Bill's pulse. "He's a government man, so of course you can trust him. I think we ought to show this vein to him, and let him tell us just what to do. His talk about corporations was awfully sensible, Bill."

"I don't know, Doris." Bill's eyes became shadowed with an unhappy memory. "I'm kind of scared of corporations. One of them broke my dad. He found a mine—not so good as this by a long way, but still pretty good—and some crooks incorporated it for him. When they got through with him, he had a bunch of stock and no mine. No money, either. It got him. He lived about two years after that, and he spent all his time cursing corporations. I don't know, Doris, but it kind of left me with a chill whenever I hear the word."

"Well, you say yourself that they were crooks. Mr. Rayfield and Mr. Emmett may have landed those very men in the penitentiary. "You've got nerves, Bill. I never would have suspected it."

"Maybe there's a good deal about me you've never suspected," Bill hinted warily,—and almost told her about the saxophone. But he didn't. His courage was too new and timid, the mine was too wonderful, and the love of Doris too unbelievable.

"One thing I'd better do," he said, dragging his mind back to the practical, "and that is to cover up this vein before some one goes to 'high-grading' on us. Tommy says Al Freeman's a thief around mines."

He pulled shovel and pick from under a ridge of washed gravel and began artfully filling the cut so that it looked as if the dirt had caved in on the side where the vein had been exposed. There was nothing crude in Bill's work. When he had finished, a stranger would have sworn that the earth, gravel and rocks had rattled down from above. Doris kept watch for him, and mourned openly because all that beautiful ore must be buried out of sight. It seemed to her almost a sacrilege.

"That's all right," Bill comforted her, standing with his arm around her shoulders while he contemplated his camouflage. "It can't run away or spoil, you know. That vein would be enough to tempt any man whose honesty didn't reach to the middle of his bones. Now you go on up the gulch while I brush out our tracks around this cut. There's a little vein up in the next location hole that's just a stringer—but it's fairly rich, and will do to show. We'll go up there, and I'll do a little digging and get some samples. And then, if you want me to put it up to the government men, Doris, I'll do it. But I'll do it on the strength of what shows up in Parowan Number Two—and we'll just keep this Number One vein a secret between us. Shall we?"

"Yes-s, if you let me tell daddy and mother," Doris assented. "I don't believe I could keep it a secret from them, Bill."

"We'll tell them, sure. I'll leave Tommy in charge of camp and go over with you to the ranch. I'd like to ask your dad what he thinks of it before I talk to the government men."

"Well, I think that's a good plan. They'll all believe, of course, that you're going over to see about that water tunnel. You can't afford to dig tunnels for dad, *now*——" she gave his arm an ecstatic squeeze "——but they won't know that. Oh, I think it's just dandy to have to be secret about it!"

"Anyway, it's a darn sight safer," Bill told her laconically, and led the way to Number Two.

CHAPTER NINE

A "HINT" FROM DORIS

A short cut from Number Two claim led them straight over a low ridge to camp. Not only did this trail shorten the distance considerably; it also avoided altogether the gulch and Parowan Number One—with its secret.

Al Freeman was seen pottering around the camp by the junipers. Evidently the truce still held, for Tommy had finished his blacksmithing and was setting the camp to rights, mumbling unintelligibly over his work.

Bill's plans had taken definite form, which means that he had half-unconsciously conceded every point brought forth by Doris, who was accustomed to having her say about things on the ranch. In one particular only had Bill stood firm. He would not take the experts into his confidence until he had talked with Don Hunter. To this Doris readily assented, feeling fairly certain that her dad would advise whatever Doris herself wanted. Bill reluctantly left the girl's side and joined Tommy over by the forge.

"I'll have to make a trip over to the Hunter ranch," he announced. "I guess our mining will have to wait until I get back—unless our neighbors should happen to move on. But I've about decided that we're going to need a dugout to store our grub in. Right here in this bank is a good place to dig. While I'm gone you can be making the dugout, Tommy—and you can keep an eye on the camp while you're doing it. Right now, while Miss Hunter is in camp, I'll take you up and show you the claims. I've got a pretty rich vein and I don't want any one monkeying around there while I'm gone. I'll leave it to you and Hez."

They went off together over the ridge, and Al Freeman stopped his work and openly watched their departure. When they were quite out of sight, he came shambling over to Bill's tent and pulled open the flap.

"Well?" Doris looked up from spreading jam between cold biscuits for their lunch on the trail. She might have been speaking to one of her father's ranch hands, for all the emotion she showed.

Al grinned slyly and placatingly.

"Excuse me," he said in his flat voice that grated unpleasantly on the ear. "I left my terbaccer in here somewhere this morning. If it ain't botherin' ye none, I just thought I'd come over an' git it."

"It took you a long time to miss it," Doris observed coldly. "Why didn't you ask Bill for it?"

"I didn't think of it then," Al grinned, edging into the tent.

"Well, I can't let you go pawing around in here while he's gone." Doris continued to spread other split biscuits with jam. "Go on out, and wait till Mr. Dale comes."

"He ain't likely to be back very soon," Al argued insinuatingly. "I just about got to have a smoke, Miss Hunter—no two ways about it. Won't take me but a minute to look where I laid my terbaccer."

Doris straightened and stood eyeing him attentively, a butcher knife in her left hand.

"Whereabouts did you lay it, then?" she demanded.

"Right on a sack in this corner. I was gittin' up to go to breakfast, an' I laid my terbaccer down on a sack in this corner. I mind now that Mr. Emmett kinda juggled things 'round, pullin' out a box to set on. I never thought no more about it till I went to make a smoke." He turned to the corner and stooped, laying hold upon a half-filled sack of something. "It musta fell over behind," he mumbled.

"You get out of that corner and out of this tent," Doris commanded sternly, laying down the knife.

Al lifted his lip in a smile that was half a snarl. "Aw, you wouldn't make a man go without his terbaccer," he whined, lifting the sack and finding it unexpectedly heavy. "Must be gold bricks in this sack," he tittered. "I guess that sample he showed at breakfast ain't all he's got!"

"Will you get out of here?" Doris took a step forward, her eyes, her whole face, hardening with anger.

"Now, now, no use gittin' excited," Al protested, leering at her. "I can't go off without my terbaccer—mebby it fell into this sack. I'll just take a look."

His hand was fumbling inside the sack when Doris fired. Hunkered down on his heels, Al gave a grotesque leap straight into the air, as the bullet spatted into the earthen floor and kicked dirt over his toes. He came down sidewise, sprawled awkwardly and clawing to get up.

"That's just a hint," Doris announced dispassionately through the drifting little smoke cloud. "In about one minute——"

Al went out on hands and knees and picked himself up and ran. Doris followed him out, saw him duck into his own tent and laughed a little.

Al, too, was laughing silently, showing his broken, tobacco-stained teeth. He was staring gloatingly down at the piece of ore he had dragged from the sack, hidden in the palm of his big hand.

Doris returned to the tent and stood looking reflectively down at the tilted sack. She stooped, reached inside it and brought out a lump of ore. She frowned over it, her under lip between her teeth.

"Bill certainly needs a guardian," she said to herself. "Leaving half a sack of this stuff right where the first sneak thief could help himself! That fellow must have suspected it was here, too. I'll bet he never lost any tobacco in here—but it's easy enough to find out."

She made a thorough search of the corner and convinced herself that Al had been lying to her and that his sole purpose was to get his hands on that ore. She tilted the sack again, spilling the contents out on the ground. She had no fear that Al would return. With her lifelong knowledge of the desert had come the understanding of desert types of men, and she needed no explanation of Al Freeman. She knew him for what he was: a coward at heart, mean and treacherous and capable of crime that might be hidden. She did not know that he had carried off a piece of the ore, but she knew that he suspected its richness. Only a tenderfoot will cumber his tent with valueless samples of mineral,—and Bill Dale was no tenderfoot.

"He thought he could fool me," she analyzed the incident contemptuously. "Or maybe he thought I'd be scared to say anything to him." She sorted the pieces of ore, choosing those that showed the largest specks and splotches of gold. She fondled them, turned them to the light, feasted her eyes upon them.

"Rich! Bill's rich, this minute. A millionaire, for all we know," she mused. "And maybe it's like this on my claim, too. Dear old Bill—he surely deserves a fortune. How he's worked to find it—and he's loved me all the time and wanted to strike it so we—I'm going to make him leave the working of the mine to some one else. He can afford to take life easy now—we'll live in Los Angeles, or maybe we'll travel——"

She was sitting cross-legged, with her lap full of rich pieces of quartz, when Bill looked in upon her. She scrambled up, her two hands clutching the prettiest specimens. Bill was laughing at her, his eyes adoring. Doris pulled her fine eyebrows together and shook her head at him.

"Good thing you've got some one to look after you, old boy," she scolded, half in earnest. "You'd have been robbed of all this, and maybe cleaned out of everything else, if I hadn't scared him off. He had his hand in the sack, mind you, when I shot at his feet. That put him on the run. Bill, you'd better tell Tommy to pack a gun while you're gone. That fellow, Al, needs a whole lot of watching. What in the world made you keep all this stuff here in the tent? He must have known it was here, or at least he suspected it——"

"I'll mighty quick settle with *him*," Bill said grimly, and turned away.

Doris stopped him. "Better let it pass, Bill. You see, I couldn't *prove* he wasn't after his tobacco, just as he claimed. He may have lost it here. I don't believe it, but he had his excuse for coming. And he didn't steal anything. I scared him off before he had a chance. Perhaps I should have waited and got the goods on him.

"No, just gather up everything but that sample you had out in sight this morning, and we'll carry it over and show it to daddy. And have Tommy watch out. There really isn't anything Al can do, is there?"

"Not unless he bats Tommy on the head; and from all accounts, Tommy's good at that game. So you took a shot at him, did you?"

"And scared the life out of him, almost. We'll have to hurry, Bill. If you can pack my outfit on one of the burros, you could ride old Rambler. I wish you would. And can't we take Luella along?"

Bill said that they could, but he would not ride Rambler. On the desert a horse seldom travels faster than a walk on a long journey, especially with a pack animal along. Bill was accustomed to depending on his own legs, and a twenty-mile hike was his regular day's travel when on the trail. He therefore packed an emergency camp outfit on Wise One and set out quite happily, walking beside Doris, sometimes touching her hand caressingly, his soul still hushed and trembling lest all this would prove itself a dream.

In violet shadows they approached the house in its square of cottonwoods and saw a tall, rangy figure step leisurely down from the porch and come to meet them, holding a big-bowled, briar pipe from which lazy incense floated upward.

Leaning both arms upon the top board of the yard fence, Don Hunter waited placidly until they came up, Rambler shuffling into a trot as he remembered his stall. Occasionally Don placed the pipestem between his teeth and took comfort from the slow inhalation of smoke. Content emanated from his personality as perfume of a flower gives a soothing quality to the air about it. He was a strong man, meant to dominate those lesser souls with whom he came in contact, and some with souls as great as his, but humble in their greatness. He was not an aggressive man, but most men feared to incur his ill will or his contempt, and his opinion was rated above that of his neighbors; and although he was slow to give advice, scarcely a day passed but he was asked for it. Bill did not know a man whom he liked better or respected more, and his attitude was not greatly influenced by the fact that Don was the father of Doris. Indeed, he had known Don Hunter long before he first met the girl. And if his prospecting were frowned upon by the older man, Bill knew that Don would be the first to throw up his hat over Bill's success, and never think of his own possible benefit from the strike.

"Hello, Bill," Don called as the two came up, Bill walking briskly behind his burro. Doris had professed a reluctance to let daddy and mother know that night about the tentative engagement, and they had traveled apart for the last mile across the flat.

"Howdy, Don. Well, we're here, all right."

Don reached out a long arm and swung open the gate. Then he and Bill shook hands, looking into each other's eyes with frank pleasure in the meeting.

"Glad to see yuh, Bill. Just slip the bridles off—there's hay in the corral—and come on in. Supper's been waiting on yuh."

"We're half-starved, Daddy, and that's the truth," Doris declared, leaning from the saddle to kiss the top of his head as she rode past. "Bill's about all in, I reckon. We got a late start and hustled right along."

"Just keep that pace up till you hit the supper table," Don suggested, and fastened the gate behind them before he returned to the porch. "They're here, Momma," he called within, and stood in the dusk of the doorway, waiting.

Bill had stridden ahead and opened the corral gate, and Wise One nipped through the opening and made for the manger along one side where fresh hay was piled. Rambler crowded past Bill hurriedly and went trotting after the burro. Doris rode through, kicked her right foot free of the stirrup and swung down, landing unexpectedly in Bill's arms.

"Oh, Bill—daddy'll see us!" she protested weakly as Bill lifted her face with a palm under her chin.

"Just one more kiss—and say you love me," Bill pleaded softly. "I can't believe it—it seems it like a dream. Kiss me, little Doris." In the last few hours Bill had attained a certain masterful manner, though he still suffered uneasy moments of incredulity that demanded instant proof of the sweet reality.

Curiously, while they actually hurried, and Bill held her no longer than a few seconds in his arms, Don Hunter's voice came bellowing from the porch before they reached the corral gate. He looked at them searchingly too, when they came into the big kitchen where the light was mellow and homelike, and where Mrs. Don was spearing mealy, white potatoes out of an old-fashioned iron kettle.

They were sighing in gastronomic bliss over the thick, quivery custard pie when Doris looked across at Bill in mild dismay.

"Bill! You forgot Luella! I'll bet she's swearing herself black in the face, out there."

Bill pushed back his chair and rose. "She must be hungry—thirsty, too," he said contritely. "Excuse me just four seconds and I'll bring her in."

"First time I ever knew Bill to forget the parrot," Don observed drily. "Where's Sister Mitchell and Hezekiah? Didn't leave them behind, did he?"

"Oh, Bill has a fellow with him in camp. Yes, he only brought Luella. She doesn't seem to like Tommy very well. She wouldn't say a word, hardly. Oh, come on, Luella!" But the smile Doris sent toward the door was too intimate to be wasted on a mere parrot. Don Hunter lifted one eyebrow, then pulled them both together in a puzzled frown.

"Luella hungry? Let me have her, Bill. Here's a lovely wishbone, Luella."

Luella tilted her head sidewise and regarded the proffered dainty suspiciously.

"I can't believe it," she remarked with startling distinctness. "One more kiss—say you love me. Seems like a dream. Kiss me, Doris. Daddy'll see us. I can't believe it. We're rich, Bill, dear. I can't believe it. Do you love me?"

Then, and then only, Luella accepted the wishbone and began daintily picking off tiny shreds of chicken meat.

CHAPTER TEN

"WE'RE RICH, BILL, DEAR"

Bill started for the door, stumbling against a chair in his flight. "I'll kill this darned bird!" he threatened viciously. "That's the second time she's tipped my hand lately."

Luella looked up at him sidewise and blinked in the effort to remember something.

"Bill Dale's parrot tipped Bill's hand," she muttered, and turned her head the other way. "We'll lay low. See the recor-r——" She turned and walked up Bill's arm to his shoulder, tilting forward there and making kissy sounds against his crimson cheek. "I can't believe it. We're rich, Bill, dear." Then she laughed in a shrill falsetto.

"Better come on back and finish your pie before I boot you outside," Don observed drily. "I reckon maybe you can explain where the bird learned all that. Never saw yuh on the run before, Bill."

At that, Bill returned and stood behind his chair, looking down honestly into Don Hunter's searching eyes.

"She learnt it eavesdropping," Bill said bluntly. "She does that trick, every once in awhile. She got it straight, too. I—asked Doris to marry me, and she said it would be a good deal as you two say. I didn't ask her until I was dead certain I'd be able to give her luxuries a prospector couldn't afford. I struck the richest vein of gold-bearing quartz, Don, that I ever saw in the ground. I've got three claims on the lead, and I located one for Doris, too.

"I didn't come over to go to work. I came to ask you if you'd have me in the family, and I wanted to get your advice about what to do with my claims. There are several thousand dollars' worth in sight—at a rough guess. And the vein looks strong." He smiled at Mrs. Don, who smiled back mistily. "I didn't mean to spring it all on you folks this evening. I—kind of wanted to get my nerve tuned up, and tell you with trimmings. But the darned parrot beat me to it, so——"

"So you'd better sit right down and eat your pie," Mrs. Don finished for him, laughing tremulously. "You're a good boy, Bill. We—we'd hate awfully to lose our girl; she's all we've got. But—far as I'm concerned, I'd rather it would be you—if you're sure you can take care of her."

"The boss has said it." Don gave his wife the look one bestows upon some treasured thing. "Sit down—sit down! Don't look as if you expected to be lynched for it. The women folks run this house, Bill. So you struck it rich! You say you're sure it ain't just a fluke?"

Doris rose hastily, asking permission with her eyes.

"Fluke!" She glanced eloquently at Bill, then at her father. "You wait a minute. I'll show you whether it's a fluke. There. I hid it under my gloves because I was going to wait till morning before we said anything. Look at *that*, will you, Mother? And cast your critical glance at *that*, Dad Hunter!" She placed a piece of ore beside each plate and returned triumphantly to her seat.

A lump came into Bill's throat as he watched those two, slipping past middle age, never quite reaching rainbow's end except in love. Mrs. Don lifted the sample, looked at it, leaned and held it under the direct rays of the lamp, glanced diffidently at Bill, then looked questioningly across the table at Don.

"It's—gold, isn't it? Without my glasses I—but it looks——"

Don deliberately produced his reading glasses from an inner pocket of his vest, tucked the bows over his ears and picked up the specimen which Bill had chipped off the vein and given to Doris. Don moved his tongue in his cheek while he looked, slanting the rock so that the lamp shone on it. He was not a miner himself, but he had lived too long in Nevada not to know minerals fairly well. He pushed his glasses down his nose until he could look over them at Bill.

"How much of this have you got in sight, did you say?"

"I estimated it roughly at about five thousand dollars. When I first located the vein I mortared and panned enough to get a fair idea of how it was running. The vein averaged about ten inches, fairly uniform so far. The storm last night uncovered it so now it stands out clean from the side of the cut like an outcropping; or it did, before I covered it up. I didn't want to

come away and leave it open. There are some strangers camped right beside me. Government men—but I didn't like the look of their packer."

"Didn't like the look—my goodness, Mother! The fellow came to the tent when I was there getting ready to start home, and he started snooping around in the corner where Bill had a lot of this ore. He was bound and de-*ter*-mined he'd see what was in the sack. I told him more than once to go—but I had to shoot into the ground beside him before he'd go. He went then, all right!"

Her mother looked alarmed. "Why, Doris! And where was Bill?"

"I was up at the claims with Tommy," Bill explained. "You can see, maybe, why I can't be away long—and why I covered up this vein."

"Oh dear!" Mrs. Hunter leaned her head on her hand as if she had become suddenly aware of a great weariness. "Must *you* go through all that fighting and grasping over gold? A boom always seems to me like a lot of wild animals fighting and tearing at one another, to get a bone which the first one on the hunting ground has already cleaned." She closed her eyes tightly for an instant, then looked wistfully from Doris to Bill. "I don't know but what gold costs more than it's worth, after all," she said. "And the more you have, the more terrible the price. I don't know but what I'd just about as soon see you two face poverty together, as to see you face a boom. You know," she added apologetically, "I was born in Virginia City. I've seen sudden wealth and sudden poverty. And the sudden wealth was worse, sometimes—though I never heard of a man shooting himself because he struck it rich, and they do sometimes when they lose everything."

"That's what Mr. Rayfield meant, I guess. He said if Bill had a lot of ore like the sample he saw, he'd have Bill's friends pray that wealth wouldn't spoil him." Doris smiled tolerantly at her mother, as youth is wont to smile at experience.

"Who's Rayfield?" Don Hunter pushed back his chair with a rasping sound on the bare floor. "How did he come to see a sample? Doris, you help your mother with the dishes; you ought to have a lot to talk over. Bill, come on out on the porch and let's get at the bottom of this. So far I can't make head nor tail of anything."

Out on the porch the two men smoked in silence, watching the twinkling of camp fires half a mile away, where travelers were availing themselves of running water and shade for one comfortable camp on the desert. The Hunter ranch saw many such wayfarers, for it lay close to the highway (such as it was) and formed a sort of oasis, all the more enticing because one could buy fresh eggs and milk and, if one were lucky, a loaf or two of delicious bread. Mrs. Don called such revenue her pin money, and Don himself grinned and wondered sometimes what she ever did with it.

"Who's Rayfield?" Don repeated his question abruptly, after a lapse of several minutes.

Bill told him, making few words of it but contriving to paint a very clear picture in Don's mind.

"They didn't come this way—or if they did, they didn't stop." Don seemed to consider that omission somewhat derogatory to the character of the government men.

"They didn't mention this place at all," Bill said. "I got the idea they diverged from the trail and cut towards the likeliest mineral showings. That would put them south."

"What's your plan, Bill? Or haven't you got any?" Don inspected his pipe, prodding at the tobacco with his finger. "Yuh want to cash in as soon as yuh can, I reckon—anxious for the honeymoon."

"You've been there," Bill retorted. "Sure, I'm anxious. That little girl has been hankering for the ocean and palm trees all her life, she said."

"They won't run away in the next year or so, that I know of. Well, I'm no mining shark, but I reckon I better trail over to your diggin's and see what you've got. Maybe them fellows over there can be some help, and then again, maybe you want to steer clear of them. Just because a man draws down his pay from Uncle Sam don't give him any guarantee from the Almighty that he's a he angel. Doris seems to think so."

"What I want, Don, is for you to take a hand and help me get started off on the right foot. I can see it's going to be a mighty big proposition, and I don't want to have the same experience my dad had. On the other hand, I don't want to act the darned fool sitting over my claims with a shotgun, afraid somebody's going to rob me. There's a safe line betwixt and

between that I want to take and keep. And I wouldn't ask you to make the trip over there, if I didn't *know* the stuff's there; acres of it, by the looks."

Don sucked at his pipe for some time before he spoke. Then,

"I'll do all I can, Bill. If you're going to be one of the family I might as well start bossing yuh now. I want to see yuh make good without hurting the other fellow. It can be done, and if it's done rightly, there ain't any cleaner money in the world than what comes out of the ground. Mines or ranches, you're giving the world something it never had before; something it needs. Most money-making is just swapping the ownership of necessities, or else changing the shape and form of them and selling them that way. But when you take something outa old Mother Earth, you've got it clean. What I can't stomach is the way crooks come flockin' around every new strike, and making it rotten business.

"Every boom suffers from 'em. When the news of this leaks out—*has* it leaked out, yet?"

Bill shook his head, though Don could not see him in the dark.

"Not so far as I know. I just brought down supplies and a mucker from Goldfield—and there's something funny happened up there. The darn parrot was outside while I was in recording the claims, and when I came out, she commenced talking a new speech that I'll swear *I* never taught her. She got it off to-night, if you noticed." Bill blushed consciously, but went on. "She said, 'Bill Dale's parrot has tipped Bill's hand. We'll lay low—see the recorder.' Only, she couldn't quite get the last word out. Now, she heard that said in Goldfield, while I was in the recorder's office, or she couldn't have repeated it. I've learned that much about parrots. She talks right along, and seems to know what she means—way she calls me down, sometimes, is right human—but she has to hear a sentence before she can say it. One hearing's enough, if she happens to take a notion to the words. But it was funny, her saying that." He flicked the ash off his cigarette. "I shut her up till I was ready to leave," he added. "I guess it didn't amount to anything. I wasn't trailed, anyway."

"What about these fellows camped up there? You sure they ain't——"

"Oh, they came from Las Vegas way. No, they're not on my trail—or if they are they're pretty damned smooth."

"Crooks are," Don remarked laconically. "How would the parrot be able to tip your hand? Ever think that out?"

"No-o—only, I talk to the menagerie in camp, of course. When a fellow doesn't see a human for weeks at a time, he'll talk to anything; and Luella's next to human, seems like. Yes, I talked about buying her a gold perch, I remember, and about striking it. I was one tickled man, Don, when I first uncovered that vein and saw the gold showing right up in the rock."

"Mh-hm—well, I reckon she must have overheard you talking about it. Same as she must have heard some remarks, coming over, that was kind of embarrassing for a minute, when repeated. I reckon I'll have to get you outa bed early, tomorrow morning, Bill. I'm getting mighty curious to see those government men and have a talk with them." He knocked the ashes from his pipe and rose. "I've learned that one hoof track is good as a dozen when you're trailin' stock. A critter's got to be present, to make one track. And I can't seem to see you teachin' that parrot to say that she's tipped your hand, and you'll lie low. Some other critter made that track, Bill. If I don't miss my guess, you'll have somebody trying to horn in somehow. Let's go in. I want to talk to Doris about that feller she took a shot at, that was nosin' around your samples."



CHAPTER ELEVEN

MR. RAYFIELD GIVES ADVICE

"I c'uldn't turrn 'em out, Mr. Dale," Tommy explained in a worried tone, and pensively inspected a plug of tobacco before helping himself. "Al Freeman packed the burros an' hit the trail yistiddy, he did—an' phwat was I t' do wit' them experts but leave 'em eat uh your grub? They're t' pay fer the board—I made that plain to 'em 'fore they swallied a mout'ful—I did that."

Bill stood with his hands on his hips, looking across to the junipers, where trampled brush and a tin can or two marked the spot where the government men had made their camp. Al Freeman had evidently made a clean job of it, though Tommy had said that the blankets of Rayfield and Emmett had been left in a pile on a convenient rock. But no food of any kind. Their canteens and prospectors' picks and sample bags, and the clothes they walked in constituted their sole equipment for camping on the desert. Of course, there was nothing for Tommy to do but take them in and feed them, at least until Bill's return.

"What do you make of it, Don?" Bill relaxed his muscles and turned to unsaddle.

"Tell you better when I've sized up the experts," Don replied warily. "Of course, this Al Freeman could expect to hear from you when you got back; he maybe decided to go while the going was good and he could have burros and plenty of grub. When his bosses heard about his performance in your tent, I don't see how they could do anything less than haze him outa camp with a back pack—do you? The average skunk like him would beat 'em to it and choose his own pack. He seems to of been right liberal with himself."

"Wanted to fix it so they couldn't follow him up, I reckon," Bill added. "When did Rayfield and Emmett find it out, Tommy?"

"When they come in at night, Mr. Dale." Tommy had his chew, now, and felt more at ease. "Uh coorse, I seen him packin', an' I coulda stopped 'im easy. But not knowin' their plans, how sh'd I know they wasn't movin' on, an' Al under orrders t' pack an' go?"

"You couldn't butt in, of course," said Bill. "I'd have stood right here and watched him carry off the works, and I'd never have thought to say a word against it. It was sure bold—and he could get away with it, too. And you couldn't do any less than feed the experts. Where did they sleep?"

Tommy tilted his head much like Luella. "They slept outa doors, Mr. Dale. They did, that! I seen 'em look longin' at your bunk, but I says I has me orrders, an' they slept outside. They did, that! It was Hez that had the tent to hisself, Mr. Dale—barrin' the turkle which I left alone, she was that bashful wit' me." He grinned, showing broken teeth. Then he thought of something.

"They was a growlin' an' a grumblin' from that dorg, Mr. Dale. "But if anny one wished to enter the tent, he changed his wish, I'm thinkin'. An' it might 'a' been Mr. Rayfield wantin' a drink from the bucket, fer I heard him tellin' that other how he was like to make a trip to the spring in the night, but recalled the canteen not bein' empty. He got no drink from the bucket befor sun-up, that I c'ld swear to, Mr. Dale."

Bill nodded and went thoughtfully about his cooking of an early supper. Riding the desert—or walking, for that matter—puts an edge on one's hunger, and eating is the first thought on arriving in camp. There would still be time to show Don his gold vein on Number One, and he quizzed Tommy carefully about the movements of the experts. Tommy had a deep, wide cut in the sidehill to show how his own time had been spent, and he had seen to it that Bill's tent had not been entered. Further than that he was vague. The experts had struck off to the west, that morning. They could have swung back around the hill and gone up the gulch without Tommy's knowledge, however, and Bill was uneasy; though with Al Freeman gone there could be no valid reason for being nervous.

But there is a certain hypnotic quality in native gold. The very sight of it in its natural form will leave a mark on any man's mind. The possessor is affected according to his mental caliber. He will lose his head and spend money recklessly, feeling that he has all nature behind him; or he will grow wary, eyeing his fellow men with suspicion, haunted by the fear of being robbed. The higher the mentality, the more subtle the effect; but it is there, nevertheless.

Don Hunter felt it when he stood beside Bill and stared at the vein which Bill had just uncovered. He stooped and laid a forefinger upon one great splotch of gold in the rock. His finger could not quite cover it from sight. He rubbed the gold almost caressingly. He feasted his eyes upon the many specks and splotches. Even when he got out his pipe and sat down on the edge of the cut, he could no more take his eyes off the gold than could Doris, when she first saw it.

"My God, Bill, that's the richest stuff I ever saw!" he sighed. "I couldn't help thinking, all along, that you and Doris had got too excited right in the start. I was afraid maybe you both had a disappointment coming to you—the way you talked about millions. I take it all back."

"I knew you felt that way about it," Bill grinned. "And I knew you'd change your tune when you saw it in the ground yourself. That's why I wanted you to see it and help me plan the next move. Doris wants to incorporate and let the company do the mining while we go off and play. Poor little kid, she wants to see something besides sagebrush, and I don't blame her. If this mine can't make Doris happy and give her the things she wants, then it's of no use to me. What do you think about forming a company, Don? Rayfield claims it's the only thing to do. I hate the very name 'corporation,' but I know that's partly prejudice. I don't want to be hidebound. I'm willing to leave it to you."

"And I ain't going to give snap judgment on a thing the size of this." Don opened his knife and went over to pick out that big splotch of gold which seemed to fascinate him. This thing is going to take some studying."

That night they talked long with the two research men. Don admired the careful conservatism of Mr. Emmett, but he responded more freely to Mr. Rayfield's genial manner and his clear, common-sense way of going at the heart of the subject. He had approached the acquaintance of the two men with mental reservations. In an hour he and Bill had both forgotten their caution; the conversation had drifted insensibly into a consultation.

"My, my! I wish that scoundrel had at least left us our grips," Mr. Rayfield exclaimed regretfully. It's rather embarrassing to be obliged to trust that you will take our word in the place of regular credentials. All our papers, instructions, reports—everything that could prove our identity and standing, carried off by that pitiful sneak thief! And I suppose," he added with a grimace, "they'll go to start his camp fire. I doubt if the man can read; if he can he'll probably burn our papers as a means of self-protection. You can't identify slabs of bacon—or burros, either, as far as I'm concerned. They all look alike to me, the same as Chinamen. So he'll probably burn all our personal belongings and travel like an honest prospector. I don't suppose he managed to get any inkling of what you have here, Mr. Dale?"

Bill replied that he didn't see how Al could have gotten wise to anything; though his prowling in the tent held a sinister meaning, he believed.

Mr. Rayfield pursed his lips. "I wouldn't think that would mean anything more than an attempt to steal whatever he could lay his hands on," he said judicially. "He had undoubtedly laid his plans to make off with our outfit, and he was quite willing to add as much of yours as he could steal. My, my, what a plucky young lady your daughter is, Mr. Hunter! There isn't a doubt in the world but what she saved Mr. Dale from being robbed. No," he returned to the point in question, "I don't see how Al could suspect that you had any rich claims here. He certainly had no time to locate any ground alongside you before he left. And that, I think, would be his first move. It would be very easy to sell his claims in Goldfield without ever showing up here again. That is, if he could get hold of some of your ore and show it to the right parties."

"You've been in Goldfield, Mr. Rayfield?" Don lifted one eyebrow at him.

"Oh, yes. Yes, we try to keep in touch more or less with all the mining camps. Emmett and I were there just this summer. Nice little camp there. But the speculators are ready for another stampede, nevertheless. Do you know, Mr. Hunter, this mining country has produced a type of men whom I should call professional boomers. A pernicious type, too, in the long run. For while they undoubtedly do start things moving when they rush to a new camp, they also knock the bottom out quite as unthinkingly when they rush off to the next boom camp.

"I suppose you realize, Mr. Dale, that you'll have to take into consideration that very thing. I don't see any possibility of avoiding a boom here at Parowan. The moment the news leaks out in Goldfield there'll be a rush down here. It will be humanly impossible to prevent it. The only thing that you can do is to prepare yourself to handle it when it comes and see to it that the undesirables don't get control."

"Has it occurred to you," Mr. Emmett asked abruptly, "that somebody's going to lay out a town site here? That's the first

thing that will happen. If you'll take my advice, Mr. Dale, you'll beat them to it. If you own the town site, you can pretty nearly control the situation."

Bill and Don looked at each other questioningly. Don turned to the other two, eyeing them quizzically. "What's the matter with you two laying out the town site yourselves?" he asked. "Seems to me you're entitled to some benefit here, if it's only to break even on your outfit."

Mr. Rayfield laughed and threw out his hand in a gesture of helplessness.

"Our hands are tied, Mr. Hunter. So long as we are in the employ of the government we are not permitted to profit in any way from the work that we do or from any mineral which may be uncovered. Sort of sanctified to the service of Uncle Sam. We'd have to resign before we could take any active part in your strike, Mr. Dale."

Bill studied that for a moment. "You know all about the best way to handle this proposition," he said finally. "That town-site idea is a bird—only I'd be plumb helpless about starting a thing like that in country that isn't surveyed. I suppose you wouldn't think of such a thing as resigning from your jobs and taking hold here." He glanced at Don for approval.

Mr. Rayfield shook his head slowly. "That, I'm afraid, would need some ve-ry serious consideration. Of course, we're not mere chattels; we could resign at any time. But there's the ethical point to consider. Speaking for myself, Mr. Dale, I'd have to feel very sure that I could be of real service, and that in a field broad enough to justify my leaving this research work to others. Of course," he went on musingly, "if I could be sure that I might be able to help develop this district and make the name Parowan stand for clean, efficient mining, with a clean, orderly town here, that would be a tremendous achievement for any man. The research work in this particular district would almost take care of itself. This whole Parowan neighborhood would be gone over with a fine-tooth comb by prospectors."

He rose, glancing with his good eye at Mr. Emmett. "I think we'd all better sleep on the subject," he smiled disarmingly. "Mr. Emmett and I will in any event be glad to look over your claims and give you our honest opinion and as much advice as we feel competent to offer. And as to our resigning and taking hold here—we'll have to think that over. But I feel free to say, here and now, that we *will* think it over; and that, if you only knew it, is a very great compliment to you folks and to the mine we believe you have got here."

Mr. Emmett had also risen to his feet. He smiled slightly, glancing from one to the other.

"Walter is more impulsive than I am, more inclined to play hunches. But we stand pretty close together and I usually agree with him in the long run. I don't fall in with this idea of resigning. Right now I call it foolish. We've passed up dozens of chances to make a stake in some mining boom. I don't know what's got into him to-night. But it's only fair to tell you that I'm going to talk him out of that notion if I can."

Mr. Rayfield threw back his head and laughed contagiously. "It isn't a notion," he denied jovially. "Bill Dale, here—*Hopeful* Bill Dale—paid us the high compliment of suggesting it. It's no treason, John, to think it over. Come along to bed and don't look so solemn." He turned to Don and Bill, smiling down at them almost paternally.

"Don't mind John Emmett, boys. He has no sense of humor, anyway. To-morrow, I think we'll just postpone our field work and go into this proposition very thoroughly with you. Our time and what scant knowledge we have is at your disposal, and free as the desert air. I hope you won't hesitate to use both as long as you feel the need. And whether we decide to roll up our sleeves and help make you a millionaire, Bill, or whether we go on pecking at rocks for the government, I hope you'll rely always upon our friendship and good will."

They had been gone some minutes before Don straightened from his hunched position on a box and knocked the cold ashes from his pipe.

"We'll try and get them in," he said slowly. "That town-site idea is worth darn near as much as your mine."

CHAPTER TWELVE

A MAN SHOULDN'T MIX BUSINESS WITH LOVE

The big hotel in Goldfield was humming with talk and laughter, as people rushed here and there. Arriving guests were lined up at the desk, waiting anxiously to hear whether they could have a room and bath, or must content themselves with a plain room. A third of them betrayed signs of having slept out under the stars or under canvas. A few of them gazed at these desert dwellers with curiosity that was more than a little envious. The rest were quite absorbed in their own affairs and gave no attention to their neighbors. And the loungers in the great, velvet-upholstered chairs scattered amongst the great pillars of the lobby, watched the new ones, idly amused or indifferent.

"That's Bill Dale," a slender, black-eyed man volunteered to his companion on the right, and waved his cigar toward the elevator. "And that's his bride—the little Hunter girl. You know Don Hunter, don't you? Sure, you do! Well, that's his daughter and her mother. Bill? Why, he's the fellow that discovered Parowan! Gold you could hack out of the quartz with your knife! Yeah—that's the stuff they've got over across the street, in the window. Brought in a ton of it and dumped it in that window like so much dirt!

"Talk about luck! You know how he found it? Why, he was prospecting around and happened to camp at Parowan spring one night. And I'm blamed if a young cloud-burst didn't hit that side of the mountain, that night, and uncovered the whole vein, bare as your hand. Fact. Bill ran slap on to it when he went to the spring next morning for water.

"He was cute as the next one. Staked out a group of claims and kept the whole thing hushed up till he'd got everything nailed down. Laid out a town site, even. Did that on the quiet, too—Don Hunter got a surveyor friend of his to go down and run some lines on his ranch. When he got him down there, he just hitched up and hauled him over to Bill's claims, and had him lay out Parowan town and survey the group of claims so there wouldn't be any chance for fraction hunters. Everything air-tight——

"Huh? No, I didn't say *water*-tight! Bill's incorporated, and everybody with two bits in his overalls is buying stock. Take my word, that stock's making a rocket look like a kid climbing a greased pole. I bought a block at par—first offering was at par, mind you. Nothing cheap about Bill! But then he's a fine, straight fellow, and everybody knows he wouldn't stand for any wildcatting. He's *got* it, you see. Why, they keep guards standing over that mine with sawed-off shotguns—or so I heard.

"What's that? Sure, I'll take you down there. If I get a chance, I'll have you meet Bill. Nothing swell-headed about him—I used to know him when he packed his grub out of here on two burros; wasn't so long ago, either, that he did that same thing—but everybody is after him now, of course. He always was popular and now his millions are not getting him the cold shoulder any, that I've noticed. Then he was just married to-day—this morning, upstairs in the parlor—with all the big bugs in town present. They're leaving to-morrow morning for California on their honeymoon.

"You know, Fred, if you want a good, safe investment that will bring quick returns, Parowan's your best bet. Either buy Parowan Consolidated, or else go down and pick up some lots in the town. As for the stock, they're shipping gold out of there in the rock right now and building a mill with the proceeds. There's going to be a railroad in there soon as it can be put through; two, I heard to-day—but that may be just street gossip. Some one was saying a cut-off's coming through from Las Vegas to Parowan, and on to Goldfield. Don't know how true that is, but I do know for a fact that a line will be put through from Barstow or thereabouts. That's been talked of for quite a while, but Goldfield has lost the peak of her boom in the last few months, and it took this new Parowan strike to bring things to a head.

"Bill's heading this way. You hold my place—I'm going to wander across his trail and meet him. If I can, I'll bring him over. I want you to meet the man that's being talked about more than any other man in the West to-day."

The black-eyed man manœvered cleverly so that he met Bill within six feet of the settee where his friend was waiting. But Bill was halted in the middle of a group that seemed disinclined to make their greetings brief. They were important-looking men, money-makers every one, if looks meant anything. All were laughing; several were talking at once. The black-eyed man caught Bill's eye over the shoulder of those in front, and tilted his head backwards. Bill answered the look with a slight nod and gradually worked his way toward the signaller.

"How are you, Davis? Pretty crowded here to-night." Mechanically Bill shook hands, that friendly ceremony having been

forced upon him in the past two months until his hand went out as unconsciously as does the hand of a politician at election time. Davis held to the hand and drew him toward the settee.

"Gold's an old story to you, Bill, but all the same I want you to meet a friend of mine who is just down from Alaska after his own little clean-up. Fred Moore's his name, and he's not such a bad guy to have for a friend. Packed me in out of the cold on his back, once, when I was up there a year or two ago. How many miles was it, Fred, that you carried me that time?"

Fred had gotten to his feet and was shaking hands with Bill. "Not over forty," he parried indifferently. "So you're a bloated plutocrat, eh? Davis has been telling me all about you. Placer or quartz?"

"Free milling gold in quartz," Bill told him, and then excused himself hastily, with two valid reasons. One was the appearance of Doris by the elevator, evidently looking for him; and the other was his growing distaste for the subject of his mine. It seemed to him that every man he met seized the first opportunity to quiz and question him about Parowan. Over and over again he had told the truth about finding the mine. Now he was cynically content to let the garbled newspaper stories and the gossip of men stand for the truth.

Mr. Rayfield joined him without greeting or apology as Bill made his way to the elevator,—and his bride. Mr. Emmett saw the two and came up, so that the three arrived together before Doris.

"Are you going to have time this evening to hold that business meeting, Bill?" Emmett asked casually. "Your train leaves about nine o'clock in the morning, doesn't it? We ought to get that straightened out before you go, or we'll have to pester you with papers to sign and a lot of detail work. What do you want done about the meeting?"

Bill hesitated, glancing toward Doris. Rayfield came to the rescue, laying his hand familiarly on Bill's arm, perfectly aware of the fact that half the men in the lobby were at that moment registering a certain degree of envy.

"Now, if you don't want to attend that meeting, Bill, just leave it to us. We can get everything done and you can sign the minutes in the morning. My, my, events are surely moving fast! There's a bunch of New York men here to-day—just got in this morning. They want to start a bank at Parowan just as soon as they can get a roof to put it under. And that man O'Hara, with the chain of hotels all up and down the coast, wants a good corner with two hundred feet frontage on Main Street. He's going to build a hotel. We'll have to take that up to-night at the meeting. The question is, do we present him with the ground for the sake of getting him down there, or do we make him pay, the same as other folks? He argues that the prestige of having an O'Hara House at Parowan is worth the site to put it on." He pursed his lips, which was his substitute for a smile.

"Make him pay!" Doris exclaimed, laughing a bit. "You can bet he isn't going to build an O'Hara House at Parowan just to help make our town look nice. He'll charge boom prices and clean up a fortune. Why should we donate to the cause? Won't he be making his money off us and the things we're doing?"

"*That's* the way to talk!" Rayfield beamed upon her with his good eye. "O'Hara's not in the hotel business for his health, you can bet on that. And if he doesn't build a hotel down there, some one else will."

"Yes, but let it once be known that O'Hara's going to put up a hotel in Parowan, and our stock will take another jump. We could well afford to give him the ground to build on." Mr. Emmett's tone betrayed the fact that this point had been discussed before.

"Oh, split the difference," Bill suggested impatiently. "Let him pick his own site, and charge him half price for it. You're both right, according to my understanding of the case. O'Hara'll clean up a bunch of money on the investment, just as Doris says. And John's right about the prestige of having an O'Hara House. Make him call it that trade name. Then he won't dare work off poor accommodations on the public. When folks know that they can get O'Hara standard of cooking and so on at Parowan, they'll come in droves. I reckon that's what makes a town."

"That's the talk!" Rayfield patted approval on Bill's flat, muscular shoulder. "Suppose we make that a regular policy, folks? Cut the prices on building sites for all enterprises that will reflect credit on the town, to just half the selling price?" He looked from one to the other eagerly. "The selling price is going up steadily, you know. Having to pay something for a site will shut out the little shoestring propositions that go broke and leave empty houses behind them. That always looks bad in a town. If they have to pay for their building site, it means they'll have to have capital behind

them. And no firm is going to sink money in real estate unless they mean business."

"Oh, come on up to our sitting room and let's have the meeting there and get it over with," said Doris. "I'm terribly interested in the whole thing—but honestly, my feet are just ready to drop off! It's a radical change from desert shoes to French-heeled pumps, let me tell you."

"All right—come on up," Bill invited resignedly.

Rayfield looked at Emmett.

"Sure, if your wife isn't too tired," Emmett hesitated. "You've got an early start to make in the morning, remember."

"Oh, fudge!" Doris placed a finger tip on the elevator button. "This is important. We don't want to go away and leave a lot of tag ends, do we, Bill? Because," she added, smiling up at them, "goodness only knows when we'll come back!"

The elevator slid down, the door slid open and Doris stepped inside, Bill just behind her, his hand placed solicitously under her elbow.

"We'd better get all the books and bring up, then," Mr. Rayfield suggested, standing just outside. "I think it will be a good idea to clean up everything, so John and I won't have to bother you again. You go on up, and we'll be right along in a few minutes."

He gave them a smile like a benediction. When it was quite certain that the conversation had terminated, the elevator boy deferentially closed the door and conveyed bride and groom to the second floor with the air of one who waits upon royalty.

"Shall I unlock the door for you, sir?" he asked eagerly.

"No, thanks," drawled Bill. "I'm not paralyzed, sonny." But he slid a coin into the boy's hand to salve the rebuff.

"Now, Bill-dear, you *must* give enough time to business to let John and Walter go ahead without having to bother us every day. You know, we're going to travel around, just wherever we take the notion we want to go. We don't want Parowan riding our necks all the time. Walter told me that if you signed the stock books in blank, and the Corporation check book, he wouldn't have to bother you at all——"

"That's giving them a pretty free hand, honey," Bill objected, laying his cheek against her silky hair as she stood within his arms.

Doris turned in the embrace so that she could look into his eyes.

"Why, Bill Dale! If you don't *trust* John and Walter, why have you got them in the company? Why is Walter Rayfield Vice President and General Manager, then, and John, Secretary and Treasurer? Bill-dear, don't you think you are rather inconsistent?"

Bill kissed her.

"Bill, it would just about break my heart to see you tie yourself down to running Parowan Consolidated. I think that would show a streak of narrowness in you, dear. It seems to me that the whole advantage of having the mine and the town site and everything is to be able to let others do the work and leave you free. You see, dear, they both resigned from good government positions to take hold and help organize the company, and the best way to show your gratitude, I think, is to trust them with the management now. We've got the control, haven't we? And they certainly have shown that they know exactly how to go ahead and make money out of the mine.

"Why, dear man, just think! *You'd* have plugged along, just digging out the gold and selling it. *They've* made a fortune for us already, without taking out more than enough gold to make all the expenses of the organization and the town-site promotion, and mining and hauling. I don't know how they do it—but they certainly are wizards at getting in money."

"I love you, little wife," said Bill irrelevantly. "If money will make you the happiest woman on earth, they can't dig up too much."

Doris pulled him over to a red velvet couch and sat down beside him, snuggling against his straight, strong body.

"Bill, you mustn't think I worship money above other things. I don't. But all my life I've heard one sentence that always grated on my nerves and my sense of justice. Whenever I wanted something nice, daddy or mother would say, 'We can't afford it.' They worked hard, and I worked and tried to do right always—and still we couldn't *afford* to enjoy life.

"Bill-dear, I never want to hear that said to me again, as long as I live!" She drew away from him, so that she could look into his face. Her own was flushed and very earnest. "Now we're rich, I mean to have the things and enjoy the things we couldn't *afford*. I never want to wonder whether the money will hold out to the end of the trip. I want to buy things without asking what they cost. I—I'm just *hungry* for the world, Bill! And if you had to hurry back and look after things, I—I——"

Bill gathered her into his arms, his throat contracting painfully at the sudden quiver of her lips. One day married, and Doris had tears in her eyes!

"I'll make you one promise, right now," he said contritely. "I'll never bring you back to this country unless you want to come. And I'll fix it so that you'll always be able to afford anything you want. Why, all *I* want is to see you happy and keep you loving me, sweetheart. I could grin at the world if I were a hobo and had your love. So never worry about having to come back to Parowan or any other place."

Doris rewarded him properly for that, and immediately made use of her woman's prerogative and had the last word.

"Then you'd better lay aside that suspiciousness of yours and fix things so you won't *have* to come back," she pouted. "John and Walter are perfectly capable of managing things, and it's to their interest. Look at the salary they're getting—and the big block of stock you gave them! Our interests are their interests, Bill-dear—and they can do the work. You did your share when you tramped the desert and found the mine. It's their turn now at the job."

Into the echo of that speech walked John and Walter, drawn into Christian-name intimacy in the past two months. Their arms were full of books—too precious to be carried by anxious bellboys—their heads were full of plans and the details of their work. Their hearts were full, too, of zeal, perchance. One must judge most persons by their faces and the words they speak.

So Bill spent a weary two hours signing stock certificates in blank, on the line in the right-hand corner entitled PRESIDENT in small caps. They were dignified-looking certificates, but Bill grew very tired of them before he was through.

After that, Bill rubbed the cramp out of his right hand and wrist, and signed a large book of blank checks with PAROWAN CONSOLIDATED MINING COMPANY, INCORPORATED, printed across the face in letters much larger than the name of the bank. Bill thought suspiciously of certain dishonest uses to which his signature as president might be put, and immediately throttled suspicion with the stern hand of loyalty. Doris was right. If he didn't trust John Emmett and Walter Rayfield, why were they officers in his company?

"There's one thing I want done," he said abruptly, pushing the signed blanks away from him with a sigh of relief. "I want that whole block—the whole *block*, remember—where my tent and dugout stands made over to me. I want a high board fence built around it, with spikes in the top. I want a padlock on the gate. I want that tent and cellar left just as I left it, with Tommy as caretaker. And I want Tommy to have a block next to it, to do as he pleases with it. Can you make out the papers to-night?"

They could. Bill sat for some time silent, smoking meditatively and staring at the door through which the fate of Parowan had passed, in the persons of John S. Emmett and Walter B. Rayfield.

He was a rich man, even now. He was growing richer so fast that he felt slightly dizzy when he tried to follow the process by which his bank account increased. It wasn't the gold in the mine that did it—yet. Doris was right; the gold shipped had just about paid the expense of exploitation. People were buying town lots at boom prices and selling them at double what they paid. He was not the only man who was growing rich. Even Tommy was talking about starting a saloon and calling it "Tommy's Place" with naïve triteness.

As Parowan Consolidated was selling in the open market, Bill was a millionaire. As Parowan lots were selling, Bill's income was better than a thousand dollars a day—real money, that, with a certain increase as men flocked to the new camp. Already that camp was noisy—garish, unwholesome, no place at all for Doris to live. Bill had tried to prevent

that. He had wanted a decent town, had worked and sweated and sworn to make it so. But Parowan was like a landslide started with one ill-judged step. It has gathered a devastating power as it progressed, until now, Bill knew that it was out of hand; a boom town, living up to the reputation of other boom towns. Only—and Bill sighed relievedly as he thought of it—*his* boom had a mine to give it a solid foundation.

"No reason in the world why Parowan shouldn't be on the map a hundred years from now," he muttered, and began to unlace the first pair of patent-leather shoes he had ever worn.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BILL LEARNS ABOUT WOMEN FROM 'ER

A mysterious, clotted haze of gray and blue and smoke smudges, shot with rose and deeper tints of carmine; a churning of white foam in an oily sweep of undulating water that caught the lights from the sunset so that they swam through a magic floating world; screaming gulls flapping close, their pink legs hanging straight down like little sticks; bellowing boat whistles, deep siren blasts, pricking lights in the haze. With frankly confessed eagerness, Doris stood with Bill in the bow of the ferry and gazed enraptured, her face pallid with emotion.

Bill looked down at her, knew himself forgotten in that moment of blissful arrival into her dream world. A vague hurt, a slow understanding, sobered his face as he watched her. Then, like a blow that forces open a door, Bill saw. There, mirrored in her eyes, on the tremulous lips, glowing through the pallor of her cheeks, was a joy, an incredulous rapture such as he himself had known, not once, but many times in the past weeks. Doris was trying to feel the reality of a dream come true. Bill remembered poignantly how he had struggled to express that emotion, and the paucity of words that had held him dumb.

He had felt it when his lips first touched the lips of Doris; when she had said that she loved him. Doris—why, Doris had wanted to talk about the gold, about whatever came into her mind. Things, other than their love, could claim her thoughts, while she stood abashed before the miracle. He had thought that Doris was different. She didn't show her feelings much; women were shy about love. It never occurred to him to question the depth of her love until that moment.

"Why didn't she have that look in her eyes—*then*?" he thought sharply. He had never seen just this look in her face; no, nor anything approaching that look. There was an answer, but Bill shut his mind against it. And then, as if a devil had prompted the words, Doris turned and spoke a sentence which Bill recognized.

"I was always scared to dream I'd ever actually be here," she said, and her voice was hushed. "Oh, Bill-dear, I'm so happy my heart just *aches*!"

"Are you, honey?" Bill bit his lips and hid something away where even his own heart must never find it. She had elaborated on his broken speech there at Parowan Number One, but Bill set that down to a more versatile vocabulary. He too had been so happy his heart had ached; but he had not been able to find those words to say.

Desert tan and mail-order trousseau hurt her pride terribly. She insisted upon a quiet hotel until the defects could be remedied but Bill only laughed at her vanity. He could call it that now, though he loved the trait,—since he could gratify it.

"When you've got a million dollars in your fist nobody's going to mind if you walk into the Palace in a gingham dish apron," he told her shrewdly. "And besides, if you had everything you think you need, you'd lose the fun of buying." He paused, glancing from the window of the taxi,—there were not so many, in those days. "What do you like best, little lady, diamonds, pearls or rubies?"

"All of them," Doris stated solemnly.

They laughed together, and Doris squeezed Bill's arm and said she was happy.

Mrs. William Gordon Dale proved herself a capable young woman who could adapt herself quickly to changed circumstances and surroundings. Once she discovered that desert tan can scarcely be distinguished from the carefully cultivated tan of ocean beaches, her self-consciousness melted into calm assurance. Likewise merged the mail-order trousseau into the almost-latest fashion of gowns, hats, cloaks, of a restrained elegance and a clever adaptation to that indefinable thing she called her "style" and clung to with firmness in the face of gorgeous temptations.

Wherefore, she arrived in Santa Barbara (Bill accompanying her, of course) with only five trunks and the sophisticated air of a girl who was born to luxury.

"You sure don't look as if you've ever had your hands in dough," was Bill's way of putting it. "I never noticed your hands so much before. I always loved them, but now I keep looking at them for their beauty."

"There are arts and wiles, Bill-dear, that make a heap of difference. It just takes time and money—and I have loads of both. Weren't those people lovely, that we met on the beach?"

"Baker Cole and his wife? Yes, he struck me just about right. Human cuss, that you can slip an improper remark to without wishing you had kept your darn mouth shut and concealed your ignorance. I'm sick of being made to think that desert words put me in the natural-curiosity class. Darn 'em, I've had more education than half the Johnnies that give me the tolerant look. There are men in this hotel with more money than I've got, that say, 'They told he and I——' and never turn a hair. But if I forget to stand up when a woman comes within rifle shot, they look as if I had insulted their wives. Lord, little lady, I've lived too long where there weren't any women! A fellow gets out of practice."

Doris came over and ruffled his hair with her meticulously manicured fingers that had won his astonished admiration.

"You know, Bill-dear, there's another thing you forget. You must take soup from the *side* of the spoon; and peas, dear man, are eaten with a fork—out here."

"I know it—but darn it, I like the juice. If I ain't wealthy enough to take mine with a spoon, I'll get out and rake in more money. Funny, isn't it, Doris? In the desert I felt myself a Beau Brummel—as I understand that term—amongst the miners and prospectors I came in contact with. I was as good as anybody—better than some. Out here, they make me feel like a cave man with his first clothes on."

"I'm sure your manners are very good, Bill-dear," Doris comforted him absently. "Just a few little points to remember—things one never encounters in the desert. If you watch the others—at table, you know—and do as they do about which fork——"

"Not on your life!" (After six weeks of hotel honeymoon and their clothes inextricably mixed in the dresser drawers, and Bill constantly on the alert lest he hurt Doris' feelings, he could argue with his divinity quite as if she were human.) "I'm not going to make a monkey of myself, copying the fellow who sits across the table. I'll do what's comfortable for me and the rest of the bunch, and let it go at that. I don't aspire to be any lady's man, Doris, nor any society bird. Men like Baker Cole don't grin behind their hands if you go first into the dining room and let your wife follow. I know—I saw you blush for shame last night, honey. But your old Bill wants to break trail for you all his life. It's second nature for me to go first and see what's ahead of us, and put it out of your way if it's dangerous."

Doris laughed at him, showing the dimple in her left cheek,—with a faint film of powder distinguishable there nowadays.

"You dear old silly, just take this view of the matter, and it'll help you remember the rules, maybe: I might be kidnaped behind your back, and you wouldn't know it, stalking ahead of me the way you do. You're supposed to shoo a lady gently before you down the aisle, and see that handsome villains don't cut in behind you." Her hand slipped down and patted his lean, freshly shaven jaw.

"Dear man, is the money holding out?" she asked suddenly, coming at last to the thing that was foremost in her mind.

Bill let his head drop back against the cushioned chair and laughed at her, his eyes half-closed and feasting on her face.

"You never wanted to ask that question as long as you lived," he reminded her teasingly.

"I know, dear. I don't mean that I think we're running short. I can't begin to spend my share that John sends me. But you know, dear, we're needing more and more, as we get the hang of it. We keep finding out about things rich people have and do, that I'm sure I never dreamed of, in the desert. Most of them have things that date back to their fathers and grandfathers, and we naturally have to spend a lot, just bringing ourselves up to date. For instance, Mrs. Baker Cole is thinking about a new automobile and wondering what kind she had better have. And Bill-dear—we haven't even had our first, yet!"

"Lord, what a world!" chuckled Bill. "And you're wondering if we can have one. Honey, you wait and see what kind of an automobile Mrs. Baker Cole buys, and then you buy two just like it. Or else you find one that costs just twice as much as hers."

"Don't tease so, Bill. But really, I *do* want one. And I—miss Little Dorrit, sort of. There are beautiful trails here, winding around through trees, and I've noticed that the really nicest people ride every morning. I've wished, when I saw

them starting out or coming back, that I could go, too."

"Do you want Little Dorrit, honey?" Bill lifted the necklace of Parowan gold spun into the finest of twisted threads and set with emeralds that made her skin look whiter. Bill had stood over the jeweler while that necklace was being made, and the result was a happy one.

"Oh, no—Little Dorrit hasn't got the style. I was wondering if we couldn't buy a couple of saddle horses. I'm crazy about Mrs. Burlingame's riding habit, Bill—and I've got one planned that would beat it. And I know the tailor who made hers. And Bill, couldn't we—no, I don't want to take a house, either. Not yet. I don't know enough of the nicest people, and couldn't entertain. I'd rather just stay here for awhile longer. Wouldn't you?"

Bill secretly loathed hotel life, and his heart had given a great thump when she almost wanted a house like the Burlingame's. But he did not mention either his loathing or his desire. Why should he? His business was to keep Doris happy, to gratify every passing whim, except when the whim changed before gratification was humanly possible.

They went together next day and chose an automobile, and hired a chauffeur warranted to give satisfaction and promised a speedy demise if ever he forgot to drive cautiously when his mistress was in the car.

In the new automobile they drove out to a famous horsebreeder's place, and bought two saddle horses, and Doris ordered her riding habit and was deliciously happy for several hours. Then she awoke to the fact that it was a sheer waste of money, time and energy to have no maid to look after her clothes and do her hair and fetch and carry. Besides, Bill was getting acquainted with men and wanted to go here and there, looking up what he called "propositions," and Doris felt that it would look much better, and give her more real freedom, if she had a maid to accompany her on drives and at the beach——

"And then I wouldn't have to keep an eye on my parasol and purse and book and bathrobe, and everything, Bill-dear," she detailed, unconsciously justifying what she instinctively felt would not meet with Bill's approval. "My maid would look after everything while I was in the surf. That would be her business." She was talking to Bill's back, which made her uncomfortable. She wished he would not stand staring out of the window, like that, while she talked things over with him. It was getting to be a regular habit. She always liked to see a person's face when she talked.

"You don't mind, do you, Bill—if I have a maid? All the nicest——"

"Anything your little heart desires!" Bill said, turning abruptly and smiling steadfastly down at her where she was sitting on the floor, on a purple silk cushion, trying on a pair of satin slippers that didn't seem to want to go on at the heel. He watched her, his eyes studying her flushed face and tousled hair.

"I reckon you do need help," he said, a dryness in his tone of which he was not quite aware, and which Doris missed altogether in her absorption. "If you had somebody to do all the things you spend your time on, maybe we could enjoy life—better," he added hastily. "We could be together more, couldn't we?"

"Together more?" Doris looked up, the silver shoehorn poised in her hand. "Good gracious! Aren't we together every single minute, almost? Bill, see if you can get this pesky slipper on; the other one's all right; they're half a size too small, but they're the only pair that just matches that new lace gown." (Doris had already learned to say gown and frock, and to avoid the word dress except as a verb.)

Bill knelt and lifted the foot, thrilling again at the touch of her slim ankle.

"Do you remember the night you came to camp, all wet and cold, and—you let me unlace your boots?" He smiled wistfully into her eyes. "I was all a-tremble, honey—I had to keep my lip between my teeth, and bite down hard to steady me. I was so happy——"

"What about? The privilege of handling wet boot laces?" Doris leaned and tried to push her toes farther into the slipper.

"They were *your* boot laces." Bill's soul withdrew from her matter-of-factness, much as Sister Mitchell used to draw into her shell at the first blast on the saxophone.

"I wonder if the housekeeper won't have something to stretch this slipper on," said Doris. "Can you find out, dear? I simply *must* make them do for to-night, or I can't wear that gown."

"Why can't you wear something else, then, and be comfortable?" Bill set her foot on the floor and got up. "You'd better take these back and change them."

"I can't," Doris said shortly. "I've ordered our table decorated to harmonize with this particular outfit. You don't understand, Bill-dear. Men get the effect, all right, and call a woman beautiful or ugly or just so-so, and never dream that it's because the details have been thought out, or haven't. I've noticed things. I know exactly how women get that carelessly beautiful effect. It doesn't just happen so, dear man. They spend *hours*, just thinking up the careless touches.

"Now, just to show you," she expanded graciously for Bill's education, "I have fallen into the habit of telling the head waiter that I'd like certain flowers, or whatever it is I choose, on our table for dinner. Then I dress accordingly. Nobody knows it's planned, but I'll bet you, dear, they get the effect just the same. The stupid ones pile it all on their persons and merely look new-rich. You've never seen *me* look new-rich, have you, Bill?"

"Not on your life." Bill was startled into a fresh appraisal of his bride. Heretofore he had looked on, amused at her plunge into the pleasures of fashionable hotel life. Now it struck him suddenly that the slim, competent desert girl who could break a horse to the saddle or rope and brand a calf, bake pies and bread to make a chef envious, was bringing that clever brain into action in a field entirely new to her, and was demonstrating the same clever competence which had distinguished her on the ranch.

With a new respect for her intelligence he saw to the detail of having the slipper stretched. Afterward he observed that Doris had really achieved a small triumph of harmonious beauty. The table decoration did add something indefinable to her own sweet self; something which caused the eyes of others to turn their way in unconscious tribute to her beauty, as one looks and looks again at any other charming picture. As a votary of wealth and fashion Mrs. William Gordon Dale was beyond criticism, destined to become a high priestess of the art of effective extravagance.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BAKER COLE

Baker Cole was a man who did his own thinking and was willing that the other fellow should do the same; indeed, he was tolerantly disdainful when the other fellow failed to do the same. He was so rich that he did not think much about money, or judge a man by his Bradstreet rating. Money flowed toward Baker Cole apparently of its own volition. He had started life with a fortune for his birthright, and he had gone on his way with a humorous philosophy which armored him against flattery, abuse or the deliberate attacks of other men whose fortunes equalled his but who were not content with another man's well-being.

Baker Cole's interest was first attracted to Bill's straight suppleness in the surf, and by the fact that, brown though he was to shoulders and chest, Bill was just learning to swim. Because of this incongruity, Baker Cole was given the opportunity of grabbing Bill by the hair and saving him from a vicious undertow. He wondered a bit, until he discovered that a man working in a sleeveless, low-necked undershirt under a desert sun may have the mark of a beach lounge burned into his skin.

"That accounts for your legs not being tanned." Baker Cole hauled himself out of the surf like a big, good-looking seal, and lay puffing and looking Bill over. "Wish I had muscles like yours," he remarked, crooking his finger toward a young man who immediately hurried up with cigarettes and matches. Bill accepted a smoke, and the two began to talk.

An hour later, they went toeing deep in the fine, loose sand to where a huge, striped umbrella hid all but a shapely, canvas-shod foot. Bill helped Doris to her feet and introduced Baker Cole, who appraised her shrewdly with one glance and decided that his wife would like her.

That began the acquaintance. In a week, the Baker Coles and the William Gordon Dales (Doris had quietly insisted upon full names from the first hotel register,—and had put it over with complete success) were pairing off together quite naturally and without deliberate intent; which is the test of congeniality the world over.

From a surreptitiously acquired paid teacher, Doris had learned bridge. She succeeded in teaching Bill, chiefly because he couldn't bear to disappoint her and because it gave him an opportunity to watch her hands without betraying a fatuous admiration. He had learned that Doris considered open love-making bad form, and was acquiring a more restrained manner of worship in accordance with her expressed wish. Wherefore, Bill willingly learned bridge after hours in their rooms, when he was dead tired, and watched unobtrusively for some sign of weariness in the sweet face opposite him. The reward for that was a more complete intimacy between the Baker Coles and the William Gordon Dales.

Bill could not remember afterwards just when or how Doris first found her pleasures apart from him. He saw that "nice" women were becoming her friends, and of course there were little parties and purely feminine gatherings to which Doris went with avid enjoyment. She would sit and tell Bill all about them afterwards, and Bill would listen bewilderingly to detailed descriptions of gowns and refreshments and scores and prizes, and to gossip not quite so harmless.

Sometimes his thoughts would wander to certain experiences of his own,—innocent experiences, though he did not tell her about them always. Baker Cole was at present amused with the spectacle of money flowing out of crude oil pumped from the ground. It amazed even him to see how fast the oil could turn into money. He called Bill's attention to the phenomenon, and Bill was immediately interested, and for reasons which he kept to himself.

Through Baker Cole's shrewd acquaintance with the game of directing and augmenting the flow of money, Bill turned tiny trickles toward his own bank account, and was amazed at the speed with which they became swift-moving streams.

"Lord, I thought Parowan was a miracle I'd never see repeated," he confided one day to Baker Cole. "Money commenced piling up before we started to move the gold. We laid out a town site, and people came in droves to buy lots and start building. It used to give me a chill at the chances they were taking. What if there wasn't a real mine there? Where would the town get off? Baker, if those men had lost on the gamble, who'd be responsible—me?"

Baker Cole rolled a fragrant cigar between his lips and regarded Bill meditatively through half-closed eyes.

"Depends on what or who induced them to speculate," he said bluntly. "How did you work it, Bill?"

Bill shook his head and looked away to where breakers were beating white foam against a segment of cliffs.

"Hell, I dunno," he confessed helplessly. "I found the mine. Then some government men came along and advised me to incorporate and to lay out a town site. I got them to resign their positions and take hold of it. We laid out the town site, and took some gold up to Goldfield and showed it, and that started the parade. Folks tromped each other's feet to get in."

"What did you do then? Sell out?" Perhaps Baker Cole knew, since he was an exceedingly well-informed man. But he waited for Bill to tell him.

"No, I'm president of the company. They fixed things so I wouldn't have to be on the ground, and we came out here to play around awhile." Bill started to explain that he had not wanted to leave, but shut his teeth upon the words. That would be unfair to Doris.

"How are things going, with you out here? Got any idea?"

Bill grinned, with a worried look back of his eyes.

"Two railroads are busting a lung trying to see which one will whistle first at the depot," he detailed laconically. "I guess that tells the tale, doesn't it?"

"Several." Baker Cole took out his cigar and looked it over carefully before he put it back in his mouth.

"The money keeps coming in," Bill went on. "Everything's fine. We're building a mill and that employs a good many men. A lot of companies have sprung up, claiming to have discovered gold—which I guess they have. The *Parowan Record* comes out every Saturday, and there's a bank and hotel—you know. It's a *town*. I feel like a loafer," he admitted ruefully. "But the boys are doing all I could do, I guess. They say everything is running smooth, and the town's a dandy—for a boom town. Soon as the railroads get there, so as to haul material faster, there'll be some fine buildings go up. Contracts are let and all."

He sighed and looked around at Baker Cole, seeking understanding.

"Parowan kind of rides my neck," he said simply. "It's all right—our mine is rich enough to hold it up till other mines get to producing—but I can't help feeling responsible for it, just the same. I feel as if I ought to be on the job myself."

"The wife likes it here," Baker Cole stated calmly.

"Yes. She hates the desert. I wouldn't take her back there into that raw mining town—I wouldn't think of such a thing."

Baker Cole finished his cigar. Very deliberately he put out his hand, drew the ash tray closer and laid the cigar butt exactly in the middle of the tray, moving it twice, fractions of an inch to the center. Bill, his eyes fixed upon him, knew that Baker Cole was not conscious of tray, cigar, or mathematical measurements.

"Bill, I've made money all my life," he said, drawing a long breath as if an important matter had been successfully accomplished. "As far as it's possible to make money honestly, I've made it. Silver in Mexico, copper in Michigan and Montana and Colorado, crude petroleum here in California; I've taken more millions from the ground, Bill, than you'd dare believe if I told you. Had half a million when I was born. Then I was taught how to take care of what I had—and I learned how to make more.

"This Parowan of yours, now, would be something in my line; only, I'd want to take it in the start and handle it myself. I wouldn't invest a dime in the other fellow's game—not if he were my own brother. I'm not afraid of losing money—I *can't* lose money, seems like. It's the game. I see a chance to get something out of the ground that the world has use for, and I go after it like a dog after a ground squirrel. Money piles up when I've got it—but I've had the fun of the getting. And of course the money helps to play again. Dollars, you know, are mostly what you dig with. Dollars are the master tool of industry—and I don't see why the working men howl so about the man that can furnish that master tool. You take Parowan, now. Leaving out the gamblers that are risking their money, you've helped many a poor man to a job at top wages. Ain't that so?"

"I reckon it is," Bill assented perfunctorily. "There's always big wages where there's a boom, and many a man got his start that way. But you've hit the spot that hurts. It's the fun of doing things that I want. The money's coming in fast enough for all we want, but I'm a loafer for the first time in my life, Baker. My Lord! Think of a grown man putting in day after

day just taking a horseback ride in the morning and a swim in the afternoon; and calling that exercise!

"When I was prospecting, Baker, I put in my time from dawn to dusk, hiking over the hills or swinging a pick. I ate because I was hungry. Now, by gosh, folks don't get hungry—they don't give themselves a chance. They eat because somebody's paid a big price to make grub taste good! This is a mighty pretty place to play around in, Baker—but I can't make a business of doing nothing." He made himself a cigarette—rolling his own whenever he was not under Doris' watchful eye—and lighted it absently. "Doris likes this sort of thing," he added pensively. "It's all right for women—but I'll be damned if it's any kinda life for a man!"

Baker Cole chuckled somewhere down in his chest and laid an impressive forefinger on Bill's arm.

"You come on and play with *me*, in my game," he invited. "I can't promise you won't make money at it—but you'll have fun."

"I bet I would, at that," said Bill. "But my wife doesn't want me to get into business. She wants me to run along and play." It was the nearest that Bill had ever come to uttering a complaint. He did not realize that it was even distantly related to a protest against the future which Doris had mapped out for them.

But as he spoke, he saw a swift, mental panorama of cities and shops and long, pillared, hotel corridors and suites furnished in velvet upholstery. He felt his feet sinking into the sickish softness of deep-piled carpets, and boys with bright buttons and little caps and silver trays dogging him with the prematurely calculating smirk. He saw long, shaded avenues down which he was carried swiftly on cushions,—always cushions and carpets and a smothery, scented atmosphere that sometimes nauseated him with its cloying sweetness.

He shut his eyes, pressing his lips together in silent revolt against the picture. And there, sharply outlined before him, were the stark, barren hills of the desert. Volcanic rubble in the foreground, and stunted sage, and a lizard ducking its head with a queer, ticking motion while it watched him from a rock; soft shadows lying at the foot of great boulders, and all the magic tints of distance; the two burros shuffling before him, picking their way daintily, setting tiny feet between the rocks; Sister Mitchell, horny and gray and solemn, clinging to the canvas with claws thrust out from her shell the size of a dinner plate; and Luella, a vivid bit of green in the gray monotone, riding gallantly the pack of Wise One and talking gravely of things a parrot shouldn't know; and Hez, solemnly herding the little company and believing himself indispensable,—Bill's teeth came down hard on his under lip.

"You're homesick," Baker Cole's voice shattered the vision for the moment.

Bill swallowed and could not meet his eyes. He threw away his cigarette, gone cold between his lips—bitten, too, in the sharp pain of remembrance—and reached for his sack of tobacco.

"I want the crunch of gravel under my feet," he admitted, smiling a twisted smile. "The ocean kind of filled the hankering for distance—but I want to get out and walk and walk—— Aw, hell! A man can't have everything at once. I had the desert, and all the while I dreamed of being rich and not having to eat beans and bacon. I was almost as sick of that country as Mrs. Dale was. But somehow—she takes to this life better than I do. She hates to be reminded of Nevada, and has been trying to coax her folks to sell out and come to the Coast. I don't blame her—not for one minute. It's no place for a woman, back there."

Baker Cole rose and flicked cigar ashes off his vest.

"You're dated up with me for a little trip down Bakersfield way," he grinned. "I'll show you desert—and a game you'll like to play. It's going to be a stag party, so you'll have to get your wife's permission. We'll be gone a week, maybe. You'll have to sleep on the ground and cook over a camp fire. Bring a roll of blankets, if you like. Can you make it tomorrow?"

Doris thought it was rather sudden. She had several things on for the week, however,—things which Bill-dear would not enjoy at all. Moreover, she had learned that close friendship with the Baker Coles was like being favored by royalty, and the necessity of explaining that her husband was off somewhere with Baker Cole for a week would cause the other women to twitter enviously and draw her closer within their hallowed circle.

"It'll be awfully lonesome, dear man, but I do think you'll enjoy the change. Don't worry one minute about me, Bill-dear. With my maid and chauffeur, I shall be all right. And Mrs. Baker Cole has asked me to stay with her, if I feel at all

strange here at the hotel. Perhaps I shall. I haven't decided, yet."

Had she met the situation with a shade less equanimity, Bill would not have gone with Baker Cole. And that would have made a great difference, later on. But Destiny has a way of providing for the seemingly unimportant things of life,— which are never unimportant, whether we know it or not. He went with Baker Cole down into a region where men were pumping wealth from the ground deep under the sage-covered plains. His going was the beginning of several changes in Bill's life.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"MARY'S GOING TO HAVE A HOME!"

Bill sat in a deep chair and held out his arms. Timorously, as if she were taking a great risk, a white-capped nurse stooped starchily and placed within the curve of them a soft little bundle. Bill held his breath until the precious, warm little body lay cuddled against his chest.

Once each day, for a stingy ten minutes or so, Bill was permitted to hold his daughter in his arms. Sometimes, if the nurse and Doris forgot their vigilance for a space, Bill could fumble and uncover the smallest, pinkest, squirmiest feet he had ever seen in his life. On one memorable occasion, when fire engines went clanging past the silk-hung windows, he had been left unobserved long enough to brush the soft pink soles against his lips.

Little Miss Mary Dale was growing at the astonishing rate of a pound a week, which Bill considered phenomenal and told of whenever he decided that it would not be a breach of etiquette to admit that he was human enough to be proud of his baby; which tells the story of Bill's servitude to conventions which he hated even while he meekly obeyed the rules.

What Bill wanted to do was carry his daughter down into the lobby and show her off to everybody who came in. Why not, since there wasn't another baby in San Francisco that could come within a mile of her for looks and intelligence? What he did do was sneak up to the room set aside for the nursery—they were still living in a hotel, which at this particular time was the Palace—and pull down the silken coverlets and gaze at little Mary until he was discovered and shooed away. After two months of this, Bill was beginning to feel abused. She was *his* baby, as well as Doris'. He believed that he had a right to look at her now and then, since Doris assumed the privilege of rocking her and talking unintelligibly to her by the hour.

Still, Bill was accustomed to carrying a proper sense of his limitations about with him. A year had convinced him that husbands didn't amount to much, after all; that they were frequently a real obstacle to a woman's pursuit of happiness. And since his whole soul was still fixed upon making Doris completely happy, he eliminated himself from the scene whenever he saw a certain look in the eyes of his wife, and ministered to her happiness as unobtrusively as possible. One deep hurt remained with Bill, do what he would to forget it. Doris had not been pleased about little Mary,—until she had actually arrived and won her own place in the family. That had hurt Bill terribly and made his own eagerness seem a fault which he must hide as best he could.

Well, women had their own ideas of things, their own hopes and ambitions. Doris didn't seem to have had enough of the glitter of life, yet. She didn't want to have a house and settle down to real home life. Bill was beginning to feel that he did not understand her at all. Home life would be lonely, she complained; would shut her away from the things she loved best. For instance, Doris never tired of the big, beautiful dining places with the music and the soft lights, the flash of jewels and the hovering, obsequious servants. She wanted the deference that bowed and waited for largess. She loved the smiles and the nods from rich diners at other tables. She loved to have her maid telephone to the steward that he would please lay so many extra covers at the William Gordon Dale table. And would he please see that there were just a few orchids peeping out from dark-green foliage, massed very low,—that glossy green which Mrs. Dale likes so well?

And then she liked to forget all about the dinner until the guests had actually arrived, and to know that the arrangements would be perfect to the slightest detail,—with Doris herself the most perfect part of it, smiling and showing the dimple in her left cheek, and sparkling across at her husband, addressing him humorously as Bill-dear. Doris, Bill observed (because the good Lord gave him powers of observation which worked automatically) had begun calling him Bill-dear openly, in social gatherings, immediately after she heard Mrs. Baker Cole say "angel husband" in an adorably quizzical tone that never failed to bring a smile. It rather spoiled the Bill-dear for him in private, but Doris never guessed that.

Neither did she guess Bill's inner shame that his child should be born in a hotel. Bill flushed in secret over the thought that, years afterward, when little Mary asked about her birthplace, her parents must refer her to suite E, Palace Hotel,—which had housed thousands before their baby opened her eyes there, and would house thousands after she had been carried away. Being born in a hotel, in Bill's estimation, was a little better than being born on a train, but not much.

So Bill's dream of a home with Doris—a place of their very own—seemed as far off as ever; and the fact that he could have bought a mansion fine enough even for Doris with the money he had paid to hotel cashiers in the past twelve months

did not help him to resignation.

A nomadic life; a life that to Bill seemed inexcusably shiftless, temporary. They had sampled several hotels, in the several cities they had visited during the first few months. They were all alike,—luxurious shelters for the traveling rich. He went about thinking how all the other guests had homes somewhere; places where they dropped anchor occasionally, at least, and took stock of themselves. He began to try and hide the fact that he and Doris had no home; that they were always tagged with a number and their mail messed up with forwarding addresses. And now, here was little Miss Mary without a home that she could look back to afterwards with affection. To Bill the thing was becoming a disgrace, the blame resting on his own shoulders. He had promised Doris that she should live where she pleased. Now he owed another duty to his daughter.

"She's beginning to notice things, Bill-dear." Doris came up and sat on the arm of a near-by chair. "To-day her eyes followed the flash of my rings—I tried her out, and she really did notice. Wake up, s'leepy thing! Show daddy how 'em can smile!"

"We'll have to get a place of our own," Bill began tentatively, consciously treading thin ice. "We can't have her think a hotel like this is all the kind of home there is in the world. Honey, don't you think a nice house up on the hill—or maybe in some other town——"

"Oh, Bill, please don't start that! You're gone half the time, almost—running around the country playing you're doing important things. What would I do in a great big house with nobody around but servants? I'd go crazy, that's all. And then, if we wanted to go somewhere, like New York or Europe, there would be the house to worry about. As it is, all we have to do is pack our trunks—and we can hire professional packers to do that. We have every comfort we could possibly have at home, and a lot besides. And I can see people, Bill, without giving a dinner or a card party or something. I'm going to have an at-home day—lots of permanent guests here do. And if I want to entertain, look at the advantages.

"Besides," she added artfully, "you know you couldn't keep in touch with men half so easily if you were struck off in a big house on Nob Hill or somewhere."

Bill did not answer for a minute. He was apparently quite absorbed with the baby's hands; he had never seen such tiny, soft hands before.

"I wouldn't run around so much, honey, if I had a home," he said quietly, looking up at Doris.

"Oh, fudge! Men with homes are gone *more*. You can't fool me! I've heard the women talk who have homes. Their husbands are always gone somewhere, their servants are always stealing them blind or quitting, and the house is a white elephant. Besides, I don't know where I'd like to live permanently. I can't picture myself settling down in any one town—can you, Bill? Now be honest."

"Yes. Parowan."

Well, she had wanted him honest, and she got the truth. Nor did she relish it, judging from the look on her face.

"Parowan! Of all the places in the world——"

"It's where we got the money to spend here," Bill stated stubbornly. "I've had some mighty happy times there, even if I did eat bacon and beans and hike a hundred miles after them sometimes. It made our stake for us—that same Parowan. Only for that mountain, you'd still be hazing your dad's cattle away from the *loco* patches, maybe, and helping your mother with the dishes. I don't wish you were—I'm tickled to death that you can wear diamonds and hire a nigger to comb your hair for you. But just the same, Doris, let's not get our heads so high in the air we can't see what Parowan ought to mean to us.

"This baby's mine—and yours. We've got her, and we haven't got a roof for her to sleep under, except what we hire by the week. Only for Parowan, we couldn't have married at all; don't forget that. You wouldn't have married a poor prospector, and if you would, I wouldn't have let you. It was the gold I found on that mountain side that made it possible for me to ask you to marry me. And it was the gold that made you say yes."

He swallowed as if there were some obstruction in his throat and went on, staring straight before him,—seeing that cut in the gulch's side, perhaps, and the slim girl in the stained khaki riding skirt and cotton shirt waist staring at the vein of

yellow-flecked rock.

"You can't think of any place where you want to give our child a home. Well, I can! She's going to have one, whether it's ever lived in or not. It's going to be at Parowan, on the spot where her daddy lived when he found the gold that made her possible. I wouldn't do it for you, against your wish. You like this froth, and I want you to have what you like best. But *Mary's going to have a home.*"

He did not raise his voice; indeed he almost whispered the words. Yet they struck Doris like a lash. Never before had Bill opposed her wishes, or declared that he would do a thing which Doris had not first decided to do.

"You can't take her away from me," she said breathlessly.

"I don't intend to take her away from you." Bill's tone was flat, emotionless, because he dared not slip the leash from his emotions. "Some day, when she's old enough to know what she's missing, the kid may want to come—home. There's going to be one for her. It's her right."

"In that case," said Doris coldly, "why not build it in civilization, at least, where she can use it?"

"I'm hoping," said Bill, very quietly, "that when my girl grows up she'll have some sense."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SO BILL GOES BACK

Parowan sprawled over the slope of the mountain without much regularity in her streets and with no dignity whatever. Bill had read faithfully each copy of the *Parowan Record* as soon as he received it, and he had calmly believed that he was keeping in close touch with the town. For instance, he had studied the picture of the new, two-story concrete schoolhouse with its graded yard and young shade trees and the cement walks and all. He had told Doris proudly that the building would reflect credit on any California town,—which was true, so far as the picture went.

Just at first he did not recognize the schoolhouse as he came up the street from the pagoda-roofed, cement depot with its arches that purported to be Moorish or Mission, no one seemed to know which. The depot had looked cunning in the picture, Doris had thought, and Bill had enthusiastically agreed with her. It did not look so cunning in reality; merely pretentious in a cheap way that irritated him. When he failed to recognize the schoolhouse, a cracker-box edifice of ugly cement blocks surrounded by raw, unpainted shacks, Bill was shocked. He had mistaken it for the jail until he observed the absence of bars at the windows, and the trampled ground in front.

He strode up the board walk—hastily laid, of cheap lumber and already showing wide cracks and broken sections where knot holes had weakened the wood and much trampling had done the rest. The Parowan Security and Trust Savings Bank stared at him from the next corner. This building he recognized the moment he saw it, and with reason. Parowan Consolidated occupied the entire front of the second story, and the building was printed in miniature upon the Company's letterheads, with the sign showing distinctly across the upper windows.

Across from the bank, the O'Hara House floated a green pennant with the O'Hara in white upon it; which was the sign of the O'Hara House in cities all through the West. Bill and Doris had tried one in Portland, and had found it almost good enough for Doris, although "two-rooms-and-bath" were the best accommodations the place afforded, with the bath connecting, which was terrible. But the cuisine was above criticism. O'Hara food always was perfect and immaculately served. Nevertheless, Bill curled his lips at the sign and went into a grocery store and bought a can of tomatoes, a pound of coffee, a little flour and butter and onions and potatoes and such other supplies as he happened to see or remember, and called a loafing Mexican to carry the stuff to his old camp, Bill walking ahead with his suitcase to show the way.

Tommy, it appeared, had been faithful to his trust. The camp was enclosed by a highboard fence, and there were signs which said, "KEEP OUT!! THIS MEANS YOU!!" Bill grinned happily and had the Mexican set the things down by the gate and go back whence he had come, an extra dollar in his overalls pocket and a wide smile on his face.

Tommy had sent the extra padlock key to Bill, perhaps in proof of his good faith. Bill opened the gate and was set upon with deadly intent by Hezekiah, who evidently failed to remember him until Bill spoke his name. Then his joy became hysterical and brought a lump into Bill's throat.

His tent stood just as he had left it, with the forge under the juniper tree and the dugout cellar in the bank. His bunk was neatly spread with his blankets, though dust lay on the calico-covered pillow. His dishes were placed in orderly rows upon the box shelves, a pile of dry wood lay behind the cook stove. And from the ridgepole, suspended by a bit of rope tied through the handle, hung a black leather case,—the silver saxophone.

Bill laughed a little when he glanced up and saw the symbol of one secret hope, but there was no mirth in the laughter. He was thinking what a fool he had been to dream of playing "Love's Old, Sweet Song" with Doris. Doris never sang nowadays. She would not sing the old songs Bill loved, because they were so absolutely back-woodsy and she did not seem to care about learning the new ones. Besides, she explained, her voice had never been cultivated; an omission for which Bill thanked God in his heart, after hearing other women strain their vocal chords with technical skill and little melody. Doris did not even know about the saxophone. It seemed unlikely now that she ever would know.

Bill started a fire, laid his coat across the pillow, removed his cuffs and his collar and began to peel the potatoes. He missed Luella, but he knew that she was down in Tommy's Place, in the back room where her speech would not be too corrupted, and he did not want to meet any one until he had eaten and smoked and planned exactly what he would do. Until he was actually on the ground he could not choose a site for the home he meant to build,—a home worthy his little Mary.

Doris had not seemed to mind his coming, and she had made no open objection to his errand. She had adopted a neutral attitude, a slightly tolerant manner toward Bill and his plan. If he wanted to build a house for the baby, years before the baby would be able to appreciate the gift, that was his own affair. She supposed he realized that the house would be all out of date long before Mary was big enough to live in it,—and did he actually mean to furnish the thing?

"It's going to be ready to step into and hang up your hat and the baby's bonnet, before I leave it," Bill had assured her steadfastly. "Whether you ever see the inside of it or not makes no difference. That will be up to you, honey. But I'm going to do my part. I'll make the home."

Well, he was here for that purpose. He had the plans in his suitcase, and the builders had ordered the material and shipped two carloads. He was to choose the site and wire whether Parowan could furnish cement workers competent to lay the foundation. He had left only one thing undone: he had not told any one in Parowan that he was coming. Wherefore, he was surprised to hear the gate open and shut, and to see Tommy presently thrust his spectacled face belligerently into the tent opening.

"An' it's yerself, is ut, Mr. Dale?" Tommy stood within the tent, goggling at Bill, his leathery face relaxing into a wide grin. "I was toold uh somewan makin' hisself free wit' this place, an' I left Dugan in charrge of the s'loon an' come along over t' have it out wit' the boorglar. I did that!"

For the first time in months, the old, sunny twinkle was back in Bill's eyes. He would not have believed that he would ever be so glad to see Tommy.

"You go back and get Luella, darn yuh," he commanded, trying to be harsh about it. "And don't let on I'm back, will you, Tommy? I want to surprise the boys. If you haven't eaten, we'll have a real feed. Good old onions and spuds fried in bacon grease!"

"I've been stoppin' at the O'Hara House, Mr. Dale," said Tommy stiffly. "They set a foine table—they do, that! Pie an' ice cream bot' at the same meal, Mr. Dale, an' no extry charrge fer that same. I been settin' the buttons forrard on my vest since I been boardin' wit' O'Hara, an' it's the trut' I'm tellin' yuh now." He took a step toward the doorway and stopped, loath to go.

"An' if it's the gin'ral manager uh Parowan yuh mean t' supprise, Mr. Dale, yuh'll do that same or I mistake. I ast 'im yisterday was yuh ever comin' back t' take holt, an' he says you was too busy makin' the money fly. An' I says to him, I says, 'It's to Parowan he sh'd come fer that,' I says, 'fer I never in all my born days seen the like.'"

Bill rescued the coffee from boiling over.

"Thought I was going broke or something, did he?"

"I dunno as to that, Mr. Dale. But he says you bin makin' it fly, an' c'llectin' yoor share fast as it comes in, he says. I take it he meant you been cuttin' a wide swathe, Mr. Dale—which nobody's got a better right, that I know. The best has been none too good, he says to me, an' named over the hotels yuh been boarding at. An' phwat business it was uh hisn I dunno, fer it's yer own money yuh been spendin'. An' I toold him that same, I did."

"I'm going to spend some more too," Bill declared, and smiled queerly to himself.

"Yuh'll never spend more than yuh've got, Mr. Dale—well I know that," drawled Tommy. "My last dime'd back that statement. It would that. An' it'd be well if I could put my good money on some others—which I would not." With that somewhat cryptic observation, Tommy withdrew to bring the parrot.

Bill sat himself down to what he considered the most satisfying meal he had eaten in many a day. He was not a primitive soul, fit only to enjoy the cruder things of life; but there was something within him that rebelled against smiles and handshakes where no good will begot them, and at the servility of hotel servants hoping for tips, and the insipid, painted faces of women who bared their shoulders and whispered malicious gossip behind jeweled hands. He could remember some wonderful evenings filled with music or the genius of great actors picturing life before him on the stage; and he could also remember evenings when he had been too bored and resentful to see the humor that lay beneath the surface of the peacock parade. And more than anything else, Doris had made mealtime an occasion for studied display that should seem unconscious. He had come to dread dinner especially.

Wherefore he enjoyed his onions and potatoes, his stewed tomatoes and fried corn all the more because he knew how certain eyebrows would lift in astonishment could their owners look in upon the wealthy William Gordon Dale, and see how he was enjoying his plebeian fare.

"Doris would like a taste of this grub," he told himself gayly as he filled his plate the second time. "She's hypnotized now with the novelty of it—dazzled with the glamor. But it's no natural life for anybody that has lived the real thing; seen life stripped down to reality. It's all pretense—and Doris is more than half pretending, herself. Pretending she likes that sort of thing—when she's probably half homesick, right now, for the desert, and won't admit it.

"Wait till she sees the house I'll build for her! No great barn of a place that she couldn't use, out here—but a jewel of a home. Everything she likes that will fit in here. *I* know! I've watched her eyes when we struck some new place. Big, rock fireplace—Parowan rock; beamed ceilings, broad stairway, hardwood floors—great, long stretches of space with arches—and a big window framing the desert like a picture. What she calls a vista. I know—you bet I know! She thinks I'm going to build some darned box of a place, perhaps of cement. I let her think so. It'll be all rock, and glass, and hardwoods that will last a century and longer.

"I'll find a hillside where the town won't be right under her nose, and I'll frame a vista for her with every window in the house! She can have house parties, if she wants to—lots of those city folks would be crazy to come and spend a week or two over here. In fact, they've thrown out hints about it, some of them—only Doris wouldn't take it that way.

"Things'll grow, here," he went on, thinking and planning more hopefully than he had done for months. "I'll have grounds laid out, and things planted that will make our home a garden spot. It may cost something, but——" He grinned then, and offered Hez a bacon rind and held his chops for a minute so that he could gaze deep into his eyes.

"Hez, you old devil, I believe you're kind of glad I came home," he said, and lingered wistfully on the last word. "You can be bodyguard for little Mary, when she gets to toddling around. I'll have to put a fence around the place to keep her in, I expect. You'd take care of the snakes and scorpions and such, wouldn't you, old boy? Never saw a bug get away from you yet."

Tommy came, with Luella riding solemnly on his shoulder. Bill rose to greet her, having been schooled in his deportment toward ladies. Luella craned her neck and eyed him suspiciously while he coaxed her, then remembered and stepped gravely upon his inviting forefinger.

"I'll be damned," she observed, looking at him with her head tilted. "Look who's here! When did you get in?"

"You can't tell me this bird ain't human," Bill exclaimed much impressed by the remark.

"She's heard that talk in the s'loon," Tommy discounted her intelligence. "If she don't speak worse things I'll be content. Your turkle's gone, Mr. Dale. I'm thinkin' she's wandered away, an' I've a reward out fer her—if it's a her, which I dunno—an' I'm hopin' she'll be returned to yuh. It's a week ago she disappeared—she did that."

"Holed up for the winter, maybe. They do, you know."

"That's a hell of a note!" cried Luella sharply.

"Well, I must be gittin' back, Mr. Dale. An' when it pleases yuh, maybe yuh'll step into my place an' have a bit of a drink on the house. An' I'll be proud to see yuh enter the door—I will that."

"First place I hit, Tommy, will be yours. And mind you, I want to surprise the boys."

"It's the town itself'll be glad to see yer face, Mr. Dale," Tommy muttered and went off, wagging his head.

Bill was trying to persuade Luella to kiss him, and did not hear.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BILL GIVES THE PUBLIC MIND A LIFT

Bill brushed past the sleek-haired office girl who attempted to bar his way and turned the knob on the door marked PRIVATE. He did not know which man he would find within; he was slightly relieved to find Walter Rayfield sitting behind a great, mahogany desk, staring at him in blank astonishment.

"Hullo, Walter." Bill crossed the room, his hand outstretched in greeting, the old, humorous grin on his face that had lost much of its tan.

"Well, well! The prodigal come home for the fatted calf?" Rayfield pulled himself together and rose, his lips pursed. "Veal's bringing a good price, Bill. Have to make it a small calf."

Bill did not know what he meant by that; nothing, probably, unless he was aiming at a witty remark. A year had made a difference in Walter B. Rayfield. He was fatter, and there were heavy pouches under his eyes. The milky one was almost hidden under a drooping lid, which gave him a facetious appearance of winking slyly at whomever he chanced to be looking. His face had lines graven deep by the responsibilities of the past months. Altogether, Walter Rayfield looked older and less paternal, Bill thought.

"How are things going?" Bill sat down in the chair pulled close to the desk and reached for his tobacco and papers. "According to the *Record*, things are still humming at Parowan."

Rayfield glanced down at a pile of correspondence on the desk. Then, knowing that Bill would probably stay until he had smoked one cigarette at least, he pushed the tray back resignedly and leaned forward, his fingers lightly clasped and tapping one another rhythmically.

"Things are humming," Rayfield confirmed guardedly. "I suppose you read of our shutdown to replace certain machinery?"

"Sure. That was last summer, sometime. Got it in, yet?"

Rayfield shook his head. "Those things take time," he said. "Stock has fallen off a few points in consequence—naturally. And how is Mrs. Dale and daughter?"

"Just fine. Doris sent regards."

"Which I return fourfold." Rayfield smiled gallantly. "When are you going back? Of course, I take it you did not bring them with you."

"No, I didn't bring them. They're camped at the Palace for the winter. I'm going to stick here for awhile." Bill glanced out of the window and down into the squalid street, and wondered how Doris would like that particular vista. He did not see the peculiar stiffening of the muscles along Rayfield's jaw.

"Going to stay? That's great news, Bill. Come back to try and speed things up, I suppose?"

Bill looked at him. Did Walter resent his coming, as betraying a lack of confidence in the present management? His tone had sounded mildly aggrieved.

"No need of that, is there? Things seem to be going all right, far as I've heard. No, Walter, I came back to take charge—of building us a home here. I'd like to see a plan of the town and look over any available ground left in the residence district. I'll want a full block, at least; high ground, where there's a view of the desert and the hills. I expect it will take a few months to build it, but I'm going to rush it right through. And say, by the way! Can you tell me whether there's anybody in town that's able to lay the foundation? I've got all the plans and specifications—copies of them—with me. I'm going to have the builders come on from San Francisco, but they're just finishing up a contract now, and I can save time by having the foundation ready when they're free to come. Think I'd better take bids on it, or just give the contract to the best man? A few dollars, one way or the other, won't make any difference. I want a good job; one that'll stand forever."

Rayfield's mouth had opened slightly in the beginning, and had closed in his genial smile. The paternal look was back in

his face.

"My, my! That will be great news to the town, it surely will! I've had some little trouble, Bill, convincing people that you hadn't just made your clean-up and quit the town cold. When it's known that you are back and building a home, that will silence all criticism." Rayfield nodded and drummed his fingers animatedly.

"Criticism—of me?" Bill's face clouded. "I thought you kept writing I wasn't needed."

"Perfectly true. Unless you feel that John and I have shown that we are incompetent, you are not needed at all. But you know people will talk—and with you gone so long and showing no interest, it began to look to some of the leading business men as if you had—well, unloaded."

What Bill would have replied to that was not known. They were interrupted by the entrance of John Emmett, who had evidently been in a hurry, but forgot his haste to stare at Bill.

"Time I came home," said Bill, getting up to shake hands. "Everybody looks as if I were a ghost that ought to get back under my marble monument and stay there."

"Not at all," Emmett protested. "Your back was to the light, and I couldn't make out who you were, at first. Well, how are you?"

"News for the town, John," Rayfield interrupted briskly. "Bill's here to build a fine home for his family. I've promised to help him look up a building site, and get a contractor on the job to lay the foundation. Going to start right away—that right, Bill? I got the impression you were in something of a hurry to begin."

Emmett looked from one to the other and laughed a little.

"Thought you'd come to fire us because we're about to pass a dividend," he said. "I was just writing you to that effect."

Rayfield pursed his lips. "Bill is not a child," he said reprovingly. "He knows dividends aren't paid out of extension costs. Once we're running full blast again, we'll be paying double what we have in the past, and Parowan Consolidated will soar again. We've done well to pay last quarter's dividends—with the mill shut down and the men out on strike."

"I didn't know we'd had a strike," Bill said inquiringly.

Rayfield threw back his head and laughed silently.

"Well, it was sort of hushed up in the paper, naturally. The men did walk out—and we seized the opportunity to make the necessary changes and repairs in the plant. John and I were rather glad, on the whole. Saved us laying men off, which would have looked bad. Company wasn't out a dollar on the strike, and to keep the stockholders easy in their minds, we paid last quarter's dividends out of our sinking fund. Now, because the alterations are taking longer than we expected, we have thought it best to pass this dividend and explain just why. Your appearance, with the intention of building a home in Parowan, should counteract any ill effect on the public mind." He stopped and looked at Bill inquiringly as a thought seemed to strike him suddenly.

"You—er—you have sufficient funds, I take it, to carry out your plans," he ventured. "Because, in the event that you haven't, I should strongly advise you to postpone your building until the mine is producing again. These repairs and changes run into money, my boy, and the Company will not be able to advance anything, I'm afraid, for another three or four months. I was on the point of writing you to trim sails a bit—until we are turning the wheels again."

Bill chewed his lip thoughtfully, turning his eyes again to the window.

"I'm safe on the building, I reckon," he said, after a pause which was not too comfortable for the others. "I saved that out." He turned toward them smilingly. "She's going to be a dandy, too," he said. "Parowan will sit up and take notice when my shack is finished. Not so very big, you know—but a gem all the way through. I've calculated to put about seventy-five thousand dollars into the building itself. She'll stand me a round hundred thousand when she's ready to walk into."

His partners looked at each other. Rayfield sucked in his breath sharply.

"My, my! And I was afraid you were short of money!" he chuckled, when he had recovered his breath. "Bill, you're a wonder. Way you've been living——"

"About all the money I've spent," said Bill grimly, "is on hotel bills—and a few trinkets for Doris. Her income that you have been sending her she spent on clothes and truck. Didn't give me a chance. She liked to spend her own money, she said. So—I can build the house, all right. I've got money enough."

"And what about your wife?" Rayfield spoke unguardedly. "She won't be getting any more from this office, for awhile." He waved a deprecating hand. "Pardon my apparent presumption, Bill. I merely want to make sure that you can ride along for the next ninety days or so without any money from us."

"Why, sure! That's all right, Walter. I don't gamble or drink, you see. And I didn't play the races—which is gambling, too. So I didn't get away with all you sent me. I can make out all right for awhile."

He rose and picked his hat off the desk.

"I'll be going, I reckon. You've got work to do—hope your salaries will go on?" he looked at them.

"Yes—oh, yes. It's only the dividends that must be omitted this quarter," Rayfield hastened to assure him.

"Well, that's all fine, then. I'm afraid you'll have to go on earning your money. I've got this house to build, and I want to see that it's built the right way. I'm going to stand guard over them. Just now, I'm going downstairs and have an account opened for me. I've got the house money with me, and if it's in the bank, Parowan will know I'm not four-flushing about the home. If the public mind needs a tonic, that ought to help."

Rayfield stood up and leaned with his knuckles on the desk.

"It will help amazingly," he said solemnly. "It will serve to instil new life in the commercial veins of this town. I tell you frankly, Bill, I did not like to pass this dividend just now, when the town has passed the first fever of enthusiasm and should be stimulated to go on with full confidence in the future. The fact that you have sufficient confidence to invest in a fine house here will have a tremendous effect on the morale of the town."

"All right," Bill grinned. "I'll go slide a pinchbar under the public mind and give it a lift. And say! Who's the best man to talk foundation to?"

"Fellow name of McGaran," Emmett told him promptly. "You'll find his sign down the street in the next block. He did our cement work, and he's a good man."

Bill went out and down the stairs, humming a little tune just above his breath. Presently, the president of the Parowan Security, Trust and Savings Bank was giving his hands a dry wash and smiling and bowing at almost everything Bill said. Teller, cashier and assistant cashier were bustling out of sight with slips of paper in their hands, looking extremely important until the ground-glass partition hid them from the front, and whispering then, heads close together, with the bookkeeper, trying his best to edge in a question or two.

"Bill Dale—he's here—just deposited sixty-thousand dollars, cashier's check from the Hibernian, in 'Frisco!" The teller took hurried pity on the bookkeeper. "He's with the boss now. Come out in a minute and consult me about a check, and take a look at him. Boy, he looks like a regular fellow!"

The bookkeeper almost missed him, at that. Bill was having his busy day. Before the bank employees quit buzzing, Bill was conferring with McGaran about cement and making time the essence of the contract, as lawyers say.

From McGaran's office Bill went to a place said to be the Town-site Office,—just behind the bank, it was. And in fifteen minutes he was riding a hard-driven automobile over slopes which had furnished scant grazing for his burros not so long ago. For himself he would have built the house beside his tent, but for Doris that wouldn't do at all. The working class had crowded into that part of town, because it was close to the mine. Wherefore, Bill examined vacant plots far removed from the grime and the noise of money-getting.

Before noon he had acquired personal title to a knoll not too far from the business section, nor so close that any part of the magnificent sweep of desert and distant mountains could ever be hidden from the windows and wide porches of his Mary's home. Laying aside his sentiment for his old camp ground, and trying to see all this with the eyes of Doris and,

later, of his little Mary, Bill looked long and said to himself that he had done well.

By then, all Parowan knew that Bill Dale had returned and meant to start immediately upon the building of a mansion. A new light shone in the eyes of certain men who had been looking anxiously for some sign in the heavens to tell them whether the prosperity of Parowan would break or hold.

For this there was a reason. Other prospects had been exploited far beyond their deserts. Their little bubbles had glowed iridescent for a time, and were going the way of all bubbles. Parowan Consolidated was the only real mine behind the town, the one big industry that could hold prosperity upon the mountain side. Other small camps had appeared in near-by canyons, desert mushrooms more or less poisonous to the unwary.

At first it had been believed that the gold Bill Dale had found would be uncovered elsewhere in the district. The promoters of Parowan had carefully fostered that belief, and even yet the men on the outside were unaware of the fact that certain other opulently named companies were riding precariously up the tail of Bill Dale's kite. They advertised their properties as being "adjoining the Parowan Consolidated properties," and sold stock on the strength of that statement rather than because of any particular value in their own claims. And the *Parowan Record* was doing all that any boom-town newspaper could do to discourage discouragement and foster faith in the district.

There was meaning in Rayfield's declaration that the passing of a dividend by Parowan Consolidated was unfortunate at that particular time, and that the coming of Bill was likely to prove a godsend to the town.

The business men watched Bill covertly for a time, still anxious. Then, when material for the big house began to arrive, and expert builders from the city; when trucks and men were busy on the knoll, certain of the watchers breathed freer and relinquished certain secret plans they had been making to leave Parowan as quietly as possible while they could pull out with a profit.

Bill himself was enough to put heart into the most timorous. He was so happy to be back and to be building his home that his voice lifted the spirits and set men to smiling at nothing in particular. The twinkle was back in his eyes; his laugh was a tonic. With Hez slouching along at his heels and Luella riding his shoulder, he walked the streets and had a word for every man who met his eye with friendly glance; bossed the job of the building. When he made brief visits to Doris and the baby, Parowan was uneasy until he returned.

The passing of the dividend created scarcely a ripple of comment, since Bill Dale was there, spending money on a home, and since Bill said that Parowan Consolidated was merely getting ready to shovel out the gold in chunks.

"Can't pay dividends, boys, when we're spending money on new machinery," he said easily, believing it all in the bottom of his heart.

Those who had begun to sell a little of their Parowan stock wished they had kept it. And those who could, bought more. Four times par they paid for it, and called it a good investment. Bill told them that it was beyond question a deep, rich, permanent mine, and that as long as he had anything to do with it, Parowan was not going to turn a dishonest dollar.

That winter the town continued to grow and to prosper. And on the fourteenth day of February Parowan Consolidated asked for extra guards for the express car, and made a valentine shipment of gold. Almost immediately, stockholders were notified that the regular dividend would be made.

So Parowan had passed its critical period of uncertainty and was accepted as a permanent town that might even rival Goldfield and Tonopah in wealth, give it a little time.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE YARN AL FREEMAN TOLD

Al Freeman, slouched forward on a box, dangled a cold cigarette from his loose lips and gave Bill the slinking, slant-eyed regard of a trapped coyote. Behind him, Tommy stood grim, with his underjaw lifted and thrust forward in a comical attempt to look as deadly as he felt. Thrust within the waistband of his sagging gray trousers was an ivory-handled revolver which had lately done its share toward intimidating the man before him. Bill held his underlip between his teeth, lest he smile and so spoil a dramatic situation evidently quite precious to the little Irishman, whom Nature had never meant for a swashbuckling hero.

"Spake up, now!" Thus Tommy cracked the whip of authority over Al. "Tell t' Mr. Dale phwat I heard yuh tellin' t' Jack Bole in my s'loon—an' tell it the same er I'll let the daylight t'rough yuh! I will, that." He rolled the words out with unctiousness, with an eye canted up through his glasses to observe the effect of his harshness upon Bill. A small boy patting a tame bear could never have felt himself more dare-devilishly courageous.

"'Tis a foine tale I heard him tellin', Mr. Dale, an' one that concerns you an' yoors. I'll have it outa him, never fear."

"Shall I heat the poker Tommy?" Bill's tone was innocent, if his eyes were not. "Or have you put the fear of the Lord in him already?"

"Aw, he ain't able t' scare a rabbit," Al protested with an ingratiating smile that managed to make itself mighty unpleasant, in spite of him. "What I tolt Jack Bole I'm willin' t' tell you, Mr. Dale—only I wisht to say that I never meant yuh no harm, an' fur as I kin see I ain't done yuh no harm neither. You made yer pile, an' I was only tryin' t' make a livin' best way I could. An' seein' yo're rich an' I'm broke, I cain't see as I done ye no harm. Which I wouldn't of wanted t' do yuh nohow."

"Clear as the Colorado River in flood time," Bill made cheerful comment. "Let's have the story, and never mind the footnotes. Go ahead. I'll keep Tommy off your back—if I can. He's a hard man to stop, once he gets started, but I'll protect you if possible."

Whereat Tommy scowled and clamped his jaws together anew, not perceiving the joke. And his captive, actuated by motives of his own, proceeded to tell his story, which startled Bill more than he would like to own.

Since Al's illiterate speech is not particularly attractive and his manner of telling the tale wearisome with a frequent seize and seize-I, here is the gist of the matter which Tommy had thought fit for Bill's ears and best attention:

In coming to Parowan as packer for the government research men, Al had come with instructions to do exactly what he had done. He declared that the sole object of Rayfield and Emmett had been to discover what value there was in Bill's claims. They had been first attracted by the parrot, talking unguardedly in Goldfield—Al here repeated almost verbatim what the parrot had said, since Jim Lambert had jotted down the sentences and had seen fit to study them seriously—and had laid their plans carefully before ever they left the town.

Al said that he was taken up to Jim Lambert's office, and there he first heard of the scheme, agreed to play his part in it and was promised an interest in all that was gained. The three had followed Bill, keeping well out of sight. They had done this because they did not know just where he was going,—Parowan being a large mountain with wide shoulders and many gulches and canyons. They had timed their arrival so as to take advantage of the storm and share Bill's shelter, whatever it was. This, Al said, was intended to induce intimacy and the exchange of confidences.

They were to secure samples, and what details they could, whereupon Al was to carry off the camp equipment and leave Rayfield and Emmett stranded there, so that Bill must take them in. This, he said, was to induce further intimacy and to make it more permanent.

There Al's duty ended. After he had reported to Jim Lambert, he was to have the burro and the outfit, and could go where he pleased, so long as he kept his mouth shut and remained away from Goldfield. He was to be paid top packer's wages and a share in whatever was made out of Bill's claims.

"Then what are you breaking your word with them for?" was Bill's first surprising question. "Why aren't you keeping

your mouth shut?"

"Wal, they hain't played square with me, Mr. Dale. They hain't give me the share they agreed to." Al lifted his dingy hat to scratch a head that looked as if it needed scratching.

"Haven't you got a written agreement?"

"No, I hain't. They wouldn't have any writin' on it. They said it wouldn't be best."

"Well, that's good sense. It wouldn't." Bill got up and put more wood in the stove, for a raw wind was blowing up from the desert. "Well, what do you expect me to do about it?" He turned on Al so abruptly that Al dodged, expecting a blow perhaps.

"Wal, I dunno—unless it might mebbe be worth somethin' to yuh, t' know about the frame-up." Cupidity flared for a moment in Al's eyes. "Yo're a rich man, Mr. Dale," he whined. "I ain't got a dime to my name."

Bill replaced the lid on the stove, scraped pieces of bark from the surface with the poker and sat down again, eyeing Al contemptuously.

"Yes, I'm a rich man—according to your standard. Did you ever hear of crooks making a man rich, Al? Doesn't that strike you as kind of funny—a crook doing that?"

"Wal, I dunno's it does, Mr. Dale—not if they was gittin' five dollars, say, whilst you was gittin' one."

Bill laughed contemptuously.

"If they were all that generous, they'd be pretty apt to pay you enough to keep your mouth shut, anyway. Or give some one a few dollars to bump you off. There are thin spots in your yarn, Al. I'm afraid it isn't worth much."

"Wall, they paid me some," Al retorted with a craven kind of acrimony. "An' they don't b'lieve in killin'. They say that's crewd an' danger'us."

"They'll pay you more," Bill snapped, "if they're afraid of your tongue. You're a cheap skate, Al—an awful cheap skate. If you'll take my advice, you'll get out of town—to-night. The world's full of places besides Parowan. Take him out, Tommy; and dump him somewhere outside the city limits. And if you want to bring any more like him into camp, give them a good scrubbing first. I'll have to clean house after him. Get!"

This last command was to Al, who overturned the box in his haste to get off it. Tommy herded him out with the ivory-handled gun, looking a bit crestfallen and a good deal puzzled. Tommy's thought processes were too simple to follow Bill's logic, or to understand his attitude. It seemed to him that Bill was almost criminally indifferent to his own interests, and that his leniency with Al Freeman fell but little short of approval. It had been labor wasted, bringing Al there to tell Bill his story, and he regretted now that he had not been content to kick Al out of the saloon and let it go at that.

But after he was gone, Bill sat dejectedly beside the stove, his arms folded across his lifted knees, feet in the oven, and brooded over the amazing story. It seemed incredible that Al could be telling the truth,—and yet, there were some things that Al could not possibly have imagined. If there were thin spots in his story, there were also details that carried conviction.

Luella, having retired under the bunk during the interview, came stalking out and climbed, beak and claws, up Bill's back and perched upon his shoulder, leaning forward and making kissing sounds against his cheek, which was her way of coaxing his attention. Bill reached up a hand and stroked her back absently.

"Speak up now," Luella admonished, having liked the sound of that phrase. "That's a hell of a note, ain't it?"

Bill pulled her down and held her on her back between his hands, rolling her gently from side to side.

"It is," he answered gravely. "You've stated the case exactly." He set the parrot on his knee, where she immediately began to preen her ruffled feathers.

That was the convincing part of Al's story,—repeating the things Luella had said before the courthouse. Al claimed to

have been there, and to have heard her talk. He had chanced to pass by the steps just as Jim Lambert, Rayfield and Emmett were coming up to the courthouse from town. He claimed to have been in the offices of Jim Lambert later, when the plot was hatched. If that were a lie, how could Al repeat what the parrot must have said? How could he know that the burros, and the parrot with them, had waited before the courthouse steps alone or otherwise? Al had named the very day and the very hour of Bill's visit to the recorder's office. The date and hour were written upon his location filing, together with book and page of the record. Had Bill chanced to forget, that record would serve to remind him; but Bill did not forget. Al had never seen those papers. He could not possibly have told about Luella unless he had both seen and heard her there.

The incredible feature of the yarn was the fact that Rayfield and Emmett—John and Walter, he had come to call them in his mind—had been the chief instigators of the plot. And there again Bill floundered in vain speculation. What *was* the plot? Not the mere creation of jobs for themselves, surely? Al had professed ignorance of their governmental position. They may have been research men, as they claimed. He didn't know, and he had never heard that talked about, except as a plausible reason for their showing up at Bill's claims. He was sure that they had lied about working out from Las Vegas west, however; having been in Goldfield, they could not have been prospecting Forty Mile Canyon at that particular time.

What had they gained? A block of stock for each of them, to be sure. Bill had been generous; had given them each fifty thousand shares of the promotion stock. He could scarcely credit any plot to get it, however. Still, that meant fifty thousand dollars immediately after the company was organized. Bill had known of many a murder committed for a fraction of that amount.

One discrepancy in the story eluded him for some time, though he groped for it vaguely. Then Al's retort came to him with force—"Not if they was gittin' five dollars where you was gittin' one"—and set him scowling, vacant-eyed, at the tent wall.

Were they getting five dollars to his one? How? They had full control, to be sure. But their control seemed to be of the conservative, constructive kind that favored dividends. And there was the thing that seemed incredible. Would crooks, of the bold type that would follow a prospector and lay cunning plans to grab what he had found, play a straight game afterwards? It did not seem to Bill that it could be possible. A crook is a crook. Once in control, they could have raided and wrecked the company a dozen times in his absence. Instead, they had worried over one passed dividend.

Bill lay that night staring up at the whitish blur of his tent roof with a cloudy moon above it, and thought circles around the thing. Walter and John *couldn't* be the thieves Al Freeman had called them. A thief cannot keep his fingers off other men's money. Walter and John had made money for many a man. But that painfully exact report of seeing and hearing Luella in Goldfield was true. It had to be true. That was something which no man could build convincingly out of his imagination; not to Bill, where Luella was concerned. She had a certain fixed idea in her talk, always. She seemed able to discriminate between subjects, and to stick to one for minutes at a time before drifting into other sentences that conveyed an entirely different impression of what might be going on back of those observant, yellow eyes. To one who did not know Luella, it would be impossible to simulate her uncanny imitation of intelligence,—which Bill more than half believed to be genuine reasoning power. Perhaps the bird was especially quick to read faces and to connect certain expressions on the countenance with certain groups of words. It could not be accident, in Bill's opinion. Accidents do not happen with consistent regularity, and Luella's remarks were usually pithy and to the point. It was therefore a fixed basis of reasoning, in Bill's mind, to grant the authenticity of Al Freeman's contention that Luella was at the bottom of the plot.

Beyond that point, however, Bill continued to flounder in doubts. He hated himself for even speculating upon the dishonesty of Walter and John, although he had found them a bit touchy, a shade jealous of their authority and their judgment. Walter had assumed executive control; John, as treasurer, had the responsibility of keeping the accounts impeccable. Bill had attended the annual stockholders' meeting, on the last afternoon of the year, and he had been almost awed by the meticulousness of John Emmett's financial report. It had sounded like some carefully compiled government statistics, and Bill had been compelled to sit and listen to a careful reading.

The reëlection of the Board of Directors had been a mere form. Bill, Walter and John were the directors,—Nevada demanding only three. They were as inevitably reëlected to the same offices. There had not been many stockholders present, the day being almost a holiday. Those who were present voted perfunctorily and with complete unanimity; indeed, so harmonious had been the meeting that every one may as well have stayed at home, save the secretary, Bill

thought.

Therefore, in their pardonable desire to be left alone to run the machinery, since they had started it in the first place, Bill saw the full approval of the resident stockholders. And if the stockholders whose very business life depended upon the success of Parowan Consolidated and the integrity of her officers were satisfied, surely there was no reason why the president should meddle. The business men of Parowan would be the first to know if anything went wrong, Bill told himself over and over.

Yet the story Al Freeman had told would not erase itself from his mind, nor could he call it a venomous bit of spite and so discount it. There had been bothersome details which a lawyer would call corroborative evidence. There was the ineffectual campsetting, the night of their arrival; rather, the late afternoon. Tommy had declared then that Al Freeman had been bluffing, that he had not tried to get their tent up and pegged down securely before the storm broke. Al confirmed Tommy's assertion. The plan, he declared, had been to manage to pass the night with Bill. They had decided that when they first glimpsed his tent.

Then the invasion of the tent while Doris was there alone he had explained. Emmett had seen the sample sack half full of ore, but had not dared to investigate the contents at the time. He had ordered Al to go back and see what was in that sack. If it were the rich ore they suspected, he was to abstract what he could, load the burros and hurry back to Goldfield, leaving Rayfield and Emmett nothing but their blankets. He said they knew that Bill had plenty of grub.

These details fitted in with what had occurred within Bill's knowledge. If Al were lying, he was assuredly making a fine, artistic job of it all. The inconceivable part was the personality of the two men he accused, and the part they had played and were still playing in Parowan Consolidated and in the town. They had promoted their campaign cleverly and efficiently, mostly by the power of suggestion.

"If it's true," said Bill harassedly at breakfast next morning, "they're the tamest bandits I ever saw in my life. I can't believe it."

"Seems like a dream," Luella assented promptly, pausing in her nibbling of coffee-soaked crust. "Ain't that a hell of a note! I can't believe it." Then, blinking rapidly as memory revived another speech, she added softly, "Kiss me, Doris. Say you love me."

Bill's face paled. He looked at the bird, swept out an impulsive arm and pushed her off the table, soaked crust and all. He bit his lip, fighting the spasm of loneliness, or heartsick longing for the life he had dreamed of living with Doris.

Of a sudden his head went down upon a curved arm, his shoulders twitching a bit as he still fought. Luella, crawling up to forgive and be forgiven, made her clicking, kissing sounds in vain against his cheek.

"Hell of a note!" she complained at last, when Bill gave no sign of response. "I can't believe it. Seems like a dream. You don't say!" Then, spying the butter unguarded, she stepped down upon the table and pigeon-toed in that direction. "Help yourself," she invited gravely. "Plenty more where that came from. Help yourself."

And Bill, his soul flayed with bitter memories, with dreams slowly strangled and returning wraithlike to mock his loneliness, did not even hear.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"THERE'LL BE MORE TO COME OF IT"

Walter Rayfield reached out his hand with deliberate firmness and laid his forefinger upon the push button on his desk. In the distance could be heard a faint buzzing. Almost immediately thereafter, John Emmett opened a door and walked in, a yellow invoice in his hand and a look of inquiry on his face.

Rayfield waved a plump hand toward a chair.

"Sit down, John, and listen to the story that Bill has brought us this morning. The most outrageous thing I ever heard in my life. Go on, Bill—but go back to the beginning, if you don't mind. I want John to hear what you have just told me."

Impassively Bill obeyed. When he had finished—and he spared no details in the recital—he sat back and folded his arms, waiting to see how they would take it; watching, too, for some sign that should guide his judgment of the matter. He was still ashamed to doubt them, still ready to believe that Al, having overheard the parrot, and suspecting the significance of her remarks, had yet concocted the rest of the story from some dark purpose of his own; revenge, perhaps, but more likely in the hope of profiting by the tale. But Bill had not spoken of his own belief in the two. He had told them what Al said, making no comment of any kind, keeping his voice and his face carefully neutral.

Rayfield and Emmett looked at each other. Emmett smiled slightly, shrugged his shoulders and glanced down at the yellow invoice.

"Interesting bit of libel," he said contemptuously. "If there was any truth in it, I wouldn't be getting a hump in my shoulders and ruining my eyes over the Company books. Did you O K the order for these engine parts, Walter? This invoice is not correct. The total is wrong, and moreover the name of purchaser is not here. I wish you'd call up the shop and ask about it. Tell them I can't accept it as it stands. Make it plain that they must furnish a correct invoice, or take back the merchandise." He dropped the invoice before Rayfield. "And once more let me say that I absolutely refuse to accept anything that is not signed by the purchaser. Who did this buying? The engineer at the plant?"

"Now, now, never mind the invoice for a minute, John! I want to ask Bill just one question. It may not be beneath your dignity, either, to join me in wanting to know why Bill did not bring this Al Freeman to us with that story. That hurts me, Bill. I can't understand why you heard him out and did not give us the chance to face him with it. I—I dislike to think that you gave the story any credence; but since——"

Emmett turned and came back to the desk. His hard brown eyes fixed themselves upon Bill's face.

"If Bill took enough stock in the yarn to listen to it, there's just one thing for me to do. I'm responsible for the Company's funds. I think I shall demand that you bring an auditor to examine the books."

"An auditor has gone over the books, hasn't he? You showed his certificate at the annual meeting. And Al didn't say you had juggled the accounts, John."

"No, he could hardly say that," Rayfield put in. "At this late day—hoping, I suppose, that we could not prosecute him for stealing our outfit—he claims that we arranged for him to steal it so that we could board with Bill!" He threw back his head suddenly and laughed, his sides and rounded front shaking with mirth.

"A fine tribute to your cooking, Bill! You should have given him a dollar or two for that!"

"I thought you two ought to know what he's saying," Bill replied soberly. He had no heart for joking, that morning. "He was telling it in Tommy's Place, and Tommy overheard him and made him come to me and repeat what he had said to others. I thought it was no more than right to let you know."

"We appreciate your spirit, Bill, but I can't seem to understand his object. Did he give you any valid reason for concocting such a yarn?"

"He said that you hadn't played fair with him. He said you had paid him some money, but not what you had promised." Bill sighed,—a purely physical incident caused by his general depression and the ache in his heart for Doris. This

conspiracy tale did not seem important, now that he had told it to Walter and John. The sunny, well-regulated offices, the sight of John and Walter on the job, busy with Parowan affairs, reassured and shamed him—though he reflected that he had not really doubted them, even in his midnight musings when a man's faith burns weakest.

"I told him you'd have paid enough to keep his mouth shut," he added. "And I wouldn't make enough of the yarn to bring him to you. I told Tommy to take him out and dump him outside the city limits."

"In that case," said John in a tone of displeasure, "I don't see just what you can expect us to do about it; or why you came to us with it during office hours. Walter may have all the time in the world to gossip—but I happen to have work to do. When you decide what you're going to do about it, let me know and I'll stand any investigation you may want to start. But I can't stand here discussing a crazy yarn like that unless it's of some importance to the Company."

Bill rose and picked up his hat.

"I came and told you the yarn so you'll know what to do if Al Freeman shows up again in Parowan. I won't be here for a week or two, maybe. I'm taking the noon train. You can get me at the Palace Hotel in Frisco, any time it's necessary."

"Going to bring the Missus back with you?" Rayfield pursed his lips good-humoredly. "Hope you mean to give a housewarming when you move into that mansion. I'd like to have some of these Parowan folks see what you've got there. Well, so-long, old man. And after all, I guess we're both grateful to you for warning us about Al Freeman. I'll put the Chief of Police on his trail. If he shows up we'll land him in the penitentiary for that robbery of our camp outfit. A man like that's dangerous, left running at large and slandering his betters."

Bill agreed with him and went down the stairs wondering just how much of a fool he had made of himself. But that thought was presently swallowed up in his anticipation of seeing Doris and little Baby Mary within twenty-four hours. He had not intended to leave so soon. He had meant to write Doris that the house was finished and furnished, and to invite her, in a purely joking way, to invite her to come and inspect his job. But up in the office he had suddenly sickened of the town, and of Walter and John. He had a fierce desire to look into one pair of eyes that he knew was loyal. Doris might not agree with him always, she might fall short of his ideal as a wife, but at least their interests were identical and she could never be guilty of treachery. He was not so sure of the rest of the world.

He hurried to camp and got Luella, taking her to Tommy's Place. He wanted Tommy to sleep up in the new house for safety's sake, and he wanted to know what had become of Al.

He found Tommy in a rather difficult mood and did not stay to explain his reasons for turning Al out with so little thought of his importance. It seemed to Tommy that Bill was playing into the hands of crooks, and as plainly as he dared Tommy told Bill so.

"Al's gone, Mr. Dale—but there'll be more to come of it," he said carpingly. "Kape wan eye open, is my advice to yuh. For I tell yuh plain that Al was not lyin', though yuh might think it. He c'uldn't look yuh in the eye, Mr. Dale—an' when he's tellin' one of his lies he has that way of lookin' at yuh, he puts the school books t' shame that says a liar cannot look a man in the eye. So I know——"

"Train's whistling, Tommy. Keep your own eyes open and look after the new house." It disturbed Bill to have Tommy voice something which Bill himself would not concede to his consciousness. He did not believe Al's story, because he refused to doubt the integrity of his partners. He refused to doubt them, because to do so would pull down his faith in the stability of Parowan, which he had chosen for Mary's home. It was a round-about way to fight a doubt, but it was the best Bill could do at that time. For, as is well known, nothing ever thrives quite so luxuriantly as the seeds of suspicion.

Doris was glad to see Bill, though she was not enthusiastic over the invitation to Parowan. She had thought that they might take a trip east, now that the baby was old enough to travel, and had cut her first two teeth. Of course, Doris would like to see her mother and dad, but Parowan——

"Well, you've got a hundred-thousand-dollar house to step into, honey, if you want to go." Bill looked at her wistfully. "I've heard several women wishing they could visit a real mining camp, and I thought maybe you'd like to take a party

over for a week or two, and give a sort of house-warming. Mrs. Baker Cole helped me choose the furnishings, and she thought the plan of the house was perfect. You won't be ashamed to have your friends see it. And there are some nice folks in Parowan now."

Doris considered the matter. If Sophy Cole had helped Bill, of course, that was different. The nice folks in Parowan, of course, did not appeal to her in the slightest degree; but the house-party idea was not a bad one. And she did want to see the old home again, she discovered.

"We'd have to take servants from here, Bill—and you know I positively couldn't think of staying longer than a couple of weeks or so. And I'd have to see the place first, before I could ask any one over. You're a dear, and all that, but a man simply *can't* know about the little things that count when one is giving a party. And besides, I'd have to arrange for amusements for the guests. There is so little that one can do in the desert for entertainment."

"I'd like to have you go with me alone," Bill confessed. "I'd like to have you all to myself for a little while in the new home. Has it ever struck you, Doris, that we have lived before the public ever since we were married?"

"I don't see how you can call this public," Doris retorted, glancing around the room. "And until you went back to Nevada on this wild scheme of yours, I'm sure we were together all the time—and by ourselves too, an awful lot."

Bill extended an arm and tapped lightly against the wall. "Six or eight inches between us and our neighbors. I call that living in public. Well, shall we go over there together, just us two and the baby?"

"I'll see," said Doris lightly. "Perhaps—with servants, of course. I'm rather curious to see what kind of a house you and Sophy Cole would build, anyway."

"Next week, then, let's go." Bill drew her toward him and kissed her. "It would be to-morrow, but I've got something to look after, first. Honey, don't think me a fool just because I love you so; and don't laugh at me for wanting to see my wife and my baby under our own roof. I can't help it. I'm human."

"You're extravagant," Doris corrected, patting him on the shoulder with a slight condescension which Bill did not miss. "Think of spending all that money on a house in the desert! I never heard of such a thing. I'll bet folks over there are calling it Dale's Folly, this minute."

Bill's eyebrows drew together. He looked down at her somberly.

"They're sure mistaken, then," he said grimly. "*That's* not Dale's folly."

"You don't mean me, I hope?" A sparkle came into her eyes.

But Bill took his hat and left the room without even remembering that he should ask to be excused, or make some courteous explanation of his sudden departure.

CHAPTER TWENTY

LUELLA ENTERTAINS

Bill stood on the south veranda and looked down upon the town, where smoke was rising lazily from bent stovepipe and brick chimney—the supper fires of Parowan's inhabitants—and away across the desert beyond, where the Funeral Mountains stood shoulder deep in purple shadows, the peaks smiling yet in rosetinted afterglow.

"Home!" he said between his teeth. "I made a mistake. I've only built a house. I'm a damned fool. It takes two to make a home."

Behind him came faint murmurs of talk, high-keyed laughter, little silences shattered suddenly by the refined babel of several women exclaiming in unison. The clink of china punctuating the pauses. Then, frank, uncompromising, came the voice of Luella, speaking with awful distinctness.

"What the hell! Damned bunch of gossips. Won't you ever settle down? Doris, for God sake listen."

A pause, then voices exclaiming once more. Slipped feet came tack-tack across polished floors, muffled on the rugs, clicking when the rug was passed. A ripple, rustle, quite close. Then silence. Without turning his head Bill knew that Doris was standing in the open doorway, looking at him in hot anger. Unconsciously he braced himself, his face setting into forced serenity.

It came.

"Bill, I wish to heaven you'd come and get that parrot! She's in there, walking up and down, looking at the floor and saying the most awful things! You'll have to explain it somehow to my guests—her calling them a bunch of damned gossips. It's beyond human endurance. She's talking something *awful*. I'll call a servant to take her out and wring her neck, if you don't come and get her. I mean that, Bill."

Bill clicked his teeth together and faced her, smiling. But in the pockets of his Palm Beach coat his hands were clenched, so that trimmed nails dug into flesh.

"Your guests wanted to see Luella and hear her talk," he reminded her with gentle raillery. "You told them how she would go up to baby Mary and smooth down the baby's dress with her beak, and make kissing sounds, and say, 'She looks like you, Bill. Damned if she don't.' I heard you telling them. She's heard Don say that, every time he comes here. Your *guests* begged to have her brought in——"

"Yes, and what did she *do*?" Doris was almost in tears; but ladies with carefully powdered cheeks cannot afford tears, so Doris pressed a twenty-five-dollar handkerchief to her lips and controlled herself. "I'll tell you what she did! I brought the baby and held her down for the parrot to talk to. And what did she *say*? 'What the hell! You damned huzzy, git outa here!' *That's* what she said, to *your own baby*! Now those women will go home and say that's the way you talk to your family."

Bill's chuckle did not soothe her appreciably. She stood looking at him as if she wanted to box his ears. Bill in cream colored Palm Beach coat and trousers, soft silk shirt, white canvas shoes, was the handsomest man in Parowan,—or in all Esmeralda County, for that matter. The women guests of Doris recognized that fact, if Doris herself overlooked it. Wherefore, when he yielded the point and returned to the midst of the assembly, he saw eyes that brightened as he looked into them, lips that smiled, a subdued little flutter at his coming.

In the wide arch that Bill had designed to give Doris the long "vista" which she so admired in other houses, Luella was pigeon-toeing back and forth, her tail spread slightly, her eyes swift-flashing bits of amber. She was peeved at something, in Bill's opinion. She paused and tilted her head at him.

"Look who's here! Well, I'll be damned!"

Ladies laughed titteringly behind their fingers, and looked at one another. Bill, feeling himself an elephant at a doll's tea-party, stooped and let Luella step upon his hand.

"Hell of a note! I just can't *stand* this place! Not a soul worth knowing. Ignorant——"

Bill mercifully squelched her with his hand pressing down her head hard. He bit his lip, trying hard not to laugh right out in meeting, and turned to make a dignified retreat of it, when a pair of human-looking eyes in the crowd met his, and one lid drooped a bit.

Bill stopped short, took the second look to make sure, and turned toward the wives and daughters of Parowan's leading citizens. He grinned,—the old, Bill Dale smile in the face of discouragement, the smile and the twinkle that had gone far to win him his nickname of Hopeful Bill.

"Aw, shucks! You've all raised children that were brought out to act pretty before company, I guess." His voice wheedled them. "They generally wound up with a spanking after the company was gone, didn't they? Well, we're in that fix right now. Luella's been and gone and done it, just like any other kid. That's what I get for leaving her with a—gentleman that keeps a saloon, while we were in California for about a year. And—you've caught me with the goods, I guess. I do cuss, now and then. Every time the baby tries to say something else, I'm apt to holler, 'Doris, for so-and-so listen!' Luella's got it down pat." He looked around at them with his Hopeful Bill smile. "I hope I shut her off before she told that on me," he said.

They laughed, much relieved, glad of his example so that they dared be human for a minute. Doris, with her perfect social manner, had kept them stiff-backed and guarding their tongues. One old lady who had been the wife of a governor and could afford to be herself on that account, waved half a wafer at Bill imperiously.

"Don't take her away, whatever you do," she cried. "That would be a confession of guilt. I wouldn't have a parrot that couldn't swear—or a monkey that wouldn't steal the guests' earrings. Put her down and let her cuss. It's about the only chance we'll ever get to hear how men talk when we're not around."

Bill hesitated, until he caught the eye of Doris, over by the door. Then he shook his head.

"My wife's trying to reform me before the baby's old enough to repeat things," he said. "Luella's influence is considered bad enough as it is. It would never do to encourage her. The custom is to shut her in a dark closet whenever she speaks in an unrefined manner. We hope to purify her speech before little Mary is old enough to copy it."

He gave them all an endearing smile and carried Luella off. The awkwardness of the situation was considerably relieved, and Doris did her careful best to efface the memory of those last interrupted remarks of Luella's. She hoped that no one had noticed how the parrot's voice had changed, imitating her own tones. Luella never learned that in the saloon, at least; there was enough to set the ladies of Parowan thinking.

The ladies of Parowan did think—and they talked, as well. They had felt all along, they said, that Bill Dale's wife held herself above the rest of the town; though why she should was beyond their powers of imagination. Everybody knew she was Don Hunter's girl,—respectable enough, but nobody in particular, and certainly not rich. Don had made some money out of Parowan, but they still ate in the kitchen, and Mrs. Hunter didn't even keep a hired girl. And here was Doris, trailing silken gowns over the polished floors, the Persian rugs of the mansion on the hill, and speaking loftily of this servant and that servant—by their last names—and bewailing the hardships of living in Parowan and trying to entertain with no caterer in town and cut flowers a practical impossibility on short notice or if the trains happened to be late.

The ladies of Parowan descended to the satisfying luxury of speaking their minds. Some of the minds harbored spite and malice and envy, at that, and the things they said were not pleasant. It was fortunate that the series of "at homes" which Doris had condescended to give to the ladies in Parowan ended with what Bill unfeelingly dubbed "Luella's party."

Five afternoons had been devoted to that memorable series. Twenty-five women to an afternoon, and the house decorated differently each day, and the prizes for the card games real, costly trifles such as Mrs. Baker Cole and her set always gave. Parowan society would have been content with a china plate or a doily for first prize, even at the bridge table,—which was new to Parowan. Plain whist and five hundred were the games usually played by the ladies of Parowan, and Doris had overawed them, intimidated them even, with her "bridge tables" ever since her arrival.

Her house-party from Santa Barbara and San Francisco, arriving in a private car, twittering through the "camp" for a week and departing as they had come, had impressed even the ex-governor's wife. There had been a grand, house-warming ball, and the very elect of Parowan had been permitted to attend it; but the house-party of wealthy strangers had

held themselves a bit aloof, and one woman had been overheard to express her surprise and disappointment because the natives had neglected to appear in red shirts and high boots, with six-shooters dangling at their hips. Parowan hadn't quite forgiven that, even yet.

But Doris had responded to the involuntary deference which Parowan showed to the wife of Bill Dale. She had glowed secretly with pride in the house Bill had built on the hillside. It was a beautiful house; even her critical eye could find no flaw in its design, in its perfect appointments. Bill had been building a dream into the house. Love had gone into it, and a wistful longing for a home that should dumbly express his love for Doris and for his child. Hope had gone into the building of that house; the hope that Doris would love it and would want to call it home.

He had visioned her standing at the great window that was set like the frame of a picture into the west end of the long drawing-room. The scene it framed each day was the sunset,—glorious sunsets such as only the desert may know. A great window of flawless plate glass, framing the far peaks that flamed each night anew.

In the eastern wall the mate to that window was set cunningly so that it should frame a glory which Bill called dawn. Doris had never seen that picture, though Bill seldom missed it. But he had dreamed of her standing before the west window, looking upon the sunset. He had dreamed of other pictures of Doris in that house. Once or twice his heart had beat faster, believing that his dream was coming true. For Doris had been stimulated by the praise of her guests of the house-party. She had read in their faces a delight in this house set upon the edge of the wilderness. A few had asked if they might come back. So Doris was lingering in Parowan and playing great lady to the town,—and dramatizing herself to herself, with her California acquaintances for an imaginary audience. She had seen that they expected her to love the desert. Wherefore, she was professing to love the desert and the town, and to dread tearing herself away at the first frost. She meant to have her friends over again, she declared. She had thought of a perfectly original bit of fun for them. She would dress them all in miners' clothes and lead them right down into the mine, and let each one dig some gold for a souvenir. She wrote of this to Mrs. Baker Cole, who told her it was a wonderful idea.

And now, here were the Parowan women gossiping about that wretched parrot. Doris did not need to hear what they were saying, in order to be sure that they were talking. She felt a difference in their attitude; thinly veiled resentment—and some sentiments which were not veiled at all. She would have left Parowan then, spurning it contemptuously as an impossible place to live in, but for one thing.

Doris Hunter, born in the desert, knew desert ways and desert people. Though she would not admit it, she knew what would have been her own attitude, three or four years ago, toward a woman of wealth who lived in a mansion and patronized her friends. She knew that she would have resented the woman intensely, would have hated everything the woman said or did. And if the woman bungled her patronage and then left the place, Doris would have curled her lip and would have said that the woman left because she discovered that even in the desert people had their own ideas and refused to run after snobs.

Knowing all that, Doris stayed, holding her head up proudly, as was her privilege. She had her house-party, and could be seen merrymaking on the broad porches, with colored lights and music and dancing, on cool nights after the days had been hot. Parowan was not invited to those frolics, but must view the colored lights and listen to the music from a distance.

She returned with the party to Los Angeles and the beaches there, and was gone for a month or more. But she returned, quite unexpectedly to Bill and to the town, and made some pretense at being glad to be at home.

And all the while gossip was flowing, a turgid underground stream fed by some unknown source. All the while it was taking to itself a bitter flavor which had not been there when it had been merely a thin trickle of feminine resentment. Men were talking,—in confidential undertones at first, later with an uneasy hope that certain rumors would be proven false; rumors that held an ugly meaning for the town.

And Bill, keeping pretty much to himself when Doris was not at home, and devoting himself to her whims and her service when she was with him, leaving suddenly for short trips and returning more imperturbable than he had been before, never heard the gossip, or dreamed of what would happen when the whisperings grew into shouts.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BILL AND THE TAME BANDITS

Bill stood on the top step of the front porch, looking down into the scowling faces of a committee of workmen from the mine. Seamed, not too clean some of them, hard-eyed every one, they stood looking up at him, measuring as they were being measured. He had seen them coming up the hill, had thought some accident had happened, had come to meet them. There he stopped short, on guard. He had seen miners' committees before now. They needed no banner to announce their kind and purpose.

"Come in, boys," he said, when the silence became marked. "You seem to have something on your chests."

He turned to the door, and they followed him, saying nothing. That in itself was of unfriendly portent. Many of these men he knew by sight, a few had speaking acquaintance with him. He had returned the evening before from the Coast, and he felt a swift desire for a full record of the day since he had left Parowan. Something must have happened, some grievance of which he was wholly in ignorance must have arisen in his absence.

Bill saw how they stared around at the beautiful room, and looked at one another afterwards with a grim significance. He stiffened mentally.

"All right, now, let's have it—since you are here. But the office is the proper place for business, you know. Why didn't you go there?"

"It's you we want to see this morning, Mr. Dale," a small, shrewd-faced man said quietly. "Mr. Rayfield and Mr. Emmett have done all they can for us. We'll have to talk straight from the shoulder, now, so we came to the man who's responsible."

"All right." Bill sat down and crossed one leg over the other,—a habit of which Doris did not approve. "Responsible for what?"

"For getting away with the money, so our wages haven't been paid this month. And so the company can't go ahead and find the ore again. The boss has done his best. He's proved that. When the Company failed to meet the payroll, Mr. Rayfield and Mr. Emmett lent a lot of the boys money out of their own pockets to tide things over. And we had just stood a cut in wages——"

"If you'll excuse me just a minute," said Bill in his best city manner, "I'll call the office."

They seemed to suspect some trick, even in that. But the small man did nothing to prevent Bill from leaving the room, so no one else did anything. But Bill had only reached the door when he swung back.

"We'll go down to the office together," he said quietly. "You fellows aren't here just to pass the time away, I take it. And I just got back last night. I don't know what's happened while I was away, so we'll just go down where I can find out the truth of the matter."

They were a taciturn lot. They said nothing whatever to that, but rose and followed him out, skidding a little on the polished floor. Bill was thankful for their silence. He wanted to think, and he needed to think swiftly.

For two months, a new rule at the mine had shut him out almost entirely from the works. Rayfield had explained that it was because some one had tampered with the safety of the men,—had in fact set fire to a section of timbering. The effect was that no man was permitted on the works without a special, written permit from the general manager.

Bill had run into that restriction unawares. The superintendent had been sorry, but firm. Rayfield, he said, would not excuse any violation of the rule. Bill must go to him for a permit. Bill had gone and had received the permit, which was good only for one visit. Rayfield could not risk the misuses of a pass, he said. He had too much on his shoulders.

Bill had taken the permit and had torn it in two before Walter's eyes. "And who writes the permit for *you*?" he had asked contemptuously and had stalked out. Rayfield had attempted to make light of the affront, but he had not recalled the order.

Bill would not run to him for permission when he wanted to go into his own mine, so he had kept away from the works,

and as far as possible he had kept away from the office as well. Who was he to butt in? he had asked himself resentfully. *He* was only the president of the Company. And, having matters of his own to occupy his mind and his time, he had not concerned himself further with the management of the mine.

Two or three men whom he met on the street looked at them strangely, but the group continued to the office without being questioned by any,—though Bill fancied that he could read anxiety in more than one pair of eyes that met him on the street. The silence of the mine machinery was noticeable and depressing. Bill was bracing himself for the worst.

The worst met him in the office of Parowan Consolidated, and it met him with a soothing pat on the shoulder—which did not soothe—and a deprecatory shake of Walter Rayfield's head. Emmett was in the room, also, standing by the window with his hands in his pockets as if he were out of a job. Which he was, as a matter of fact.

"I was going to send for you, Bill," said Walter. "I wasn't sure you came home last night, however."

Bill passed the civilities by as of no moment.

"What's all this about the mine being on the rocks?" He did not mince matters. He was past that.

Walter looked at him reproachfully with his good eye and pursed his lips.

"You saw it coming," he said mildly. "I kept preaching retrenchment, you know, when our ore began to pinch out. Hopeful Bill wouldn't listen." He glanced swiftly at the committee of six. "So the result that I warned you of has come to pass. We have no ore, no money, and some debts. The boys haven't had their wages this payday, Bill." His tone was maddeningly reproachful. It implied that Bill was to blame for all this. Bill accepted the challenge.

"How do you blame *me* for that?" Again he was clenching his hands in his pockets, holding his temper rigidly under control. He wanted to get to the bottom of this amazing state of affairs. He *had* to get to the bottom of it.

"Wel-l——" Walter fiddled with a pencil on the desk, "——of course we know it costs money to build fine houses, and dividends must be paid promptly to meet the needs of—the occasion. But one can't go on paying dividends unless there is some income to warrant it. I admit that I erred in my judgment in one respect. I was in hopes that the ore would hold out longer than it did. We might have carried things along until the first of the year, at least. Then, John and I intended to resign and let you take the load on your own shoulders. We have done the best we could but——" he shook his head regretfully "——we couldn't keep the dollars rolling in quite fast enough. Not—quite."

Bill stared at him stupidly. He looked at John Emmett, who had turned and was facing them, his hard eyes fixed on Bill.

"I should like," said Bill, "to bring in an auditor to go over the books. How you've worked it I don't pretend to know—but I see you've done it. I don't suppose the books will show it either. I reckon you've been too cute for that—since you've been working out a plan from the start. But we'll go through the motions of getting at the bottom of this. And before we go any farther, I'll admit that I know almost exactly how much of a damned fool I've been. But you're slick, you two. It took me so long to figure you out that you got away with it before I was in a position to stop you. There's nothing," he sneered, "like the friendship game to skin a man with. It beats a knife in the dark, any time. John, let's see the cash balance—if there is any; or did you two dig out the corners?"

Rayfield sighed and shrugged his shoulders. Emmett lifted his lip at Bill like a wolf and did not move.

"No use trying to put up any bluff," he snarled. "You're the president of this Company—you sign all the checks, don't you? If you don't know where the Company stands, who would?"

The small, shrewd-faced man interrupted, standing a bit forward from the group.

"All this is interesting," he said, "but it don't get us fellows anywhere. We came to find out about the payroll. We've been stood off now for ten days. We want to know where we stand."

Bill turned his head and studied the men briefly, the small man longest.

"You stand in line, along with the rest of the bunch," he said, with a heartening grin. "Go back and tell the men to mosey down here to the office. They'll get their pay, all right."

They looked at him, and from him their eyes went to the other two. The small man turned to the door.

"They'll be here, Mr. Dale," he said. Bill never could decide afterwards just what lay behind the little man's words. They had sounded somewhat like a threat.

"Get out the payroll, John," he said crisply. "And the nice, big check book I've kept signed up for you. The men will be here, and they'll have to be paid."

"There's not enough money in the bank to pay them." Emmett's voice was surly.

"Get the books, I said. The men are going to be paid."

Perhaps Emmett thought it would not be worth while to oppose him. Perhaps he knew the temper the men would be in. He brought the books, slapping them down on Rayfield's desk ill-naturedly.

"They've waited ten days," said Bill. "You begin figuring their time up to and including to-day."

Rayfield ceased for a moment to drum his fingers. "They've been out for two days, Bill," he said. "Quit of their own accord."

"Up to and including to-day," Bill repeated distinctly. He picked up the telephone and called the bank, asked for the Company's balance and got it. The modesty of that balance astonished him, even now.

"Send up a messenger for a deposit," he said easily and put down the 'phone. "Now, what's the payroll?"

"Including our salaries, which have not been paid for the last three months——"

Bill reached out a long arm and got him by the front, pulling him close. "I'd love to smash every bone in your body, you tame bandit," he gritted. "But we won't add any rough stuff to this—yet. I want to find out, first, just how rough to make it."

He let John go with a savage push that slammed him against the wall. "I want you two crooks to know just where I stand," he said between his teeth. "You've raided and wrecked my Company, deliberately, and as completely as you could. You've squeezed the lemon dry, and you've been peddling lies about me and mine, to cover up your dirty work. I don't need to be knocked down with a club, once my eyes are open. You've asked me to accept paper for my dividends, all summer, so there would be a decent cut for the rest. I did it,—and don't you reckon I can't *prove* it?"

"Now, you're going to come clean. It won't get you anything but whole bones, because I mean to send you to the pen for this, if I can prove it on you. I fight for my own. And now, how much will it take to cover the payroll? The messenger's outside."

Emmett growled the amount, and Bill wrote a check, asked for the bank book and got it just as the messenger rapped on the door.

"Wait a minute, sonny," he called, when the boy was leaving. "I want you to do an errand for me, if you will."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Dale." Boys must worship heroes, and Bill was the man this youngster had chosen for his own. One read it in his eyes, in his voice, in his glowing eagerness to serve.

Bill scribbled a short note to Tommy, and held it out with a dollar. The boy shook his head at the money, took the note and bowed himself out with a quaint courtesy that would have amused Bill at any other time.

"Now, you'll write the checks, John. And you'll say no word to the men—that goes for both. Stay right where you are, Walter."

There was a heavy trampling on the stairs, and Bill threw open the door into the outer office.

"You can go," he said to the girl, sitting wide-eyed behind her typewriting desk. "Or, rather, come in here. I may need you later on." He raised his voice. "Come on in, boys. A's come first into the private office, B's follow, and so on. And as you get your checks, please go right on out. Saves crowding."

He needn't have worried about their going right out. The first A headed straight down to the bank, and the second A was presently at his heels. The workmen of Parowan Consolidated had listened to ugly rumors too long to take chances.

A late comer squeezed past and into the private office, accompanied by inquiries as to how he spelled his name. Bill turned his head and nodded at Tommy.

"All right—you sit over there by the window," he said carelessly, and went on with his work of watching Emmett write the pay checks, taking each one damp from his fingers, calling out the name of the man to whom it belonged and placing a pen in his fingers for the signing of the payroll.

Bill saw the flare of surprise in more than one man's eyes as he read the amount of his pay. Bill's hand would clamp down on the man's shoulder for an instant with a friendly pressure as he spun the fellow out of the way of the next. He spoke to none, but he had a nod and a smile for many. He looked into the faces of men whom he believed were guilty of treachery to the Company and to him, but he gave no sign of suspicion. There were others who could have told him much, but he asked no question. The routine of payday was observed without comment. The only change was the paying of the men in the office.

So presently the last man had clumped down the stairs and into the bank, and only Tommy remained, sitting grimly in his corner, staring owlishly through his thick-lensed glasses. Bill shot him a sidelong glance, lifted an eyebrow and bent over the check book before Emmett. John had a wonderful head for figures. The balance on the last stub would not have bought a dinner at the O'Hara House.

"Not much chance to graft off that," grinned Bill, and pointed at the figures. "Now, you spoke about debts. Dig 'em up, John."

"What's that roughneck doing here?" Emmett growled, looking at Tommy insultingly. "We don't owe him anything."

"Oh, yes, you do," Bill retorted evenly. "You owe him about the only thing in the world you're able to pay. Implicit obedience." He paused to let those two words sink in. "I never thought I'd ever have to call in a gun-man to camp on your shadow. But he's here, and he's got too many notches on his gun to be scared about adding another one or two. Tommy, you'll go with Mr. Emmett into the other office, and stand over him while he digs up Bills Payable. He should find them in a book—not in the right-hand drawer of his desk! You're a gun-man. You know what I mean, I guess."

"I do that, Mr. Dale," Tommy rumbled ominously. "He'll return wit' the Bills Payable, have no doubt of that."

"Bill, this is an outrage!" Walter Rayfield reached for the telephone, but Bill snatched it away from his finger tips.

"You're damned right, it's an outrage. But the remedy is going to be applied as fast as possible."

"You're letting the lies that Al Freeman told poison your mind. John and I have worked hard for this Company. We've gone without our salaries for three months now, because the funds were getting low. And this is all the thanks we get. You come blustering in here at the last minute, trying to bully and play the bad man. You can't get away with it, Bill." Rayfield shook his head sorrowfully. "Bluffing won't lift the Company out of the hole it's in. You've paid off the men—but there are the stockholders to think of, and the debts. And the ore has petered out, Bill. One of those rich surface deposits with no depth to it." He pursed his lips, drumming on the table with his fingers. "Your fine friends from San Francisco dug out the last of it, Bill, for souvenirs. A fitting end to Parowan and the fortunes of Hopeful Bill Dale. A picturesque ending—but the end, nevertheless."

Bill did not trouble to answer him. In a moment, Emmett returned with his arms full of books, the dangerous Tommy treading close on his heels.

"Not knowin' which would be the right wan, I had him bring them all, Mr. Dale. An' his gun was not in the right-hand drawer. It was in his pocket. Here it is, Mr. Dale,—in case yuh've neglected to pack wan yourself. An' if yuh don't mind, Mr. Dale, I'd like fer to have yuh search him fer a knife. Them's the kind of crooks that packs 'em, Mr. Dale,—as it's been my experience to know. An' I'd search the other wan whilst I was about it, Mr. Dale. I would that."

Tommy's suggestion was gravely complied with, in the presence and to the horror of the wide-eyed typist. Bill apologized to her with a smile, but he did not suggest that she leave the room. Messrs. Rayfield and Emmett were wily gentlemen. The girl might easily be in their confidence and their private pay. He did not know where they had gotten her,

but he remembered that she had reigned supreme over the outer office ever since Parowan Consolidated had established itself there.

"Now, John, write checks for all these bills. All of them, that is, that are authentic. Have this girl get them ready for the mail. If you'll come with me, young lady, I'll help you bring your typewriter in here for sake of convenience. Mr. Emmett and Mr. Rayfield are not moving about much, to-day."



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BILL BUYS PAROWAN

On the streets groups of men stood and talked together, scanned eagerly the faces of pedestrians, asked questions that halted men in their stride, formed new groups as some fresh bit of news became known. And without exception, all up and down the town, men talked of Bill Dale and Parowan Consolidated.

Before the bank a prominent group had gathered. Men went up and down the stairs to the office, coming out upon the street to run the gauntlet of human eyes, and sometimes saying, "I got mine, all right—maybe." A trip in to the teller's window, and a nod of assurance as they came out again.

Glances went up and clung to the windows of the office where a queer gathering sat silent, or did what Bill Dale commanded. Emmett and Rayfield had turned surly. The typist was in tears, having broken unexpectedly into speech. Things she had seen, sentences which she had overheard, trifles most of them, she told to Bill. Nothing was sufficiently definite to serve as evidence of fraud, but she accomplished one thing at least: She convinced Bill that she was not in their plot, that she was innocent of all knowledge of the inner workings of the office.

Bill had a lawyer there,—a man whom he trusted to a certain extent, though he was not really trusting any one save Tommy, just now. The lawyer took the girl's name and address, and told her that she might go for the time being. "Which left Bill freer in his mind. He had not wanted to seem harsh with the girl if he could possibly avoid it.

Rayfield looked up at him and sneered when the door closed behind her.

"Now you've done every melodramatic stunt you can think of, with a lawyer in one room and an auditor in the next, and a roughneck with a gun at our backs, just what do you really expect to accomplish? It's all well enough to dissolve the Corporation, as you say you intend to do; but you surely don't expect to keep us here until that is accomplished, do you?"

"It won't take so long," said Bill. "The written consent of the stockholders, waiving a meeting, and so on—Fuller, here, has all the dope, and can give you the details—why, it won't take long, at all."

"With stock scattered from Coast to Coast? You'll have a nice time, Bill, getting the signatures of the stockholders!" Then the necessity of fighting for his honor occurred to Rayfield. He blustered a good deal about the outrage, and about Bill's insanity and his ingratitude.

"That's all right," Bill retorted imperturbably. "And Parowan stock is not scattered as badly as you think, maybe. I hold most of it myself. Been picking it up all summer, fast as I could without sending the price up. And you've helped quite a lot, unloading what you held, and lying about me and the way I've been squandering the money. I didn't know all of it, until yesterday. I thought you meant to carry things along smooth on the surface till the last minute, and then duck. I was ready for that. But you took me by surprise, working it this way. However," he yawned, "I'm an adaptable cuss.

"You don't know it, but there's a bunch of bulletins being put up, right now, saying that Bill Dale will buy Parowan Consolidated at two dollars a share. Some will make money at that, and some will lose. But it can't be helped; I can't trail down every buyer and find out just what he paid. And the losers won't lose so much as if you had played it through your way."

"You damn fool," said Rayfield softly, "You'll spend your last dime for nothing. The ore's gone. I made sure of that. No depth—like so many of these rich strikes." His good eye dwelt speculatively upon the lawyer. "Everything has been done properly, Mr. Fuller. Bill's biting off more than a mouthful, and it's your duty to tell him that he is not obliged to buy in the stock. John knows to a dollar what his income has been. It was big, I admit that. He's had close to a million dollars out of the mine so far—and the town site. What he's managed to spend is not my business, of course. But if he hadn't spent a dollar, you can see where he will wind up if he tries to buy up Parowan stock. I wish he would," he sighed. "I hold some shares I should like to dispose of."

"Oh, you're going to get rid of them," said Bill. "Right now while I'm in the mood, if you've got any sense. But don't think I'll pay you any fancy price. Ten cents a share for all you've got will be about right."

Rayfield studied him, gave up trying to read his mind, and accepted the price. With less grace, Emmett followed. They

hadn't much, and the insignificance of their holdings, their acceptance of his offer which he had intended as an insult, was more enlightening to Bill than all their protestations had been.

They believed the mine had been worked out. They had held up the faith of the public until they could unload their stock; it was quite possible that his agents had bought in theirs and paid them a good price for it. The market was broken now. A panic was growing in the town. People were leaving by the dozens. They could not have gone out of the office and sold Parowan stock for one tenth of what Bill had contemptuously offered them.

A man came in, holding a long envelope in his hand. He moved deprecatingly toward Bill.

"It says down on the street that you're paying two dollars for Parowan," he said. "I paid six for mine, but if you'll take it at two dollars you can have it—and glad to get rid of it," he added in a mutter that Bill caught quite plainly.

"Here's your money. Go back and tell the rest it's no dream," Bill said shortly, blotting the check with a vicious thump of his fist. "Ask them not to obstruct the traffic, if they can help it, and to please form in line."

The man folded his check and hurried out, ashamed of his act, but manifestly relieved to have recovered a part of his investment. In five minutes there were five other men in the office.

All that day, Bill bought Parowan. The broker down the street, having been enterprising enough to wire Goldfield, Tonopah, all the towns within reach, came and sold to Bill Parowan stock,—stock which he could not deliver until the mail came in.

That night Doris met him in the door of the big house on the hill. Her face was white, her eyes clouded with troubled anger.

"Bill, you haven't been buying Parowan stock!" she began, trembling all over. "They told me you've been buying like a madman, for two dollars a share. It must be a lie. You aren't *that* crazy!"

Her emphasis hit Bill's pride. He grinned down at her, though his eyes were tired and a bit sunken in his head.

"Yup, I'm *that* crazy," he said. "Sign this slip of paper, and I'll have bought yours, too. Only I'm paying top price for yours, old girl. You get five dollars."

"Five hundred thousand dollars?" She looked at him strangely. "All right, Bill. Only, where's the money? I'd have to sell for cash, dear."

"Cash in the bank, sure. I haven't that much on me, right now." Bill sat down at the nearest table, pushed away a costly vase with flowers from Los Angeles drooping toward him, and shook his fountain pen.

His check fluttering faintly in her white fingers, he watched her scrawl her name under the agreement of sale. "Doris Mary Dale," she wrote, and he saw how her right hand shook, and that there was no breeze to flutter his check in her left hand. She stood up, breathing quickly.

"There's that much you can't throw away on strangers," she said triumphantly. "And you can't possibly have much more. But what possessed you to buy stock you know is worthless? These people have made their money out of Parowan. Let them go! They'll get it back in the next boom. They're just rushing out of town as if we had the plague here," she continued. "The bottom's dropped out of everything, I heard. And you stayed in that office and paid two dollars a share for Parowan stock! Bill, what did you *do* it for?"

"Well, because I wanted Parowan stock, I guess," Bill evaded her flippantly. "And these poor devils needed to sell, I reckon. And there is such a thing as honor."

"Honor!" Doris stared at him. "Do you mean to tell me there is any honor in throwing away your last dollar? I wonder," she said, "whether you've got enough to cover this check! Have you gone over your account, Bill, since you started this—this orgy of honor? You *can't* have this much left!"

Bill flushed, then paled slowly.

"So you think I'd give you a bad check?" His own voice shook slightly. "Do you think that? When I've given you all of

myself, and let this mine go to hell because I couldn't be away from you, and you wanted to be where you could dazzle and be dazzled—do you think, when the whole thing smashes, I'd give you a bad check for your stock? You can give that check back to me, Doris." His eyes burned into hers. "As soon as mail can travel to Frisco and back, I'll have the money for you. Or place it on deposit for you at the Hibernian—if you can trust the bank's word when you get it! Since the committee called here at the house, I've been writing checks. There hasn't been a drunken Bohunk that asked if my check was good! Parowan has mopped them up and been glad to get them. It remains for my *wife* to question my honesty!"

He picked up his hat and left the house again, going back into the town. His nerves were raw, his pride had been seared over and over by the open distrust of men who had grown prosperous in the town he had created. He wanted sympathy, Doris' arms around his neck, her indignant condemnation of the thieves who had after all wrecked the mine. He had thought that Doris would understand his reasons for doing what he had done. He had believed that her own pride would demand that they stand back of Parowan with their last dollar.

He sent a long code telegram to Baker Cole, and one to his bank. Then, with hell still in his heart, he walked up the other slope, across the gulch, and entered the tent (now boarded and roofed and floored, but otherwise not changed) where he felt that he could at least call himself at home.

Luella, banished since the fateful party that had set the gossips talking, greeted him with hysterical chatter. He poked a cold nose ingratiatingly into his palm. Even Sister Mitchell, long ago retrieved from her winter quarters under a rock by the cellar, crawled from under the stove and craned her long neck at him, begging for something green. Bill looked in the cupboard and found nothing eatable. He had been away too long, he remembered now. He had lost count of the time, so completely had his mind been given to meet a humiliating situation in such a way that he need never be ashamed to look any man in the face.

Well, his menagerie was hungry and begging for food. He went out again, hurried to the nearest grocery and bought what he wanted, careless of the curious looks he excited. He stopped at Tommy's Place and told Tommy that he wouldn't be needed, close-herding anybody. The auditor had reported to Bill that he could find nothing wrong with the books, and there was not much chance of getting hold of any actual proof of crookedness against either Rayfield or Emmett.

"And are yuh still buyin' Parowan stock, Mr. Dale?" Tommy's soft voice was softer, more plaintive than ever.

"As long as there's a share out, I'm in the market," Bill answered shortly—defiantly too, though there was no reason for defiance.

He returned to his camp and fed Sister Mitchell her lettuce, Luella a cookie, and flung a stale mutton chop outside the door for Hez. He did not cook anything for himself. He was too heartsick to think of food. The whole damnable robbery, the treachery,—and then, Doris!

He tried to recall what words had passed between them; to remember just what Doris had said. But then he knew that it was not the words; she had not actually said anything awful, he suspected. But her tones, the hard, condemning look in her eyes! He could see her again, trembling with anger because he was spending money to keep his name—and hers—above reproach among men. In all the time since they were married, Bill had never seen Doris like that. The months had not been altogether peaceful, to be sure. Doris had frequently found something in her husband that required correcting, had enumerated his faults to him many, many times. She had often hurt Bill, had made him angry, so that he would go away until he forgot it. But there had been nothing like this.

"Damn money, if that's what it does to people!" Bill groaned aloud, when Luella recalled him to his surroundings by crying, "Give us a light! Give us a light!" He lighted a lantern and hung it from the hook on the ridgepole, and for a long while he stood staring at the cased saxophone.

Only two years ago he had dreamed of learning to play that thing,—to forward his wooing of Doris!

"I didn't need music," he told himself bitterly, all her hysteria over money and luxury flooding his mind with a nauseating enlightenment. "She took me, quick enough, when she saw the gold! Money, money! That's all she has thought of, from the day I showed her the vein. Little peacock, strutting around, showing off her finery. What a blind fool a man can be. And it had to wind up this way. She took money from me for her stock—thinking it was my last dollar. Afraid my account wouldn't cover it! If she thinks I'm that near broke, why did she take that check? Sell out, just like all the rest, because Parowan's on the rocks and the stock's not worth a damn, and she stood to lose something if she didn't unload quick. So

she unloaded—five dollars a share because I offered it—to *me*! Her own husband, the man who gave her the claim that put her in the Company to begin with.

"What has she ever done to help? What's she doing now? Looking after her own little dollar pile—that's what. And she didn't *need* it! I gave her half a million in bonds, last Christmas. My God, even Rayfield wouldn't have done what she did to-night! And the way she's treated her folks. That shows the stuff she's made of. I don't blame Don for turning me down every time I tried to do something for him. They're proud—the right kind of pride. They're proud to make their own way. But Doris—neglecting them and not wanting them in California for a visit—excuses, the thinnest kind of excuses. Ashamed to have them at the hotels, that was why. She couldn't bear the thought of leading her pudgy old mother and her big, awkward dad into the dining room to her table! Afraid they might eat their salad with the fork dedicated to fish! Old Don might possibly put his soup spoon into his mouth front end forward! Snob! Cold-blooded, heartless little snob!"

So he railed at her, lashing his anger with the memory of her foolishness. But when he thought of baby Mary, his heart failed him. Beginning to toddle now, she was. And squinting her nose at him and laughing, and hiding her head in a cushion when he went down on his hands and knees and boo-ooed at her. Holding out her little arms to him and pleading "Take!" when the nurse came to carry her off to bed.

She must be in her little white nightgown now, with pink toes wriggling, little white teeth flashing when she laughed. He wondered, hungrily, if she missed her daddy,—wanted him to come and play little-pigs-going-to-market.

Bill couldn't stand it. He put on his hat and went out, locking the gate after him and steeling himself against Luella's protestations. He would go back to the big house on the hill. He couldn't leave his baby girl to go "bye-bye" without kissing her daddy good night.

But when he had walked to where the house stood revealed to him, bold against the starry sky, his steps slowed, faltered, stopped altogether. All the big rooms were lighted brilliantly, as if there were a party in the house. He knew the look,—having had his fill of that mockery of hospitality which Doris called entertaining. It would be like her, he told himself between clenched teeth. With Parowan fortunes sliding into the abyss of cataclysmic failure, it would be like Doris to throw wide her doors to merrymaking, to fling her defiance into the face of the town over which disaster hovered vulturelike, waiting to feed upon the broken fortunes left in the wake of the boom.

He looked for what seemed a long while at the window upstairs, where a dim light was burning in the corner room. He knew well the meaning of that light also. It meant that baby Mary was in her bed, tucked in by the nurse, while her mother laughed and talked and "entertained" in the drawing-rooms below.

Bill muttered a great oath, turned and went back to his dingy little board-and-canvas camp.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BILL IS BACK WHERE HE STARTED

Bill bought Parowan stock. When he saw that the price he had named was holding back many sales, that many a stockholder suspected a shrewd motive in his buying and held on in the hope of riding another high wave of frenzied finance, Bill gave a snort and sent another bulletin out from Parowan headquarters. He would buy Parowan stock at one-fifty.

That day he wrote checks, an unpleasant curl of the lip betraying his consciousness of his wife, of the look in her eyes, of the hard bitterness of her tones because he was spending money on something other than her whims. His anger held and hardened with the congealing quality of his contempt for her selfishness, her cold-blooded acquisitiveness. He felt that the greatest ease he could know was never to see Doris again so long as he lived.

Wherefore, he did not go home. But Doris called him on the telephone, just before noon.

"Bill, are you going to be home for luncheon?"

"No."

"When *are* you coming, then? Don't you realize what people will be saying? I should think you might have some little consideration for *me*."

"I can trust you to attend to that matter," Bill replied evenly. "I have never yet known you to fail. When I hear from San Francisco I shall let you know. I wired last evening, and should hear to-day or to-morrow."

"Bill Dale, you——"

"Yes. Certainly. Good-by." Bill hung up and turned back unemotionally to his work. His lawyer, who sat within three feet of him, believed that Bill was speaking to a client, or an employee of some kind.

The next day, Parowan Consolidated dropped to one dollar, and people were selling by wire,—and Bill was buying. He was appalled at the amount of stock which had been placed on the market and sold at boom prices. The incorporation had been for two million shares. There had been two million, seven hundred thousand shares issued. The auditor had discovered that for Bill.

Bill had a happy half-hour, thinking that he had "got the goods" on Rayfield and Emmett. But Fuller, the attorney, dug into the records and discovered just when and where and how the capital stock had been increased nearly one million shares. Bill called to mind the times when he had been asked, just as he put on his hat to leave after some brief visit to the office, "Oh, just sign up these minutes, Mr. President. Catch you while I can, is the only way I can get at you!" And Bill, knowing that Doris was waiting for him, had signed minutes, documents, stock and check books hastily, without giving the time he should have devoted to the reading. So the capital stock had been increased with his official sanction, but without his knowledge. There was nothing that he could say, nothing that he could do. An officer of a corporation is supposed to know the official acts of his organization.

Well, he had himself to blame, if there were more Parowan stock floating around than he had any idea of. He was prepared to buy every share that he himself did not hold,—and Doris. He had counted on Doris standing at his shoulder, since she had more than half a million in her own right and could never want for money unless she deliberately squandered it. Now, when he should be nearing the end of his buying, he found himself far from the goal.

He went out and wired again to Baker Cole—an urgent call to liquidate at once all his holdings in the big Baker-Cole oil interests—and to place the money at his disposal in the Hibernian.

Then he went back to the office and continued to buy Parowan at one dollar. More stock was coming in. The gamblers, having no inside information—though they tried hard enough to get hold of it—lost their nerve and began to let go. But not fast enough for Bill, who was impatient to be through with the thing.

Parowan dropped to ninety, the new price being sent out imperturbably from Bill's office. More stock came in. The

papers were full of the crash, full of wild rumors of the cause, full of Bill Dale's insane buying—or was it insane? Certainly, it was sensational. No stockholder could possibly remain in ignorance of the facts, the worst of the rumors concerning Bill and the mine.

"Sell! Sell!" Every one was crying it. Sell before Bill Dale goes broke or quits buying because he has enough. They sold frantically. After Bill had bought so much, the most credulous old woman who held ten shares could not fail to see that she was hopelessly in the minority; that she would never get one dime for Parowan, unless Bill Dale willed that she should.

So it went on for a week. At the end of that time, the silence was broken between Bill and Doris. One evening, in a cape borrowed from her maid, Doris visited Bill at his camp.

Bill thought that it was Tommy, until Doris had closed the rough door behind her and stood there looking around the crude little place with its canvas walls and roof (inside, the room was still nearly all canvas) and at Bill hunkered down before the cookstove, blowing up his fire. She stood looking at him in silence. Perhaps she remembered that other night when she had cried, "Bill! Bill Dale! Let me in!" Perhaps she remembered the light in Bill's eyes then, the happy quiver of his lips which he could not hold from smiling just because she was there——

"Oh, hello," he greeted involuntarily when she did not speak. "I thought it was Tommy." He stood up, looking down at her. There was no light in his eyes now. His lips were pressed together in a straight line, and he waited guardedly for her to speak first. She came up and held her ringed hands over the stove, for the night was cool. Perhaps, too, she wanted to be near him, to watch his face.

"Well, Bill, since I am to be left a widow," she said lightly, "I'm going back to the Coast. Well, of course, I'm joking about the widow—though I'm sure I don't know what folks are saying about you not being home for days. I never saw such an ugly temper as you've got. I came to say that I'm leaving for Santa Barbara to-morrow. I want to be early so as to get a good suite before the crowd arrives. I suppose you'll at least help me get there and get settled?"

Bill smiled darkly. "Any girl that's able to sling a pack on a horse and get out on this desert alone, and think nothing of it," he said, "ought to be able to take a train ride alone—with two hired women to wait on her."

"Do you mean you won't go?"

"I mean, I won't leave here. I might convoy you to your pet hotel, if you'll wait till I have time. But if you want to go now, you'll have to go alone."

"Bill, sometimes I think I *hate* you!"

"Never mind. That'll soon settle into a fixed habit—soon as I'm broke."

"You're the most stubborn man I ever saw in my life. No one knows what I have endured from you. Everything must be your way—nothing that I say or do is worth your consideration. You never would listen to me—I know now that you must have been making money on the side, that you never told me about. If you hadn't you never could have acted the fool and kept it up the way you have, buying in worthless stock."

"*You* didn't find it worthless," Bill could not refrain from reminding her. "You made a good thing out of yours, don't you think? There's not a man in the country can call Parowan stock worthless. What are *you* kicking about?"

Doris looked him over scornfully. "What a fool you are!" she said. "Beggaring yourself just so you may have the satisfaction of saying that Parowan stock is worth par."

"Ninety cents," Bill corrected her calmly. "I dropped it a bit to-day—shaking loose a few that have been hanging on."

"I suppose," said Doris, "you consider it a great achievement, buying up Parowan. Cornering a worn-out mine!"

Bill reached for the coffeepot, measured out coffee and poured in water from a dented tea-kettle. He was sick of fruitless argument with Doris. She was as she was made, he told himself resignedly. Some persons are unable by nature to see beyond a dollar, and Doris, he considered, was one of them.

"Have you ever thought of me, in this performance of yours?" she cried, stung by his silence. "I am your wife. What right

had you to throw away money the way you have done, without even asking me what I thought about it? Throwing away _____"

"You aren't worrying about your hotel bill, are you? I believe you still have a few nickels left. You ought to make out—for awhile, anyway. I can land a job, maybe, after this blows over."

"A job! You'll land in the insane asylum, if you keep on. I wish I'd never seen you, Bill Dale!"

"In that case," said Bill, looking up from slicing bacon, "you'd still be punchin' cows for your dad, most likely."

Doris gave him one furious glare and swept past him. "I hate the ground you walk on!" she cried. "I hope I never see you again, as long as I live!"

Bill went on slicing bacon, even after he had heard the gate slam. When he came to himself, he had sliced enough for ten hungry men.

"You won't, if I can help it," he said tardily; so tardily that Doris was probably at home by that time.

But nothing is immutable save the Law, and Bill was up at the big house, the next day, attending to the small details of departure. Baby Mary was in his arms, bonneted and ready to go, a full hour before the train left. Bill wondered dully how he was ever going to loosen his clasp of her warm little body and let her go with Doris,—out of his life, since the break between him and her mother was irrevocable.

He wondered if Doris would divorce him. But he would have bitten his tongue in two before he would ask. She was keeping up the pretense, speaking to him pleasantly when a servant was within hearing, ignoring his presence when they chanced to be alone.

At the depot, whither he accompanied them, still carrying little Mary in his arms, Doris chatted lightly of trivial things and smiled frequently at Bill. The eyes of Parowan were upon them, and Doris would give them nothing more to roll under their tongues.

"I wired for reservations at the hotel," Bill told her, as he was helping her on the train. "I asked for our old suite back, if possible. Thought you'd like it."

"I thought I'd get one in the other wing," Doris answered perversely. "But that's all right, dear. Well, I'll write immediately, of course. Good-by, dear!"

Bill hugged little Mary to him, gave her one kiss and put her in her nurse's arms. The last he heard was the baby's voice screaming, "Daddy, *take!*"

He went back to the office and bought Parowan stock with a fierce eagerness that made Fuller, the attorney, look at him queerly.

Before the week was out, Parowan Consolidated was dissolved and Bill was watching the last of the town's inhabitants leaving on the trail down the mountain side, and by train. The boom was "busted." From the Bill Dale mansion on the hill to the meanest shack perched on the edge of the gulch, the houses of Parowan stood empty. Bill had not lied to them. He had told them that there would be nothing for them in the town. He had advised anxious-eyed storekeepers to get out while they could, carry their stock to some other town and sell it or open another store. They had taken his advice. The exodus, while orderly, had been complete.

One little store, the one nearest Bill's camp, remained much as it had been when Bill made his last purchases there. The storekeeper had a wife and a lot of children, and he had wanted to get out on a ranch that he owned near Reno. He was sick of business. He tried to sell, and nobody would buy. They had enough on their hands, getting out with their own goods, and landing business. They needed all their cash, and more too, they said. So Bill, hearing it all while he purchased coffee and a pound of butter and a few cans of milk, set down his packages and bought the man out. Not that he was trying to see how much money he could spend, but because he would need supplies and he thought that this was the cheapest way to stock up.

One night, then, Bill sat down to his supper in the tent-shack and told Luella and Hez that they had the place to themselves. Parowan, as a town, was a thing of the past. That day, the train had made its last trip into the deserted camp.

Its sole freight consisted of six cases of wine and whisky for Tommy's place—a consignment delayed somewhere in transit.

"What are *you* kicking about?" Luella inquired sharply.

"Nothing," said Bill stubbornly. "Nothing at all."

Tommy came in, peering through his glasses at Bill. He grinned, setting his lantern down on the table.

"The ghosts'll be out this night, I'm thinkin', Mr. Dale," he observed slyly. "I've been all over the town, an' here's the only stovepipe that's smokin' t'night. Not mine—I thought mebby yuh might ast me t' eat wit' yuh, an' so I cooked nawthin' fer m'self."

Bill nodded and got another cup and plate. "I thought you went to-day," he said.

"Me? Wit' the stock I've bought an' the stock I've held befoor, I've a right t' stay wit' my investment."

Bill studied him. "So it's you has been holding out on Parowan!" He laughed shortly not quite pleased. "Well, you'd better fork over, Tommy. I'll buy your stock. You know, don't you, that the Company's dissolved—there *ain't* no more Parowan Consolidated. What's left of the mine belongs to Bill Dale. Right where it began, it finishes. How much have you got?" Almost mechanically he reached for his fountain pen. The thought struck him that now, at last, he might not be able to buy Tommy out for any decent price. He might not have money enough. As poor as when he had followed his burros into Goldfield was Bill. But he had his mine; he had his self-respect.

"I'm not sellin' Parowan stock," said Tommy stiffly. "When I seen you was buyin', I bought from them that come in the s'loon an' talkin'. If they's no Company left, I can thank Gawd fer that. An' we'll own the mine, the two of us. Fer I have no wish t' sell, Mr. Dale. Phwat's good enough fer you that found it, sh'd be good enough fer me. I'm keepin' my share. An' I'm thinkin' we'll find the ore, Mr. Dale, spite o' the experts that says it's gone. 'Tis not gone s' far but we can find it—you an' me worrkin' t'gether—though phwat yer plan is I dunno——"

Bill gulped. His eyes shone wet between his lashes, though he tried to laugh.

"You bought—because I bought. Tommy, you're the biggest damn fool in Nevada. You ought to be shot."

"Yiss," said Tommy, and blinked at him. "But not fer quittin' a friend, Mr. Dale. The durrtty houn's that came an' fed from yer hand, an' when yuh had no more for them, they streaked it outa town an' left yuh holdin' the sack——"

"Aw, shut up!" Bill's tone was gruff. "This may not be O'Hara cooking, but—fill your plate. I'll do my killing in the morning."

"Yuh will not—Bill." And Tommy pulled up a box, threw his hat into a corner and snickered happily over his supper.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE TOWN THAT WAS

Every day after that Bill would go up to the mine, Tommy and Hez shambling along at his heels. First of all, Bill must examine the workings closely to see where and why the vein first showed signs of "petering out." He knew that rich veins are tricky, that they seldom hold up under mining. Either the values drop as the ore body increases in volume, or the vein will pinch out, perhaps never to be rediscovered. He had to know just what had been done, what formations had been cut, just how the vein had dipped into the hill.

He took his time, and his work was simplified because the workings were not really extensive. It sickened him to see how they had gutted the rich vein and passed up tiny stringers that might lead to other rich deposits. So far as he could determine, Rayfield had not attempted to explore the further resources of the mine. He had taken what was in sight, easy to mine, and had neglected the development of other possible veins.

Well, he had probably been frightened off with Al Freeman's story and had proceeded to rake in as much loot as possible before the crash came. All the better for Bill, if he could pick up the vein again, or locate further deposits. It would be slow, with only two pairs of hands for the work. Bill could not even keep the compressor going, so that they could use the air drills.

"It's the hand-drilling for us, Tommy," he decided, one night while they planned. "I can't afford to run that machinery—that's flat. I'm broke, so far as working men and machinery are concerned. I want you to know it before I start in. I've got less than a thousand dollars in the bank. I could borrow—I've a friend in California that would come in here and open things wide up, and like the fun of it. He doesn't know how rich he is; doesn't care. Never saw the bottom of his dollar pile, anyway.

"But the truth of the matter is, I want to do this alone. If it takes the rest of my life, I mean to stick here and find that ore. I mean to bring Parowan to the front again. That's why I bought everything up and spent practically my last dollar to do it. But you don't have to stick. It isn't *your* pride that was ground under their heels. If I hadn't been able—well, that doesn't matter, now. But thank the Lord my money held out! They can call me crazy, but they can't say I'm a quitter."

"They can not. An' Tommy'll be right here when the boom comes back—make no mistake, Bill. The furrst place of business will be Tommy's Place—an' I'm keepin' it swep' out an' the glasses wiped, agin that day when we strike ore. I am, that."

Bill did not answer. He was thinking of one other place that was swept and dusted regularly every Sunday. Not because he had any hope that Doris would live in it, nor because of any desire, even. It troubled him now and then to think how his heart was hardening toward Doris. Perhaps he did it for baby Mary; because he had built her a home. She wouldn't remember—but some day, when she was a woman, she could come back and see her little crib, up in the corner bedroom. A scuffed pair of shoes left in a drawer. A broken, rubber doll with the whistle torn out. And she would know that she had crept over these floors, had slept under this roof; that this had been her home.

Never once did it occur to Bill that he could sell the furnishings of the house for enough money to hire miners, run his machinery, expedite his work in a dozen different ways. He would have fought the man who suggested such a thing.

He would walk through the room—wearing rich-man's shoes so that the floors would not be marred—and dream of the baby, trying all the while to shut Doris out of his mind. She had not seemed like *his* Doris, this proud young woman who rustled her silken gowns through the house, flashed her jewels and spoke imperiously to her servants. No, that was not the Doris he had loved. His Doris had been tanned and frank of eye and of speech. She had been lithe and competent, and looked life honestly in the face. His heart was very empty, sometimes, very hungry for that Doris whom he had loved. He even caught himself dreaming about her, now and then,—almost forgetting the other Doris who had kissed him good-by because others were watching and would gossip if the parting seemed too cold. A Judas kiss, it had seemed to Bill. He tried to forget it, lest his hatred grow against her.

Every Sunday, Tommy would sweep and dust and polish,—and dream, perchance, some hidden little dream of his own. Bill would disappear for hours, coming in after sunset with tired eyes and with lines beside his mouth. And neither would speak of how the time had been spent.

But the rest of Parowan was given over to the winds of the desert spaces. Doors began to sag, windows rattled. When the wind blew strong, corrugated iron roof would hammer like anvil blows. Old papers swept through the streets to lodge ghostlike in the corners. It was a place of desolation, watched over proudly by the big house on the hill, with its sheeted furniture and its big, plate-glass windows that looked and looked, and framed no face but Bill's, staring out through them moodily upon the town and the desert beyond.

For a time there had been a certain somber activity about the camp, daytimes. Men hauled away salvage where ownership could be proved to Bill's satisfaction,—and Bill was hard to satisfy, these days. Precious time was lost from their mine while he and Tommy guarded against looting. For practically all of Parowan belonged to Bill Dale, and he was showing himself hard, grasping, suspicious, a man who carried a gun for the first time in years, and who would shoot, give him provocation.

A railroad gang appeared—with flat cars and their cookhouse—and took up the rails, leaving the ties on the roadbed. Twenty miles away, running past the Hunter ranch with a flag station at his largest spring, the railroad still continued to give service of a sort between Los Angeles and Tonopah. But Parowan was wiped disdainfully off its map. It became a speck, away out on the southern slope of the mountain,—too far away to tempt the idly curious, especially with Bill Dale, said to be "a little off," resenting prowlers in the town that was; too dead to bring the meanest man there for gain. In this fashion was Parowan set apart from other decadent mining camps. Loot—men prowling through the buildings looking for whatever might be carried off—Parowan was saved that indignity. The big house on the hill must have been a temptation; but no one quite wanted to risk it. The general opinion was that Bill lived in the house, and spent much of his time watching the town.

This opinion was strengthened by the fact that Bill did come down from the big house, one Sunday, and drive a looting party out of town with the silent ferocity of a jungle tiger. They did not come back. Bill had emptied his six-shooter after them, furrowing the dirt just behind their heels. It was close shooting. They took the hint.

For awhile, Bill and Tommy occupied themselves with packing the best railroad ties up to the mine, using Wise One and Angelface—and the two other burros which Bill had bought, and which had been called whatever came handiest—principally epithets coined for the occasion. The ties made splendid mine timbers. They were preparing for a long siege.

Fall chilled to winter. Sister Mitchell disappeared, and Bill began to hunt mittens for Tommy and himself. They had all the supplies they would need for a long, long time. The little store had catered to miners and carried a well-balanced stock of general supplies, ranging from needles and thread and candy and gum, to picks and overalls and shoes. And in the shed behind was a full ton of grain. The burros would not suffer in the work before them. For the burros, too, would have to help.

Bill rigged a sweep arrangement which miners call a whim. It was the duty of the burros to walk round and round in a circle, and hoist the muck, when the two men settled down to their mining. They didn't like it, but they did like their pint of rolled barley at the end of the shift, so that even the burros became resigned to their labor; so resigned that they would walk of their own accord into their places, ready to be harnessed to the whim.

One evening, when Tommy failed to show up after supper, Bill unhooked the saxophone case from its nail in the ridgepole and took out the instrument, fitting it together tentatively as if he were not at all sure that he would want to play it or do more than look it over. That first winter on the Coast, before his dreams had died of starvation, Bill had yielded to temptation and arranged for lessons on the saxophone. A Sunday advertisement had given him the idea, and Bill had worked hard, practising for two hours a day at a studio under the tutelage of a stern but thorough teacher. That was before he awoke to the fact that saxophones were not for the elect, and that Doris declined to agree with him that it would be nice if they could play things together.

The valves were stiff, to begin with. Bill oiled them carefully and tried out his fingering. Swinging a single-jack, he discovered, did not tend to increase the flexibility of the fingers, but not all his patient work in the studio was lost. He wiped the mouthpiece absently, adjusted the reed to his liking and began to play, while Luella screamed at him hysterically.

"Fer Gawd sake, Bill!" she implored, just as Tommy came panting into the yard, having run all the way from his saloon.

"Don't *you* start in," Bill warned, looking up under his eyebrows at Tommy while he went down to low C and lingered there heartrendingly, finishing "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep" to his own satisfaction, at least.

"Fer Gaw-wd *sake!*" Tommy breathed in an awed half-whisper. "There'll be no pinochle this night, Bill Dale. Yuh'll be playin' music—an' it hits the spot—it does that!" He did not mention what spot, and Bill did not ask.

To Bill, the saxophone marked a milestone in his troubles. He could play it and enjoy himself without thinking too bitterly of Doris. But he never explained to himself why it was that he stuck to the things he had learned in San Francisco; why it was that he never played "Love's Old Sweet Song."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

HOPELESS BILL DALE

Christmas came, by the big calendar that hung on the wall of Tommy's Place. It did not come in the heart of Bill Dale. Don Hunter, riding thoughtfully to dead Parowan, begged Bill to come and spend the holiday at the ranch. Mother Hunter, he said, had made fresh mincemeat and was fattening a turkey, and she'd feel hurt if Bill didn't show up to help celebrate.

Bill was standing by the whim, watching Tommy unhitch the burros from the sweeps. Bill's face was grimed, his shoulders drooped a bit. He had put in five long holes since noon, and the rock was hard. His eyes went down to the empty roofs of Parowan that was; wandered farther, to where the big house stood staunchly upon its knoll, solid, beautiful,—but with no smoke curling up into the nipping air.

"Tell her I'm sorry, Don. I can't—keep Christmas." He swung away and went down the trail, biting his lip, fighting the hot surge of rebellious thoughts. Christmas! Good God, did they think he was made of stone? Did they think, because he wouldn't whine like a beaten dog—did they think it meant so little to him—all this desolation?

"Dead—inside and out," he muttered fiercely. "And they think I can eat turkey and mince pie and call it—Christmas!"

Behind him, hazing the burros, Tommy was talking plaintively to Don.

"I wouldn't urrge 'im, Mr. Hunter. He worrks like tin men, he does. An' he eats hearty, an' he plays pinochle wit' me of an evenin'. He's havin' 'is joke wit' me an' the burrd an' the dorg—but I've eyes in me head, Mr. Hunter. The heart of 'im's weepin' tears of blood whilst the lips of 'em's laughin' belike. It shows in the eyes of 'im. It does that, Mr. Hunter."

There was no Christmas in Parowan, then. On that day Bill worked harder than ever, and mortared and panned some pieces of quartz that seemed "likely looking rock." He got colors in the pan and professed to be very much encouraged, he talked about formations and ore deposits and bedding planes, on Christmas night, until Tommy fell asleep in his chair and dropped his pipe, breaking the mouthpiece.

"I'll make you a bargain, Tommy," Bill said then, his eyes brighter than they should be, "We'll go over to my store, and you can pick out the best pipe there. And then, if you're human, you'll invite me into your 'Place' and set 'em up. I'd like to get drunk—stony, blind drunk. But I don't think I shall, because I want to put in a thundering big day to-morrow."

Tommy blinked and couldn't find his hat, which was on his head. And Bill laughed at him all the way to the store. He laughed, too, when he pushed Tommy behind the bar to serve the drinks; made him put on a white apron, polish the bar with a towel before and afterwards,—do the thing in style. But neither of them mentioned Christmas.

After that, Bill went away, still laughing at something funny. He said that he was going to bed. But the next morning, when Tommy went over to Bill's camp for breakfast, there were Bill's tracks in the fresh-fallen snow,—tracks coming up from across the gulch and turning in at the gate. Seeing them there, Tommy blinked again. He knew that it had not snowed until dawn was breaking.

One day, when Tommy was washing the dishes—Bill taking a turn at the blacksmithing—he came across two letters tucked behind a jar of fermenting peaches which should have gone into the discard days ago. Tommy pulled out the envelopes, goggled down at them and saw that one was addressed to Parowan, Nevada, and that the address had been covered by a red stamped notice, "NO SUCH POSTOFFICE." Below that was another address—where the Hunters got their mail. The other envelope bore a later date, and was addressed in care of D. L. Hunter. Neither envelope had been opened,—an over-sight which caused Tommy some anxiety. He thought it was darned careless of Don Hunter to put them up in the cupboard and say nothing about them.

So, "Here's a coupla letters Mr. Hunter musta brought yuh an' fergot to give yuh," he said, the moment Bill stepped inside for a drink.

Bill took the letters, glanced at them, lifted the lid of the stove and thrust them deep into the fire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BILL ACQUIRES A COOK

"We're on the right track," said Bill, and gathered up an armful of dulled steel to sharpen the next morning, preferring his own little forge by the camp for that purpose, and passing by the bigger shop at the mill.

"We are that," Tommy agreed, just as he had agreed every day for the past month. "She's talkin' to us, Bill. She's t'rowed out 'er thread uh gold, an' says, 'Will yuh folly the t'read, now, byes?' A mont' ago she said that—she did."

"We're on the trail," Bill repeated mechanically. "It may be a damn long one, but it's got to end."

"It has," said Tommy, bouncing a rock off Wise One's rump. "Ivery trail has got an ind to it, Bill—it has, that."

Bill walked several paces. "I wonder," he said then.

"Did yuh leave a fire, Bill, in the stove?" Tommy broke a moody silence. "She's smokin' yit."

"It's Don," Bill said indifferently. "I wish they'd quit worrying over me. Hell, you'd think I never spent months in the desert before! I hate to be treated like a sick kid," he added querulously.

"Wit' a fire startted a'ready, supper'll be quicker got," Tommy observed plaintively, and made for the camp. "I'll warm up the beans an' bile the coffee in the time it takes t' tell it," he said.

Bill went on with his steel and dumped it beside the blacksmith shop. The heads of two horses showed over the front gate,—Don's horses. Bill felt a contraction of the throat. He wished they would leave him alone; their unspoken loyalty hurt; their sympathy made him writhe. And then, Don might bring letters. Bill felt as if he could not bear to see another letter.

So he walked into the camp—from which Tommy had fled—and confronted Doris. Bill pushed the door shut behind him and leaned against it, not knowing that he did so. He did not speak.

Doris, in khaki riding skirt and flannel shirt, her hair braided down her back, was standing by the table, on which were three plates, three cups. She was holding a can of tomatoes in one hand, and with the other she was trying to open the can with a dull can-opener.

"Did the man ever live," she asked, "that kept a decently sharp knife or anything on the place?"

Bill came forward mechanically, took the can from her and opened it. Doris stood back and watched him, her breath coming unevenly. Bill's eyes were fixed upon the slight task. He did not look up.

"Everything else is all—ready," Doris said. "I thought maybe—I thought I'd use up those cold biscuits in a tomato stew. Tommy says he boards himself. I—would you rather have them cold out of the can?"

Bill looked into her face. His eyes seemed hard and bitter, with those hollows beneath.

"What's the matter? Did your money play out?" His voice was hard, too—though God knows he did not mean to be hard. He was trying so hard not to be a fool!

"Why, no." Doris winced a bit before she straightened her shoulders. "I can stew them in just a minute, if you'd rather." She stood waiting his decision, the can in her two hands before her. Her own eyes were sparkling, but social training helps a lot when one wants to cover emotion deep out of sight. "Which?"

"Oh—any way." Bill turned away to the wash basin, feeling the old, baffled bewilderment. He washed his face, caught himself wishing he had shaved, swore at himself silently for the craven thought. Doris had chosen to come. Let her take him as she found him, or—not at all. He dried his hands carefully, glad of his broken nails. He combed his hair before the little, square mirror, spitefully pleased with Tommy's attempt at a haircut,—though his remarks had been biting at the time.

"Well, how's the social elect?" he asked ironically, unconsciously responding to her presence so far that he stood beside

his chair until she was seated. He never did that for Tommy.

Doris poured his coffee with the grace he had loved when they were on their honeymoon,—when the coffeepot was silver and the cups toy things of china. She held out his chipped enamel cup to him with gracious composure.

"The elect? They're riding and golfing and swimming and bridging, as usual." Then, unexpectedly, "I left baby down with mother and daddy. She's awfully well—little monkey; she trots around all over the place."

Bill set his teeth and kept his composure. In a moment he could risk speaking. His voice was so steady that it was brutal.

"And the maid and the nurse—are they down there, too?"

"Oh, no. They're canned. And that reminds me. Those are peach preserves in that jar."

Bill lifted his head a trifle, so that he could send her a sidelong glance. What, in heaven's name, had brought her here, in the dead of winter? Wanting him to go back with her, probably. Wanted to dodge the gossiping. But he would not ask her. She was here; let her tell her object in coming.

"I don't suppose you've heard any news lately," Doris remarked, when Bill had declined every dish of food on the table, and was merely pretending to drink his coffee. "I heard it just as I was leaving the ranch. Walter and John and another man, and that Al Freeman—the one I shot out of here that time, you know—all had a terrible fight in this other man's office, in Goldfield. About money, they said. Walter and the other man were shot, and the other two are in jail. They think Walter won't live. I was thinking, Bill, maybe you ought to go and see him. He—they cheated you somehow, didn't they? Walter might tell, if you went to him and asked about it. I think he'd tell, to get even with John."

"What's the use?" Bill pushed back his chair. "What's the use of anything? Doris, did you make the ride over here to tell me *that*?"

Doris also was making a pretense of eating. She pushed back her plate and began rolling a bit of bread under her forefinger, patting it carefully into a flat little cake. Bill noticed then that she was wearing no rings, save her wedding ring and one with a Parowan nugget,—the first one he found in the claim.

"Why, no. I just happened to think of that. No. What I really came for—well I *really* came for, was—well, I thought there was no sense in spending money living at a hotel when I have a wonderful home here, and—when the mine needs the money. I don't know whether you need any of mine, but I wish you'd take it and use it, Bill. I—it's a darned shame for you to be working like—like a Bohunk!"

Bill was studying her fixedly.

"I was working like a Bohunk when I found the mine in the first place," he said. "I guess there's nothing the matter with my back. It can stand up under a little more work. I haven't," he said deliberately, "found the ore yet. I may never find it. So you may need your money."

"Our money," corrected Doris, under her breath. "Well, I suppose I can't get around it—you're the stubbornest mule of a man I ever saw in my life! I *really* came to say I've been a beast. I don't see why," she cried indignantly, "a man can get rich and make a darned fool of himself, and it's all right. But if a *woman* goes on a perfectly respectable society spree, it—it's *something awful*!" Her voice broke. "If it had been *you*—if you'd got drunk and gambled and—raised Cain generally, don't—don't you suppose I'd have overlooked it when you—so-sobered up and—wanted to get a fresh start?"

Bill stared at her.

"What I *really* came over for," she said, sniffing a little, "was to be w-with you. If you can s-stand it like this, I—can't. I just about went *crazy*, seeing other women with their husbands and—being around those darned hotels alone, and you here working like a dog—I *couldn't sta-and* it!"

"You poor little kid!" Bill whispered against her hair. "You poor little kid!" He laughed shakily, holding her close. "Sobered up with an awful head on her, I'll bet!"

That was not what he expected to say, but Bill was never much of a hand to express his deeper emotions.

"Anyway, I can cook for you and Tommy, I hope!" Doris was, as usual, withering in her sarcasm. "If you're *determined* to grub along like this, all right. I'm game for it. I never liked cooking—much. But I can do it. We can move up to the house——"

"Not till we've struck the ore. Call me stubborn if you want to—I can't help it. I found the ore in the first place, and I'll find it again. Without touching a dollar of your money. I can't afford to keep up that big house. This is about my limit."

Doris eyed the limited space, chewing her lip meditatively.

"It isn't much of a place to bring baby," she said. "She'd have her little hands full of slivers, the first thing, off these rough boards. And I can't see the sense, Bill-dear. Not when there's the kitchen up there, and the breakfast room and maid's room that could be shut off from the rest of the house. I'd like to know how it's going to cost more to live there. Do you think you boys would *eat* more in that kitchen than you do here?"

"Aw, hell! Come on, be a shport!" cried Luella into the silence, evidently believing that the two were playing pinochle.

The winter passed quickly, after that. Bill wondered sometimes if there hadn't been some mistake about that honeymoon trip to California. This was the kind of honeymoon he had dreamed of, when he dared to dream of so remote a bliss. Baby Mary was just a lump of sweetness thrown in for good measure; by the way, you should have seen how she took to mining. On warm days, Doris and the baby would go up to the mine, little Mary smiling back over her daddy's shoulder until they overtook Tommy and the burros, when she would insist upon riding burro-back.

Sometimes she had her way, if one of the burros on shift chanced to be Wise One. Luella, of course, would go along, language and all. They would have a hot lunch, cooked over the camp fire by Doris, who wore khaki, these days, and high-laced boots, and did not look in the least like a lady millionaire. Lady millionaires do not as a rule drive two burros round and round in a circle, hoisting muck from a mine.

They were up there—baby Mary trying her little best to lift a single-jack, and wrinkling her nose at Doris, who was busy with the burros—one morning in April. Bill and Tommy were both below, examining the effect of their "shots" of the evening before. Parowan was "talkin' to 'em louder 'n' the noon whistle," according to Tommy, and when Doris received the hoisting signal, she answered it and then picked up a double handful of rocks, with which to pelt the two burros whom nobody loved. Bill and Tommy had not been down underground longer than five minutes. Doris put an unexpected sharpness into her tone. The burros broke into a trot,—proving that the load was not muck.

Bill heaved himself out of the bucket, his eyes dancing.

"Ever see anything like that before?" he asked triumphantly, holding out a piece of rock the size of his fist.

"Why—it's gold, isn't it?" The same old thrill hushed her voice as she took the quartz in her hand. Tiny, yellow specks showed here and there,—Parowan gold.

"Busted right into it!" crowed Bill. "I told you last night I was willing to bet we'd get a change this morning. There she is, old girl. Whole face of the tunnel in quartz—gold ore or I'm a Chinaman. It won't be so rich as the surface ore was, but it'll be a darn sight more permanent. We trailed her close to a hundred feet—but we sure overhauled her at last!"

"Oh, Bill-dear, isn't it simply great! Well, what are you going to do now? Organize——"

"Not on your life. The crooks aren't all dead and in jail—not by any means! I'll borrow some money from my wife and put in a crew of men here and go to mining!"

"I suppose," said Doris, "you wouldn't consider selling an interest in the mine—to your wife? You couldn't borrow what's yours, you great, big silly!"

Bill gave the ore to baby Mary, who tried harder than ever to lift the single-jack so that she could smash it down on the

rock. His eyes strayed down the hill to the empty town, with the two-story cement bank standing up high above the wooden buildings around it. And the O'Hara House with staring, empty windows and no pennant at all.

"The town'll come back," he said, squatting on his haunches beside Doris and beginning to plan and dream again. "I almost wish it wouldn't. This has been a great winter, honey. But it's bound to come back. I don't know what the darned railroad will do about it," he grinned. "We've swiped most of their ties!"

"That's a hell of a note, ain't it!" cried Luella, and began crawling, beak and claws, up Bill's back.

THE END

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